Ballots and Bows

by electric_eel

Summary

He's going to need all the help he can get.
Chapter 1

Hi guys! This story will follow cannon… with a few twists. I’ll be working on my other story, I’ll Be Waiting, at the same time as this one. This will be a little heavier on the fluff though. As always, I would LOVE your feedback. Hope you enjoy it!

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“Bartlet for America.” The voice was clearly distracted, which wasn't exactly a stretch considering the amount of commotion in the background.

"CJ? What are you doing answering the phone?"

"Donna? Is that you? Oh thank the heavens." CJ did nothing to mask her overwhelming relief.

"My sister said you called- CJ, is she everything alright?"

She could hear a loud crash in the background and then the unmistakable sound of Josh's yelling.


"You're going to have to work on your presentation when you're spinning," Donna told her. She could hear a door close and silence finally resonate from the other end of the line.

"Donna, listen, I don't want to push you into anything you don't want to do, but what would we have to do to get you to come back?"

"Is he okay?" The shouting had resumed in the background. Donna wondered if it had followed CJ.

"He's, uh, in rare form lately." CJ didn't want to get into it and completely terrify Donna, but the truth was that he'd been nothing short of falling apart since she left to return to that asshole boyfriend of hers in Wisconsin.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Donna told her.

"Donna, you're a goddess. When can we expect you? I'll leave a key to my room at the front desk. You can stay with me until they put you on salary."

She smiled. Never before has she become such fast friends with a group of people.

"I'll be at the office in 20 minutes."

"Great. Wait- what?!!"

Donna bit her lip. "I'm calling from a pay phone at a gas station outside of town. I left yesterday to come back. I drove all night. I would have been here sooner but there was a... thing. In Wisconsin."

"Be careful, Donna." Though she'd only known her a few weeks, she was forming a fast friendship with Donna Moss. "I'll see you in a little bit."

CJ ended the call and walked back to her makeshift office, past the disaster area that was now Josh Lyman's space. He was in the corner with Leo, rambling on about who knows what, and Leo and the Governor both looked like they were about at the end of their rope with him.
She hoped Donna would do the trick and get him back on track. No matter how annoyed she could be with Josh, she had a soft spot for him. And she also knew the campaign couldn't survive without him.

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Donna sat on the floor beside Josh's desk, sorting through the apparent explosion of paperwork that had occurred while she was gone.

Everyone had been so warm upon her return, welcoming her with open arms, most of them literally. But she was still nervous- she hadn't seen Josh yet. He'd been in a meeting all afternoon, and given the fact that he was supposed to be back about two hours ago, Donna was fairly sure he'd have himself worked into a later by the time he made it back to headquarters.

She wasn't sure what his reaction to seeing her in his office would be, though she'd played all the possible scenarios through her head on the drive from Wisconsin.

Readjusting her injured ankle, Donna moved slightly on the floor, stacking a few papers into an organized pile. Only one more box to go. She glanced around, almost amazed at the work she'd accomplished in a few short hours. The office was so tidy now he could actually take a meeting or get something done.

Pulling the last bit closer to her, she heard the front door close with a bang and heavy footsteps coming towards her. The outer offices went a bit more quiet than usual, and given the absence of conversation, or yelling, for that matter, she knew Josh was here, and he was in one hell of a mood.

Entering his office he forcefully threw his backpack into corner, and rounded his desk, grabbing a portfolio out of his middle drawer, throwing a new stack of paperwork onto his newly organized desk and starting to storm off again. It was only then that he seemed to notice that his office was tidy. He looked up and glanced around, eyes landing on Donna, sitting in the far corner.

"Oh thank God," he muttered. "There's a pile of things on the desk."

And with that, he was off to his next meeting, leaving Donna in a stunned silence on the floor.

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The tiny hotel didn't have an elevator and of course CJ's room was on the second floor. So after an exhaustive 15 minutes Donna had finally made it to the doorway from the car, CJ patiently walking beside her, Sam following closely with her bags.

Once they were finally settled into the room, the stress and uncertainty of the day melted away and Donna felt immediately at home again. She was among friends.

"Get settled in, ladies. I'll be back in 20 minutes with Toby to take you to dinner," Sam announced, walking to the door. "Welcome home, Donna," he told her, flashing her a bright smile.

"I'm taking a quick shower," CJ announced. "Need anything?"

"No, go ahead. I'm just going to take a little nap," Donna told her, propping her ankle up on a pillow.

It wasn't more than a few minutes, however, before Donna awoke to a pounding at her door, her name being bellowed from the other side. Sitting up, she grabbed for her crutches and began to make her way to the door.
"Donna!"

"I'm coming."

Knock, knock, knock. "Donna!"

"I'm coming, Josh."

"Donna!"

She swung the door open on the third bellow and he stood there, his nose buried in a folder of polling statistics.

"What took you so long," he spouted, sauntering through the doorway without ever looking up. "I need you to set up a meeting with the Senators from Indiana and Illinois. I'm also going to need 15 minutes with... What in the hell happened to you?!" He'd finally looked up, noticing her ankle, and every other thought he'd had left his mind. "You should sit down," he offered her a little help as she made her way back to the bed.

She laughed, shaking her head. Only Josh could go from so unaware to so concerned in such a short amount of time.

He stared at her ankle. "What happened," he asked, genuine concern in his voice.

"I slipped on the ice. It was a late thaw..."

"You should put down kitty litter," he told her. "Do you need anything? Can I get you something?"

"I'm fine. We're getting ready to go to dinner with Sam and Toby," she told him. "You coming?"

"I, uh, have to take care of a few things. Maybe I'll catch up with you guys later."

"Yeah, okay." Truth be told she was a little disappointed. She'd missed him. "Anything I can help you with?"

"Oh, no," he recoiled. "Go ahead. It's just some personal stuff. Paperwork."

She nodded her head. She'd been taking care of his personal affairs before she'd left. Maybe he was hesitant around her now. She hated that she'd violated his trust.

Josh checked his watch and left in a hurry, but not before telling her he was glad to have her back.

Minutes later Sam arrived with Toby and the four set out for dinner and drinks. "Ugh, these steps again," Donna muttered.

"Not to worry," Sam jumped in, crouching over a bit. "Hop on, Donna. You can never be too old for a good old fashioned piggy back ride."

"You can," Toby interjected dryly. "And you are."

Donna hopped on Sam's back as she and CJ giggled profusely. They were down the steps in no time, Sam now determined to carry her all the way to the bar. Their laughter and joking continued around the corner where the four of them stepped directly into a now legendary Mandy/Josh screaming match. Sam froze, Donna and CJ’s faces falling. The four of them stared at their friend and his girlfriend, unsure of what to say.
Taking a good look at the image of Donna on Sam’s back, Josh shot Sam a stare.

Sam gently put Donna down as she took her crutches from CJ.

“Boy, you can sure kill a fun night,” CJ remarked towards Josh and Mandy.

“Donna. Welcome back.” The fake smile on Mandy’s face was obvious to everyone as Josh stretched his neck.

“We’re headed out for dinner,” Sam stated, wishing to get out of there as quickly as possible. “Across the street. Stop by later, drinks are on me,” Sam added with a smile.

The foursome ate dinner and sipped a few drinks, Toby eventually heading toward the bar for another round as Sam and CJ took a trip around the dance floor. Sitting alone with her ankle propped up in the corner booth, Donna barely noticed Josh before he sat down.

“Rough day,” she asked him as if she wasn’t well aware of the answer.

He leaned his head back on the booth and loosened his tie. “You have no idea,” he muttered.

She slid him her beer.

“But it’s certainly looking up,” he told her.

They were joined by the rest of the senior staff and spent the evening filling Donna in on the last few weeks. Josh remained oddly quiet, as though his mind was anywhere but there.

One by one the bar cleared out and Josh and Donna walked slowly back to the hotel.

“What’s on your mind, Josh,” she asked. “And don’t tell me it’s nothing, because clearly that’s not true.”

He sighed. She could read him like a book. “I just got a weird voicemail today. It didn’t make any sense and it was very vague. It’s nothing to worry about. Probably just a mix up.”

“Oh. Well, do you want to talk about it,” Donna offered.

“Uh, no,” Josh scrubbed his hands over his face. “Actually I don’t. I appreciate it, Donna, but it doesn’t even warrant my attention, and I’m exhausted.”

He helped her slowly up the motel steps. “I’m getting you a room on the bottom floor tomorrow,” he muttered. He knew that she was double bunking with CJ to save money but he didn’t mind the extra expense. He was just glad to have her back.

Walking her to her door, he didn’t hesitate before leaning in and giving her a gentle hug. “Welcome Home, Donnatella. I missed you.”

Before she could even blink they were back on the road. Donna quickly re-adjusted to the campaign life, loving the fast pace of the days and the high spirited conversation. She fell back into a familiar flow with Josh, too. They were very much in sync with one another, and that’s why she noticed that something was bothering him for the last 12 hours. He was just-off. She’d tried to bring it up but he’d panicked, so she’d dropped it.

Now, however, they were in Manhattan, just having finished a campaign stop and Leo was flagging
“Donna,” he began, “Josh has a personal errand in midtown. You’re going with him.

Josh’s eyes immediately went wide as he began to protest.

“Quiet,” Leo immediately silenced him.

“He’s going to his father’s firm to take care of a private matter. You’re going to ride with him and then sit in the waiting room while he handles a few things. Can you do that for me?”

“Of course,” Donna didn’t hesitate. It wasn’t like Josh to keep her so out of the loop, so when he did, Donna didn’t want to push.

“Leo…” Josh started again, looking rather out of sorts.

“She’s going with you,” Leo told him as though it was final, “because if she doesn’t you’re going to lose it and someone’s going to have to drive all the way down there to scrape you off the ceiling and I just don’t have time for that today. My driver is waiting for you in the front of the building.” And with that he walked away.

Donna silently followed Josh into the waiting town car and rode with him through the crowded streets. She was taking in the city around her, spouting off trivia and asking him a few questions here and there, but Josh was mysteriously quiet. Arriving at their destination, Josh and Donna took the elevator up to a sleekly decorated law firm and Josh was immediately ushered into his father’s office where the door closed immediately.

Donna made herself as comfortable as possible in the waiting room, feeling rather out of place. A half an hour had passed before a tall man bearing a striking resemblance to Josh emerged.

“Donna?” he asked.

She stood hesitantly. “Mr. Lyman?”

“Ah, it’s so nice to finally meet you,” he told her, walking her into his office. The two carried on a casual conversation for a few minutes, Donna stealing glances at Josh, who appeared to be lost in his thoughts.

“Josh tells me it’s your first time in the city,” Noah commented.

“Yes. And it’s wonderful,” Donna smiled.

“Good. Well, since the two of you have a free evening I hope you’ll join Edith and I for dinner. We have reservations in an hour,” he told her.

Josh still remained in a somewhat comatose state in the corner.

“I wouldn’t want to impose,” Donna told him.

Josh’s head spun around to look at her and he shot her a look begging her to stay.

“Oh, um, but it does sound lovely.”

“Great. It’s settled. Let’s go,” Noah clapped his hands together, grabbing his briefcase and standing. “And Donna, if you don’t mind, we’ll just keep this afternoon’s meeting between the three of us for the time being, alright?”
Donna nodded her agreement, but she really didn’t understand. What was going on with Josh?”
Josh continued to be high strung and somewhat reclusive the next few weeks. Unsure of what, exactly, the issue was, Donna rolled with the punches. She knew how to anticipate his needs and she did so, running interference with anyone she could.

If they were alone, or wrapped up in a project, Josh would begin to relax a bit, but that was becoming more and more rare. If they were on the road he’d somehow morph into his old self. He’d split a beer with Donna and they’d work late into the night, laughing and joking with the rest of the senior staff. When they were in Nashua, however, Josh would disappear after work. Any off weekends would find him out of town and if his mother called he’d be sure to close the door for the conversation.

Donna knew Noah Lyman was sick, but that wasn’t what was distracting Josh. He’d talk to her about that. Rather than alienate him further, Donna just decided to blindly support him, working as hard as she could to make his life a little easier.

She was finishing up a project late Friday night in the campaign headquarters, most of the staff having left for the evening when Leo found her.

“Where’s Josh,” he asked, looking closely at a blue file folder full of what appeared to be polling data.

“He’s gone for the weekend,” she told him.

“Already?” Leo glanced at his watch, surprised to see that Josh had left so early on a Friday.

“Damnit,” he muttered. “I need to get this to him tonight. We can’t wait til Monday.”

“Oh, um, can I fax it?” Donna offered. “Or is it something I can read to him over the phone?”

Leo shook his head. “Donna, have you ever been to Connecticut?”

Donna parked the one way rental in the driveway of the address that Leo had given her. She checked and double checked what she’d written, taking in the large, beautiful house. Pulling the grouping of folders that Leo had compiled and sent, Donna grabbed her purse and locked the car.

She’d had 3 hours to process what Leo had told her before she’d left but she couldn’t quiet wrap her head around it. It did, however, explain the way Josh had been acting.

She rang the doorbell, standing nervously on the front porch. Only a few moments later she heard Josh’s familiar footsteps walking quickly to the door and throwing it open.

The stood there, face to face, neither of them speaking. Josh was stunned; his eyes widened in surprise. “I thought you were the pizza guy,” he admitted to her, unsure of what to say.

“I’m not,” she supplied. “I’m your assistant. And also, you know, not a guy,” she joked. “Your mom ordered pizza for dinner?” Donna was surprised.

“She’s not here,” Josh told her, still not moving. He wasn’t sure what to say.

Donna, for her part, thought he looked pretty damn adorable in his jeans and tshirt with a little burp
rag over one shoulder and a baby in his arms.

Ready to take the tension from the air, Donna stepped inside, immediately placing a light hand on the baby’s back. “And you must be Audrey Joan,” she cooed. It was only a few seconds before she had placed her things down and gently taken the baby from Josh, fawning over her.

Josh stood there, dumbstruck, and scratched the back of his head. “How did you-”

“She,” she supplied, her attention now focused solely on tiny Audrey.

She wandered into the living room where Josh had clearly been watching the Mets game prior to her arrival, making herself at home on the couch.

“Why are you here,” he asked. “Not that I’m not happy to see you,” he supplied quickly.

“Something urgent with polling data. The folder is next to my purse.”

The pizza arrived and Josh studied the data, talking over a few of the finer points with Donna. Audrey barely made a peep- she was content to be held by Donna. After Josh put her down he collapsed on the floor, leaning back on the couch next to Donna.

“I’m beat,” he announced. “I don’t know how something so tiny can make me so exhausted.”

Donna chuckled.

“Donna, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I am. It’s just all very overwhelming for me right now.”

Donna placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “I’m sure it is. But Josh you know I’m here if you need a hand.”

He nodded that he did.

“So, not to be too intrusive, but I think the cat’s out of the bag now… so, what happened? Leo only gave me the bare details.”

It was a one night stand, he explained. Something that he never did, with the kind of woman he never even found attractive. It just happened. And then, 9 months later, he got a call from the hospital. She’d had the baby and then had what Josh was referring to as a ‘spiritual awakening’ and had decided to move to a remote mountain retreat in Thailand. She’d signed the paperwork waiving parental rights and that was that. Josh had a DNA test completed and Audrey was, in fact, his. He’d taken care of the paperwork for it at Noah’s office in the city that day and soon afterwards the results came back and the legal portion was taken care of. His parents were helping with Audrey during the campaign.

At some point during their conversation, Donna had found her hand in his curls, gently reassuring him that he wasn’t alone in this.

“I’m terrified,” he’d admitted.

“Probably normal,” she’d told him. “But you don’t have to do it on your own, Josh. Remember that.”

They’d talked for a while longer, Donna finally getting up and stretching. “I better get going,” she admitted.

“What?” He looked at the clock. “It’s 1am.”
She nodded. “Leo said he’d pay for a hotel. I’m just going to get some sleep and drive back in the morning.”

“No way,” he shook his head. “You’ll stay here. We have plenty of room. Besides, my Mom would have a stroke if she found out you were in town and didn’t stay with us. She really likes you, you know,” he told her.

“I’m quite charming, Joshua,” she quipped.

“So you say,” he responded, not missing a beat.

He grabbed the keys to her rental, glad she didn’t drive her beat up car all the way to Westport, and retrieved her bags. Scribbling a note to his parents that Donna was in the guest room he showed her upstairs, telling her to make herself at home and calling it a night, knowing that Audrey would be awake and hungry very soon.

Donna slept like a dream. She was in a large, comfortable bed, in a home, not a discount motel room with itchy sheets. Waking up the next morning she took a leisurely shower and then dressed for breakfast, taking in the Lyman home during the daylight.

“Donna! So good to see you, dear,” Edith Lyman was on her feet immediately, ushering the younger woman to the breakfast table and pouring her a cup of coffee.

“Thank you, Mrs. Lyman. You have such a lovely home,” Donna did love the way the house looked, but more than that she loved the way it felt. Like it was lived in, that they were a family there. It made her a little homesick for Wisconsin.

“Please, I think we’re past the formalities. Call me Edie, everyone does.”

“Oh, alright. Thanks, Edie.”

Donna and Edie spent the early morning catching up with each other, only interrupted when Edie apologized, telling Donna she was late for a volunteer meeting and heading off. A very frazzled Josh finally wandered down the stairs holding a very alert Audrey a little while later. “Doesn’t she need rest,” he asked, exasperated.

“Well I don’t know,” Donna told him. “But you look like you could use some.”

“Thank you, Donna. How insightful,” he moseyed over to the sink, picking up a clean bottle and rooting around in the pantry for the formula.

Donna hopped up and took Audrey from him, the baby immediately cuddling into her. She kissed the top of her soft little whips of hair and then took the bottle from Josh. “Go back to bed,” she told him. “You can’t function like this and Leo needs you to know what’s going on this afternoon.”

“But-“

“But nothing. We’ll be fine. I’ve taken care of babies before, Josh,” she assured him. “I’ll come and wake you up if anything is wrong.”

Not having the energy to protest, Josh drug himself up the stairs and immediately passed out.

Donna and Audrey had an easy morning and the baby was bathed, fed, changed, dressed and happy
by the time Donna woke Josh for the conference call.

“You’re amazing.” Josh told her, marveling at the apparent ease with which the morning had run.

“I know,” she told him. “Now give me your credit card. We’re going shopping and Audrey might want a new outfit.” She gave him a smile and, though he rolled his eyes, he reached into his wallet and handed over his American Express.

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Edie took Donna out to lunch, excited for the young woman’s company. After that they’d hit a few stores, Donna finding herself unable to resist a few tiny outfits.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Edie told Donna. “I was so worried about him. He’s giving it his all but between this and the campaign he’s just burning the candle from both ends. Noah and I made plans this weekend, trying to give him some time alone with Audrey to settle in, but it may have just been too much.”

“He seems to be doing alright. He’s great with her,” Donna told Edie honestly. “I just think it’s a bit overwhelming for him.”

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Donna stayed the rest of the weekend, returning her rental car in Westport and riding back to New Hampshire with Josh. He’d been himself on the car ride, and Donna could tell he was excited to have someone to confide in about Audrey.

“You know, you can tell them. CJ, Toby and Sam, I mean.”

“Yeah,” Josh sighed. “I know. I will. I just- wanted some time to process it all.”

Donna thought that was understandable. She was also glad she now knew what was going on. She’d be better able to assist Josh in all areas now that she knew what was really going on.

Pulling in to a parking spot at the hotel they were now calling home, Josh hadn’t even shut the car off when Mandy stormed out of the lobby, yelling on her way over.

“Well, have fun with that,” Donna told him. “I’m off to find a cold drink and a hot bath.”

Josh groaned, getting out of the car to listen to the verbal thrashing he knew was coming.

Donna grabbed her bag, uttered a chipper “Hi, Mandy!” and continued up to her room.

She was barely done unpacking from the weekend when CJ knocked on her door.

“Mind if I hang out in here for a little while,” she asked. “There’s an excessive amount of yelling bleeding through the walls in my room.”

“Josh and Mandy,” Donna ventured a guess.

“Yeah,” CJ confirmed. “Who else fights like that. It probably won’t be long. He usually just takes a verbal beating and she leaves.”

Donna bit her tongue. “May be a bit longer tonight,” she told CJ. “They’ve got a lot to talk about. But, I’ve got wine and this place has cable, so we’re all set.”
“I’ll drink to that,” CJ laughed.

One by one, Josh pulled the senior staff aside and told them about Audrey, meeting a variety of responses.

Toby was mostly indifferent, his concern for Josh’s personal life largely not his top priority.

Sam was congratulatory. He’d asked Josh several questions, and though it was obvious he wished Josh would have confided in him to begin with, by the end of the conversation he understood Josh’s reasoning.

CJ was shocked. She would have never guessed. She was glad he was having this discussion with her so she wouldn’t have to hear it from the press, but assured him it shouldn’t be an issue. There was probably no scandal brewing and she doubted anyone would care the campaign manager of a dark horse candidate was raising his little girl on the weekends. She congratulated him with a hug, and went back to what she was doing.

Mandy, however, didn’t take it so well. She experienced a wide range of emotions, telling Josh repeatedly that she was a political operative, not a mother. After their blowout fight at the hotel they’d seen less and less of her. And when she was in town she was clear with Josh about the nature of their relationship- she wanted the clout that came with being associated with him, but she wasn’t going to be changing diapers at 2am.

Josh continued to go to Westport as often as possible but a the campaign continued, his free time became less and less. Donna saw it but didn’t know what to do. After the end of a particularly long week Leo gave them Saturday afternoon and Sunday off. Josh, who hadn’t slept in 2 days, was close to dropping.

As they unloaded from the campaign bus, Donna didn’t even let him get to his room.

“Give me your car keys,” she demanded, catching him off guard.

“Why?”

“Your bag is already packed. Throw it in the trunk. I’m driving you to Westport for the night. You can nap on the way.”

And so they did. Josh spent some quality time with Audrey and caught up on his sleep. Donna had a weekend away and the Lyman family welcomed her with open arms.

Donna adored Audrey, hating to leave her on Sunday afternoon just as much as Josh did. They said their goodbyes and Josh loaded their bags into the car as Donna held Audrey for just another minute.

“I’m glad you two made the trip,” Noah Lyman told her. “You’re welcome in our home any time, Donna. You’re family now,” he patted her on the shoulder. “Take good care of him for me,” he nodded to Josh.

“Thank you,” she told him genuinely, touched at his sentiment. “I will.”

The night of the Illinois primary had been an emotional roller coaster for Josh. He drug his feet down the aisle of the aircraft, searching for his seat on the flight. He’d just had the strangest interaction with
the Governor, and now he was headed home. He couldn’t get there fast enough. As devastated as he was about the loss of his father, he knew his mother would be grief-stricken and he hated the thought of her facing it alone.

Josh sat down next to a businessman and settled in to his seat, closing his eyes. It was only a few moment later that he heard her voice, requesting if the man would switch her for a first class ticket. She needed, she explained, to sit in this row.

The man gladly agreed to the upgrade and Josh opened his eyes, glad he wasn’t dreaming. Donna sat down next to him and Josh gave her a sad smile. “What are you doing here,” he asked.

“Assisting you. There’s apparently something in the job description I’ve never seen about it.”

He appreciated her gentle humor and closed his eyes again, comforted by her presence.

And assist Donna did. Aside from being an emotional comfort to both Josh and Edie, she helped with Audrey, tidied up around the house, greeted friends and neighbors and made sure everyone was eating.

“You don’t have to do that,” Josh told her in the middle of the night as he passed her in the hall. Audrey had been crying and she’d slipped in to pick her up, trying to intercept the fussing infant before Josh woke.

“I know,” she told him honestly. “But I want to,” she ran a soft hand over the baby’s head and pulled her close. “Get some sleep, our flight is early tomorrow.”

Josh nodded his head but didn’t move. They had to get back to the campaign rather quickly, but Josh was grateful for the time he could spend in Connecticut. “Thanks,” he told Donna. “For everything. You didn’t have to be here- you didn’t have to do any of this, but I- I’m grateful you did.”

His thanks meant the world to her. She gave him a soft smile. “Any time, Joshua,” she told him before continuing to pace Audrey to sleep. And she meant it.

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Ok, well know we're all on the same page. And so begins our journey through the West Wing years with an extra cute little addition... :)
They did it. They'd won the democratic nomination. Josh's initial reaction had been to scoop up Donna and spin her around. The music blasted and the staffers all began to let loose.

After the initial celebration had subsided they'd moved to Josh's room, all camping out on his balcony with a leftover bottle of champagne CJ had swiped and Toby's scotch. They'd sat up until the early hours of the morning laughing, strategizing, drinking and smoking Toby's cigars.

Eventuality they others filtered back to their rooms leaving Josh and Donna alone. "Oh, I almost forgot," she hopped up and ran inside, letting herself into her adjoining room. He could hear her rooting around for something, retuning a moment later with a small wrapped package.

"Congratulations," she told him. "You did a great thing today."

He smiled at her praise. "So did you."

She handed him the package and stood there as he opened it, pulling out a tiny onesie with the Bartlet for America logo on it and a tiny American flag patterned bow.

"This is amazing!" He shot her a full dimpled grin, truly excited for the gift. "Thank you," he reached in and wrapped her in a genuine hug, lingering a bit. It was safe to say she didn't mind.

"Hey, do you want to go with me next time I head to Westport," he asked somewhat tentatively.

"Yeah, I'd like that," she told him. "I know you miss her, Josh," she placed a comforting hand on his shoulder.

He nodded his head. After the moment had passed Josh stood and announced he was headed to bed.

"Now that the nomination is officially ours they're going to need us in DC a couple days next week," he told her, returning to business as usual. "Book us tickets into National for the day after tomorrow," he told her. "Sam too. Leo will meet us there.

"Okay. Where do you want to stay?"

"Won't need a hotel. We can just crash at my place. If, uh, if you're okay with that."

She smiled. "Kay."

She'd only known Josh Lyman for a few months but their comfort level with each other would indicate otherwise.

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It occurred to her, only after she had turned off the light in Josh's guest bedroom, that perhaps this arrangement could be misconstrued. Though she and Josh were just friends and he was kind enough to offer her a place to stay, she didn't want to be on Mandy's bad side.

Donna slept for a few hours but work up early. Due to the campaign schedule she was used to getting very little sleep. She wandered quietly around Josh's apartment after turning on the copy.

"What are you doing up," he shuffled into the room behind her, hair wild with bedhead.

"I think you should make this room the nursery," she stated. It has that great nook and the window.
He looked around a bit, considering it. "Kay."

She giggled. "Kay? It was that easy? You're agreeing?"

He shrugged his shoulders, still groggy. "Whatever you say."

Josh went about his day, returning to his apartment with take out for Donna and Sam, whom he'd been informed would meet him there. He walked into the entranceway of his apartment, which was now filled to the top with boxes.

"Donna," he called out, wondering what in the hell had happened in the 4 hours he'd been out.

"I'm in here," she yelled from down the hallway.

He stepped into the room she'd earlier in the day declared to be a nursery to see Donna on a small ladder, hanging curtains, a smudge of lavender paint that matched the freshly coated walls smeared across her cheek.

"Uhhh... Donna? Something you want to run by me?"

"What?" She turned to look at him. "You said this was the nursery."

He just shook his head. "And I'm beginning to see just how right I was about that," he laughed.

She climbed down from the ladder. "Give me a hand with the rug," she told him, walking up to the large pile of things in the foyer. "And then you and Sam can start to assemble the furniture after dinner."

Josh groaned. "Wasn't there an option to have it delivered in one piece?"

"Yes. But we passed on that."

"You're getting a little fast and loose with the definition of the word 'we' aren't you, Donna?"

"Yeah, yeah," she smiled. "Where's dinner?"

He laughed procuring the Chinese takeout and 6 pack and dropping onto the floor to eat.

Sam had arrived and they'd put the nursery together completely, though, Donna though, the crib assembly had taken significantly longer than the man in the store had suggested. But now the room was all put together and Sam had said his goodbyes.

Josh and Donna, both exhausted, were sprawled out on the rug in Audrey's new room.

"You did a great job on this," Josh offered, staring at the ceiling. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I hope she likes it. She just... I really love that sweet little girl, Josh."

"I know you do," he told her. "And we're lucky to have you."

Donna didn't say much in response for a moment, eventually finding her voice. "Josh? Why do you stay with Mandy?"

That was the last thing he had expected to hear.

He sighed. "It's not... we're not..." That was the thing. They weren't together. She'd made if very
clear that she wasn't looking to be tied down and she had no ideas about putting her career on hold and raising Audrey with him. So, it was just... actually it wasn't even physical for them at this point. Josh knew that above anything else he was politically advantageous for her to associate with.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked. It's none of my business."

"I'm bad at relationships, Donna," he admitted into the dimly lit room.

"I could guess," she laughed at him. "But you're a good man, Joshua, and when it's the right woman none of that will matter."

"Yeah," he hoped she was right. "What about you though?"

"What about me?"

"Are you seeing anyone? A local republican homer, perhaps?"

"Yes, Josh. In all of my spare time I'm dating the hair of the RNC and it's just never come up."

"Sarcasm?"

"You're very intuitive tonight, Lyman."

He laughed. It felt good to laugh. Why was everything so easy with her and so hard with everyone else?

"What happened with Freeride?"

She didn't respond immediately.

"You don't have to answer that," he said. "I shouldn't have..."

She took a deep breath and started at the beginning. It felt good to get it off of her chest, honestly. Most of the story she'd never even told her closest friends or her mother. About his refusal to let her go back to school, about the way he spoke to her, about the infidelity. About everything but the car accident.

"You deserve better, Donna. Much better," the level of disgust in Josh's voice was evident.

Donna laughed. "They're not exactly lining up."

"Well then they're crazy," Josh told her, daring to glance over at her and show his sincerity.

"You'll find the right woman too, you know. And I'm sure she'll be incredible."

"Yeah, a workaholic single father. What a catch," he chuckled defeatedly. "I'm not exactly what women are looking for."

"Well then they're crazy," Donna echoed his words, giving him a little poke in the arm.

How had this woman already become his best friend? His other half.

OooooooooooO

When the election was officially called for Bartlet, the first person Josh looked for was Donna. He quickly wrapped her in a hug and spun her around.
"You did it," she told him grinning widely, a celebration breaking out all around them. "You really did it."

At that moment he should have been thinking of a million things. But all he could focus on was her smile. He'd made Donna proud.

He kissed her on the cheek and pulled her to the dance floor. Logistics could come later.

OooooooooO

Josh, Donna, Sam, Toby and CJ sat with in a row on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. They'd all moved to DC, transition now fully under way. Their lives were becoming busier and more stressful by the hour.

Donna has never been sightseeing in DC and it had been ages since CJ had played tourist so they'd all ended up on an impromptu trip to the Mall.

Sam had played tour guide while Toby and Josh discussed strategy and staffing, CJ and Donna content just to be out of the office.

They'd had dinner and a few drinks and were now rehashing some of their favorite stories about each other from the campaign.

"It's incredible," Donna finally stated. "This," she gestured towards the national mall. "I can't believe I'm here- with you guys."

"Well we wouldn't be here without you," Josh offered.

"That's for sure," CJ noted. "Nobody else could reign that one in."

Toby and Sam laughed while Josh and Donna exchanged a look. They did make an excellent team.

"Hawk and Dove?" Sam suggested what was quickly becoming their favorite spot.

"I can get behind that," Toby stood and they began to descend the steps, CJ right behind them.

"Right behind you," Josh called but didn't move from where he sat beside Donna.

"Hard to believe I'm going to work in the White House," Donna stated, still marveling at where she was. "I don't think I've ever really thanked you," she began.

"Nothing to thank me for," he cut her off. "You're not here as a favor, Donna. You've proven yourself. You've earned your seat at the table."

"But you took a chance on me, Josh. And that's not lost on me. You had no reason to hire me, and no reason to take me back, or ask Leo to give me a permanent job."

"Whoa. Slow down. Leo had every reason to give you a permanent job, Donna. And that was his call. But I don't succeed without you. Don't sell yourself short. And for the record, Donna, I'll always take you back but please, I'm begging you not to leave again." He stared across the darkening city.

"I'm not going anywhere, Josh," she told him, resting her head on his shoulder. "I'm in this for the long run. And I'm all in."

They sat for a moment, enjoying a peaceful moment in their otherwise frantic world.
"It's going to get so much harder," he finally admitted. "And I don't know if I can juggle it all."

She knew what he meant, and she just let him get it all out, not interested in interrupting him.

"I'm already burning the candle at both ends here and we aren't even governing yet. And she'll be here tomorrow. I just don't know how I can make it all work."

"You'll find a way," she told him, all the confidence in the world in her voice. "You always do. You have a knack for it, you know. Making the difficult into an easy reality. Look at the President Elect. You found a way."

Josh didn't say anything to that.

"And you're not alone in this, Josh. Don't forget that. There are so many people who care about you, and care about Audrey. You're never going to be all by yourself. And you can always ask for help, okay."

He leaned over and kissed the top of her head. "Thanks," he offered sincerely, knowing Donna would be right by his side through all of this. He was somehow greatly comforted by that. By her.

They'd morphed into this easy companionship and more than anything he hoped the White House wouldn't change that.

"Let's go," she told him. "They'll be waiting for us, and it's the last time you won't need a babysitter. Better live it up, Lyman," she told him with a wink.

OooooooooO

Two mornings later found Josh on the couch with Audrey snuggled against his chest. There was no better way, he thought, to start his day. He halfway listened to the morning news, glad he had a late start to the day, and watched her sleep peacefully. She'd arrived with his mother, who was staying with him for the time being, last night.

He was startled by a knock at the door, wondering who could possibly be here this early.

His mother answered it, greeting Donna with a warm hug.

"Sorry, I know it's early but I was on the way in to the office and... I wanted to see her," she almost blushed.

Josh laughed from the living room, getting up to meet her. "She's right here," he handed Audrey to Donna, both of their faces lighting up. "And I'd say she wanted to see you too."

Donna kissed the baby's chunky little cheeks and pulled her close, absolutely fawning over her.

"You two catch up, I'll get dressed and you can ride in with me," Josh told her, loving Donna's adoration of his daughter.

She was right last night, he thought. He wasn't all alone. He wasn't alone at all.

XxxxxxxxxxxX

Ok so I guess I can't pull off the two stories at once thing. My brain can't focus on what should be happening in both of them. Sorry for the delays in this... the updates will become more regular once I finish I'll Be Waiting. Thanks for sticking with me!! :)

OooooooooO
Chapter 4

Timeframe: Crackpots and These Women

Josh sat back in his leather desk chair and stared out his office window, his mind stuck on the small yellow card he'd been handed earlier in the day.

He couldn't bring his staff. Or his family.

After a therapy session he was still not feeling much better but at least now he knew what he needed to do.

He picked up the phone and called his father's firm, requesting that guardianship paperwork be drawn up. A full power of attorney and an amendment to his will.

OooooooooO

Donna waved as she approached the front gate, immediately spotting Edith Lyman and Audrey waiting for her. Security had called to let her know they were here.

Edie embraced Donna as the two exchanged pleasantries. "Josh is in with Leo," Donna explained, sitting down on the bench where they'd been waiting for her. "Hi, Miss Audrey, you look so pretty today," she turned her attention to the baby for a moment.

"You always find the cutest little outfits for her," Edie commented, noting that Donna had purchased the tiny dress and matching headband that Audrey was currently sporting.

The two visited for a moment longer, commenting mostly on Audrey's rapidly growing hair and the somewhat wild baby curls that were beginning to form. There were no two ways about it, she was a miniature Josh Lyman.

Donna inviting Edie to brunch the following weekend when her mother would be visiting from Wisconsin. Edie gladly accepted, looking forward to it. She'd grown very close to Donna, and was very fond of her as well. The role that The younger woman had effortlessly slipped into was not lost on her, but above that, Edie saw the way her son looked at Donna. And the way the Donna saw him as well.

Though they may not have it all figured out for themselves yet, Edith Lyman knew true love when she saw it.

OooooooooO

Donna fed and changed Audrey in Josh's office while she finished reading over the notes she'd typed over the afternoon. Josh was still in his last meeting but the baby was finally dozing off. News that she was in the building spread quickly and Ginger, Carol and CJ had all stopped in for a small dose of happiness.

"He's ready for us," Charlie peeked through the doorway. "Need a hand with some of that?"

Donna slipped a now sleeping Audrey into her carrier and handed her to Charlie, scribbling Josh a note telling him where they were and grabbing her bag. They made their way to the residence and said their hellos, everyone swooning over sweet little Audrey.
"Donna?" Ed peeked around the corner. "Josh needs you for a minute."

She looked around the room as Mrs. Landingham stepped in, as if she read Donna's mind. "Go ahead, dear. We'll watch out for the little one."

"Thanks," she whispered. "I'm sure I'll be right back."

Donna slipped out of the gathering, hurrying down to the Roosevelt room to see what Josh needed. She pulled a few files and grabbed him the information he was looking for as quickly as possible, handing it off to him.

"Your mom dropped the baby off for the party," she told him. "We're in the residence when you're done."

Josh looked at his watch and then back at her.

"She's already eaten and she dozed off," she told him, knowing what he was thinking. "See you in a minute?"

"Kay," he gave her a simple smile, knowing that his previous worries were unfounded as long as Donna was in their lives.

OooooooooO

Donna climbed the steps to the residence once more, quickening her pace when she heard Audrey's cries from the hallway. Peeking through the door she was met with the sobs of a very upset baby and several distressed senior staffers.

"Donna's back," Toby announced and a flustered CJ rounded the corner. As soon as Audrey saw Donna the crying stopped.

"Audrey Joan," Donna stated with mock surprise, "why are you crying?" She took the baby from CJ and wiped her teary face. Donna situated herself on the end of the couch with Audrey on her lap, reaching to her bag and handing the little girl a floppy eared stuffed rabbit.

The gentle interaction between the two was not lost on anyone in the room, though it had become somewhat commonplace. Audrey was content on Donna's lap as the staffers visited and mingled. The President served his chili and Donna ate quickly while the baby was preoccupied by Sam. Audrey was content as long as Donna was within her line of sight.

OooooooooO

Josh drug himself up the stairs to the residence after a hellaciously long day. He wasn't in an overly social mood but he knew the lack of his presence would be noted.

He wove through his colleagues until he reached Donna, who was holding Audrey and listening CJ speak intently about... wolves?

He shook his head, not wishing to open that can of worms.

"Hi, shortcake," he greeted Audrey, placing a gentle hand on her back but leaving her in Donna's arms.
"Go get something to eat, I've got her," Donna told him, a temporary aside from her conversation with CJ. "She's going to get cranky soon so if you still need to talk to Leo you better do it quickly."

"Yeah," Josh sighed. "It's close to bed time."

Josh walked over to the President and Leo, listening to them as they watched the staff members mingle with one another.

"What's on your mind, Josh?" He could easily read his surrogate son.

Josh explains what had been bothering him all day regarding the card. The white flag of surrender, as he thought of it.

"Leo, it’s not for me. I want to be with my friends, my family, and these women," Josh looked over to where Donna was holding Audrey and smiled, handing the card back.

Eventually the President wandered over to Zoe and left Leo and Josh to chat. They spoke about the house appropriations bill before Leo changed the conversation to a more causal topic. He'd asked Josh how his mother was going in her new apartment, and teased him about he story he'd heard from Edie about Josh's first night alone in the apartment with Audrey.

He'd been hellbent not to call his mother, instead frantically ringing Donna, sure that something was horribly wrong with Audrey. Donna had come over to see that the baby was just fussy from teething. She'd handed Audrey the chilled teething ring from the freezer, put the baby to sleep and poured Josh a glass of scotch before leaving, never even teasing Josh about it. The only reason Leo knew is because Josh told Edith, amazed by Donna's instinct when it came to caring for them.

"You know she cries when she can't see Donna."

Josh's eyebrows shot up. "You mean Audrey?" He cleared his throat, not waiting for the response Leo wasn't offering. "Yeah, I know."

"And Mandy doesn't know how to take care of her. Has no interest in her."

"I'm aware," he sighed.

"Just as long as you know."

Josh looked at a spot on the carpet. "They don't really know each other. Mandy doesn't really hang around. She doesn't want- it's just physical. Casual." Josh mumbles.

"Josh let me make one thing very clear to you," Leo told him. "I don't want to know about your..." he made a face. "Extracurricular activities."

Josh would have preferred to spontaneously combust rather than continue on the current route the conversation was taking.

"But," Leo continued. "I do want to make it clear that it would be one hell of a mess in the press if you date your assistant."

"Leo!" Josh was startled by the older man's statement.

"And don't you dare do that to Donna, either."

Josh gulped, leaning his head on the wall behind him.
"They're good girls, Josh," Leo said, patting his shoulder just as Audrey began to get fussy. "And I know you'll do right by them both."

Donna peeked around the corner at that moment, eyeing him as if to let him know it was time to make their exit before Audrey warmed up her vocal chords. After all, the girl was a Lyman. She could certainly yell.

Josh quickly said his goodbyes, grabbing his backpack, Audrey's bag and the carrier while Donna kept the baby relatively quiet.

"I'll give you a ride home," Josh told her and Donna followed him out to the car. Audrey had held it together very well all night, only letting out a wail when they'd already reached the parking lot.

Josh threw the bags in his trunk and clipped Audrey's car seat in, taking the already unhappy baby from Donna and buckling her in, much to Audrey's displeasure. Josh comforted her as the infant went into a full on meltdown.

"Come on," Donna told him. "She always falls asleep when the car starts moving. I'll sit with her while you drive. Donna slipped in, cupping Audrey's face with her hand and soothing the baby as Josh grabbed his keys.

It was only a few blocks when Audrey calmed herself and fell asleep.

"She's out," Donna announced, settling back to watch her sleep. "How was your meeting," she asked, changing subjects.

Josh told her about his day, leaving out the portions regarding the small pox threat and the NSC card. He loved Donna's perspective and he appreciated having someone to talk to. To share things with.

She told him about her big block of cheese crazies, giving him a good, much needed, laugh.

He pulled the car into a spot at the curb, Audrey now sleeping soundly after the being lulled into a peaceful slumber by the movement of the car.

She unbuckled her seatbelt, and gathered her purse, reaching for her keys. Leaning over she kissed Audrey's forehead and lightly stroked the baby's cheek.

"See you in the morning," she told Josh.

"Wait."

She looked back at him, surprised by the hint of anxiety in his voice.

"There's something I want to talk to you about."

"Okay..." rarely did Josh beat around the bush, so she was becoming a little worried.

He sighed, scrubbing his hand over his face. "Today I-" he stopped mid thought, looking away. He didn't want to get into it with Donna about the card. "I've just been thinking. What if something happened?"

"What are you talking about, Josh?" Donna was focused on what he was saying, leaning against the back of the front seat as she perched near Audrey's carrier, one hand protectively on her tiny foot.

"If something happens to me, what would happen to Audrey. Or if something happened to my Mom while I was out of town or god forbid they just couldn't reach us..."
"Nothing is going to happen to you or your mother," she reassured him, well aware that his mind had the tendency to kick into overdrive and run away with worst case scenarios in his head.

"But if it did," he interrupted her. "I- I'd want you to raise Audrey." He watched her face for a reaction. "Would you? You can think about it as long as you'd like, I know it's an incredibly huge thing to ask of you," he told her.

"Oh Josh, of course I would." Donna immediately became emotional. "I'd do anything for her," she looked back at the baby, still dreaming happily. "Are you sure, though? Sure you want me?"

"Donna, I'm positive. You're so good with her. I trust you implicitly and you love her. Not to mention she adores you. There's nothing that makes you a better choice than that."

Donna wiped her eyes, trying not to get overly emotional but she couldn't help it. She leaned up through the seats and gave Josh a makeshift hug. "Thank you for letting me be part of her life," she whispered in his ear, leaning back to tuck Audrey's blanket in around her. "And thank you, little one, for being so sweet."

XxxxxxxxxXX

Yay! Another chapter! Hope you're enjoying this one because I'm having a lot of fun writing it! Just a little fluffy to accompany cannon ((for now)).

Let me know what you think!!
"...and he was a beautiful butterfly! The End!" Donna closed the book and sat it to the side.

"How about a snack, little miss?" Donna placed a few Cheerios on Josh's desk, allowing Audrey to nibble at them. She'd pick them up two at a time, one in each fist, placing one in her own mouth with a certain degree of concentration and then hand the other one to Donna, who would eat it with outlandish animation and then laugh, causing Audrey to do it all again.

Edie has dropped Audrey off on her way to dinner with a friend and they were waiting for Josh to come back from Sam's office. Donna had already packed up the files they needed to work on that evening, ready to head out as soon as he returned.

Josh and Donna found themselves working late at his place frequently. They'd usually take a short break for dinner and then resume whatever task was at hand after Audrey was asleep. It wasn't conventional, she supposed, but it worked for them.

Just came bustling through only a moment later, to the delight of his daughter, who squealed in happiness at the sight of him. Josh picked her up from where she was perched calmly on Donna's lap, tossing her into the air a few times and pretending to eat her chubby little cheeks. Audrey laughed and laughed, completely enthralled by her Daddy.

Donna sat back in Josh's chair and watched on in amusement. He had probably given a Senator the verbal ass kicking of a lifetime only a few minutes prior, but as soon as he saw his baby girl he switched gears completely.

He slung his backpack and Audrey's bag over one shoulder, grabbing his keys and surveying the room for anything he may have forgotten.

"Wanna order takeout," he asked Donna. "We can pick it up on the way."

"Already did," she told him, grabbing her purse and jacket to follow him out of the building.

They made their way through the corridors of the West Wing, Donna stopping for a quick moment when she bumped into Carol.

While she listened halfway to Carol, who was giving her some last minute information on tomorrow mornings schedule, Josh chatted with Sam, who was also on his way home. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Mary Marsh in the waiting area, obviously lingering after an appointment. As Sam said goodnight to Josh and Audrey she saw Mary walk over from where she previously stood at the door. She could see that only a few words were exchanged and Josh's voice was raised as he put his free hand protectively over Audrey.

"Just leave it on my desk, Carol," Donna said as she rushed over to prevent another incident between the two. "Let's go," she told Josh. "Busy schedule this evening. Lots to do."

Josh turned and left the building but Donna could tell that something had already been said from the looks on their faces.

Josh was silent the whole way back to his apartment. The car ride was tense even with the babbling coming from the backseat.

They climbed the stairs and entered the apartment, Donna immediately popping dinner into the oven.
to stay warm while Josh sat Audrey on a blanket with her toys.

He was clearly tense as he removed his tie and toed off his shoes before laying down on his side to play with the baby.

Donna knew when to push him and when to leave him alone with his thoughts and tonight she said nothing, letting him unwind on his own with his daughter.

She set the table, calling them over as they vaguely discussed the files they had to work on tonight, but she could tell Josh wasn't focused. It was so unlike him.

Audrey finished her dinner and became antsy so Donna pulled her out of the high chair between them, allowing her to sit on her lap and eat a couple of the peas from Donna's carryout.

Josh just watched them, not eating much of his dinner. When Audrey was finished he wiped her tiny hands and face off and took her from Donna, wandering back over to the spot they'd previously occupied on the floor.

"You're stressed, Josh. Why don't you take a hot shower and relax and I'll get this little princess ready for bed," Donna sat down next to Audrey, who was very content with all of the attention she was receiving. Josh didn't directly respond, he just handed Audrey another of the small plastic toys she was putting into and pulling out of a box.

"You're not going to be able to get anything done if you're wound this tight," she told him.

He nodded his head absently as Donna stood again, picking the baby up with her.

"You're a good dad, Josh. I hope you know that. I see the sacrifices you make and how devoted you are to her. You don't have anything to prove to anyone."

Josh leaned in and kissed the top of Audrey's curly head, then moving over and planing a gentle kiss on Donna's forehead, giving her a soft smile before he made his way to his bedroom.

Donna drew a bath for Audrey, sitting next to the tub as she splashed and played. Eventually Josh joined them, sitting down across from Donna and leaning against the bathroom wall.

Donna could easily see that his demeanor had changed. Where he had been pensive all evening she could now see that something had clicked inside Josh. He was a man on a mission. She'd know that look in his eyes anywhere.

"Are you going to tell me what Mary Marsh said to you," she asked him as she pushed a rubber ducky around in the water.

He cleared his throat. "No, but CJ's on her way over so let's get her dried off." They wrapped Audrey in a little hooded towel and Josh changed her into a pair of footie pajamas.

"Say goodnight, shortcake," Josh told her and held Audrey close to Donna so she could give her a sloppy baby kiss goodnight. "You can go home, Donna," he added, tucking a strand of her loose hair behind her ear. "Thank you... for everything." He walked over and sat down in the corner, making himself comfortable in the rocking chair in the corner. "We'll talk in the morning."

Donna wasn't used to Josh asking her to leave so she was caught quite off guard. But knowing CJ was on the way over she didn't worry. She cleaned up from their evenings and let herself out, bumping into the press secretary in the hallway.
"Call me when you leave, no matter what time," Donna requested, and CJ nodded her head as a silent promise that she'd comply.

OoooooooooO

When CJ did call Donna on her way home it was fairly late.

"What'd he say to Mary Marsh," she muttered sleepily. "And how early do I need to go in to fix it?"

CJ laughed lightly. "That's not what it was. I mean, Mary Marsh is the problem, yes, but it's not so much what Josh said to her as what she said to Josh."

"Which was..." Donna sat up in bed, blinking against the dark of her bedroom.

"Well," CJ didn't want to skirt the question when she was talking to Donna, but she knew Josh didn't want to hurt her either. "She made some comments... about Audrey..."

"...that horrible woman, Id like to give her a piece of my...."

"...and about you." CJ finished.

"Me?"

"Donna," CJ sighed, "there are people... let's just say they know they can use you as a way to get to Josh. He's protective of you and of Audrey and nothing else really rattles his cage. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She did. "But we're friends, CJ. Of course he's going to defend me."

CJ sighed. That's what Josh had said too. Could those two really be blind to whatever was forming between them? "Josh handled it this time. I really don't think much else will come from this, I just want you to be careful, okay? She's not the only one who's going to try and manipulate how close the two of you are."

"I understand," she told CJ, wishing to drop the subject. "How's he doing."

"He's... okay. Just worried about you, mostly. We discussed every possible angle of this and we agreed that nothing should change in your arrangement as of now. You spend a lot of time at his place and a lot of time with Audrey but it can easily be explained- he's a busy man and has a lot to do and a little girl to raise."

As long as Josh and Audrey weren't going to be put under the microscope she could live with anything else thrown at them.

OooooooooooO

The next morning Donna was waiting in Josh's office with breakfast when he arrived.

He opened his mouth to make a smart remark about her bringing him coffee when she silenced him.

"I talked to CJ last night, but I think you already know that."

His eyes widened, she had his full attention.

"I appreciate you wanting to protect me, Josh. I really do. But I need you to understand something. If anyone ever says a negative word about that little girl there isn't anyone or anything that will be able
to hold me back from them. They'll wish they were dealing with Bartlet's Bulldog when I'm through
with them. Am I clear?"

"Crystal." He was taken aback, but he still beamed with pride. He believed her, too.

"Good," she continued, a matter of fact time to her voice. "Now, about the other things I said last
night- I meant them. And don't let Mary Marsh get into your head. You're an amazing Dad, Josh,
and Audrey is a very lucky little girl." She squeezed his bicep lightly to make her point. "Okay, your
schedule is on your desk, senior staff is in 5 minutes, and that," she picked up the coffee he was
reaching for, quickly intercepting it, "is for CJ."

She turned to walk out. "We can finish what we didn't get through last night after work at your place.
I'm taking a full hour for lunch though, I'm meeting your mom and Audrey at 11:30."

Josh just smirked at her, internally very pleased. "Whatever you say, Donnatella."
"Josh Lyman's office."

Donna answered the phone without checking caller ID, typing away to respond to the emails that had piled up over night.

"It's me," Josh informed her.

"Where are you," Donna whisper yelled into her phone. "You two have senior staff in 10 minutes."

"Relax. We're here."

"Oh." Donna relaxed back into her chair. It was National Bring Your Child to Work Day and Donna wouldn't have been surprised if Josh and Audrey were running late. "So why did you call?"

"To warn you."

"About what?"

"I put her in that outfit you bought for her to wear today."

"Headband too?"

"Headband too," he confirmed. "And this ridiculous badge you had made." Even as he teased her Josh grinned about it.

Donna smiled. She'd had a small White House ID printed with Audrey's photo and the words Audrey Lyman, Deputy Deputy Chief of Staff to clip to her dress. "So what's the problem."

"Donna, she looks adorable," Josh practically gushed. "And we're in a place of business so I encourage you to keep it together when we walk in."

Donna rolled her eyes, able to hear Josh walking into the West Wing in the background. "I think I'll be able to manage," she laughed. At that moment Donna saw Josh round the corner and hung up the phone, squealing a little as soon as she saw Audrey.

Josh sighed. "What did I just say?"

Donna leaned over and took Audrey from him, kissing her cheeks and taking a closer look at the dress and matching cardigan. She looked like a tiny, and adorable, senator in her navy blue dress and cardigan. Donna gushed over the baby, leaving Josh to lug everything he'd need for the day into his office behind him.

"I'm here too, you know," he remarked.

She turned her attention back to him. "Yes. And you should be on your way to Leo's for Senior Staff." She shoved a folder into his arms, straightening tiny American flag bow on the headband in Audrey's curls. "Little Miss and I will be at the First Lady's welcome reception and we will meet you in Margaret's office when your meeting is over."

Josh kissed Audrey on the cheek and told her to be good as Donna shooed him out the door. She sat Audrey down and took her little hand, walking slowly through the corridors with the toddler.
"We're going to go eat breakfast and listen to Dr. Bartlet read a book," Donna told her, rounding the corner towards the South Lawn. They joined the crowd of parents and children from the White House and OEOB staff, Donna grabbing a few things to eat as taking a seat in the corner of the room in case they needed to make a quick exit if Josh needed them. She drank her coffee and ate a few bites of a danish, passing on both the green eggs and the ham that were offered, while Audrey played happily with a toy from her bag.

After a few bites of berries, Donna saw Audrey watching the older kids playing off to the side. "You want to go over and play, Sweet Pea?"

Audrey shrunk back into Donna a bit, content watching from afar.

"Alright," she smoothed Audrey's hair, "you don't have to." She'd noticed a little trend developing in Audrey, who was becoming increasingly shy.

A few people popped by to say hello, including the Cat in the Hat, but before they knew it the program was starting. Dr. Bartlet and Zoey were introduced and spoke very briefly before reading Oh, The Places You'll Go and handing out a copy of the book to each child, the front cover stamped with the day's date and signed by the President and First Lady.

Donna held back as the crowds thinned out, knowing Zoey and Abbey would want to say a few extra words with Audrey.

"Ahh," Abbey smiled. "My favorite Lyman." She bent down to Audrey's level to greet her, handing her a book and posing for a photo for the White House photographer.

"Book!" Audrey proclaimed loud and clear, earning adoring smiles from everyone around.

"She's just so cute," Zoey gushed. "Does Josh ever need a babysitter?"

"Every single day," Donna quipped. "But that's why they keep me around. Audrey stays with his mom."

Zoey laughed, the four women chatting for a moment before Donna checked her watch, having to head to Leo's to meet Josh after senior staff.

"If you get busy this afternoon just bring her by," Abbey offered. "We'd be glad to spend a few hours with her."

Donna conveyed her thanks and then strode quickly back to the West Wing, making it to Margaret's office just as Leo's door opened and Josh emerged.

"Banking bill," he began as a way of a greeting, "it's going to be a mess today." He took Audrey from Donna, kissing her little cheek as they walked into Leo's office. "We need to get Rhodes, Morris, Skinner and Tucker on the phone this morning. And then I need 30 minutes with the speaker before the end of the day."

Donna nodded her head in agreement as they entered the Chief of Staff's office.

Josh put Audrey down, instructing her to go say hi, and she immediately grinned ran around the corner to Leo.

"PapaWeeOh!" She was still working on mastery of the concept that Papa Leo was two words.

The normally gruff exterior of the Chief of Staff immediately softened. Audrey had the ability to
bring out the happiness in everyone around her.

"Well good morning, Smiley," Leo greeted her using the nickname he'd given her as a newborn. "I heard you were going to be hanging around here with us today. Are you going to show your Dad how to keep Congress in line?"

Audrey looked to Donna for an answer, causing them all to chuckle.

"Good girl," Leo added, just as Margaret poked her head in to announce the arrival of his next meeting. "Have fun today, kiddo," he told her.

"Josh? I'll see you at 1:00 to go over progress on the banking bill?"

"Yes," he nodded in confirmation.

"And don't forget to take Audrey by the Oval. Neither of us will ever hear the end of it if she doesn't stop by to see the President."

Audrey gave Leo a hug goodbye and Josh scooped her up as they made their way into the hustle and bustle of the west wing corridors, walking with a baby on his hip and Donna matching him stride for stride while giving him a run down of his next meeting.

They settled into their respective desks, Audrey playing in Josh's office as Donna set up the calls and meetings Josh would need to take that day. She peeked in to let him know he was all set, handing him a memo and some notes that would assist him and grabbing a few briefing folders he would no longer need.

"You have three minutes before the tour begins," she told him. "And you're he first stop."

"Kay," he told her, releasing a puff of air as he spoke.

"Do you know what you're going to say?" She had been reminding him about this for weeks. He just had to peek out into the bullpen and say hello to the group of children taking the tour and pass it off to Ed and Larry.

"Yes," he stood and pulled his suit jacket on. "And they're going to love it."

"Oh?" Before Donna could question him further he reached into his backpack and pulled out a bag of candy and scooped Audrey up.

She stood back and listened to him speak briefly about what happened in his portion of the building, the excitement building within him. She loved to watch him when he was like this. He was so passionate- it was contagious.

Josh ended his short speech by encouraging the kids to get involved- after all, it would be their world soon. "Student government, research and open dialogue with parents, peers and other members of your community," he told them. "Follow the issues that matter. Write your Congressional representatives! And," he grinned, "have a piece of candy before you go."

Donna beamed with pride. He'd nailed it. She took Audrey from him as he gave her a nod of appreciation and kissed Audrey's cheek goodbye as he hurried off to a meeting in the Roosevelt Room.

"Okay," Donna corralled the visitors to take them to their next stop. "Up next is communications, so if you'll just step right this way..." she led them into the cramped areas in front of Ginger and
Bonnie's desks. "This is Sam Seaborne, and he is going to tell you all about what happens in here."

"Unca Sam!" Audrey greeted him right on cue, causing most of the kids to laugh.

"Your name is Uncle Sam? And you work here?!" He asked.

Sam didn't miss a beat. "I am Uncle Sam to Miss Audrey," he confirmed, giving her a little waive, "and yes, I do work here. The combination is quite patriotic," he grinned. "Anyway, we're the communications department..."

Donna and Audrey stepped away from the speech and wandered around the corner into CJ's office, Audrey picking up the pace when she saw the press secretary.

"Well, good morning Miss Lyman," CJ greeted her with a wide grin. "Don't you look fancy today."

Audrey stared wide eyed at CJ, saying nothing as she silently moved to hold onto the handle of the second drawer on CJ's desk. She wore a particularly calculated look, and CJ recognized it immediately. It was a softer version of the same look that crossed Josh's face after a victory.

"What are you doing?" CJ bent over and asked Audrey softly, straightening her little sweater in the process.

Audrey blinked her long lashes a few times at CJ before turning a questioning gaze to Donna.

CJ glanced between the two, wondering what she wasn't catching.

"What do you say," Donna asked, walking over to perch on the arm of CJ's visitor chair.

"Pease," Audrey almost begged Donna in her little voice, still not letting go of the drawer handle.

"Don't ask me, ask CJ."

"Pease?" Audrey asked CJ, bouncing up and down a bit.

"Tell her what you want," Donna instructed softly. She was trying to get Josh to stop speaking for Audrey, and this was the perfect way for the little girl to begin to fend for herself.

"Fish!" Audrey stated excitedly.

"Ah," CJ smiled, glancing at Donna for the go ahead before rolling her desk chair over a little farther to help Audrey open the drawer and procuring a bag of goldfish crackers.

CJ grabbed a napkin and shook a few crackers out, Audrey reaching happily for them.

"Sit down while you're eating, please," Donna softly reminded from where she sat and Audrey withdrew her hand and quickly made her way to Donna's lap, CJ scooting the napkin and the snack across the desk.

The three sat in a moment of silence before Donna spoke. "Do you think she's getting shy? It just seems like the last few months she's gotten a little more... clingy."

CJ pondered the question for a moment. "I'm not sure. I can't say that I've noticed one way or the other."

"It's just that the books I've read say-"
"Wait." CJ interrupted. "You're reading parenting books?"

"Well, yeah." Donna never thought twice about it.

"Donna..." CJ's voice was a mixture of wonder and concern.

"CJ, you know us. We're... It's just..." Donna's thought trailed off as she smoothed Audrey's hair.

"I know," she assured her friend, truly not needing further explanation. CJ watched the normally fidgeting toddler sit content on Donna's lap. And while she may not understand exactly the dynamic between Josh and Donna she did understand what her friend was saying. The two had something special. Something that, if CJ got right down to it, could hardly be explained. It was a gentle understanding, she supposed. "Anyway. You were reading the books," CJ leaned back in her chair. "And it's a good thing, too. Somebody has to make sure Josh is doing it right."

Donna smiled somewhat sadly. "I was reading the books and it seems like she should be more social than she is. This morning at breakfast she just watched the other kids play but didn't want to join them."

"So, she's shy." CJ didn't see the big deal.

"Well she is, but I'm worried it's more than that. I'm worried she doesn't know how to interact with kids her own age. She's just around senior staff and she spends all day with Edie."

"Have you talked to Josh about this."

Donna sighed softly. "It's a touchy subject. He just doesn't think anything is wrong but I'm still worried. Well, maybe not worried... but I notice. Even when I take her to the library she pretty much just clings to me but I can see her watching the other kids. She'll sit through story time if she's on my lap but she still doesn't really interact."

CJ nodded her head slowly as her friend continued, knowing Donna just wanted someone to talk to about her concerns. "I suggested some of those Gymboree classes. He wasn't too receptive at the time but I can tell he's still thinking it over."

Donna popped a goldfish cracker into her mouth and checked her watch. "Anyway. Shall we get going?"

"Yes," CJ stood and extended her hand to Audrey. "Ready for your debut?"

The three slowly made their way to the briefing room and Audrey joined CJ at the podium while Donna found a spot to lean on the side wall.

"Hey Chris," she greeted one of the White House staff photographers as he stood next to her.

"Donna! How's it going?" He lifted his camera and began to snap photos, taking several of Audrey and CJ as well as various other reporters children who filled the briefing room.

"We've seen a lot of you today," Donna commented, noticing that Chris had earlier photographed the two of them at brunch and the first lady's book give away.

Chris shrugged his shoulders and looked a little guilty. "Special assignment from the Chief of Staff's office."

"Ah." Donna understood and gave a knowing smile. It was really no surprise to her, but Edie must
have called Leo to make sure someone took pictures today.

A quick moment later CJ entered the room with Audrey in tow and stepped to the podium for the mock press briefing.

"I'm CJ Cregg," she announced, "and this is my helper today, Audrey Lyman."

Audrey peered out across the room full of people, taking it all in. Her eyes became wide and she stared somewhat helplessly at Donna.

Donna gave her a little waive and a smile, hoping to calm any anxiety that may have been starting to bubble up inside the little girl.

CJ explained the daily briefing process and then allowed the kids to ask questions. All of the hands in the room raised and several kids shouted "CJ!" as they were likely instructed to do by their press corps parents, a few camera bulbs flashing in the distance.

That proved to be a little overwhelming for Audrey who's chin began to slightly quiver as she reached out with both arms for Donna who was there in an instant, taking her from CJ who never missed a beat in her program. They pair stood to the side and watched the mock briefing, Audrey completely content not to be the center of attention.

Twenty minutes later CJ announced that lunch would be served in the mess and the room cleared out, Donna and Audrey trailing behind the crowd.

"Hey," a winded Josh fell in step beside her, checking his crappy watch. "I was hoping I'd make it back in time for lunch."

"Daddy!" Audrey grinned at the sight of him, her tiny dimples popping out to mirror Josh's own.

Josh grabbed a few slices of pizza for the three of them and slid into the chair next to Donna, who handed Audrey over to him and popped up to grab two salads. Josh had intentionally avoided the 'rabbit food,' as he called it.

Josh and Donna quickly ran through the rest of the day's schedule, which was rather light due to the number of small guests in the a White House.

"She'll be ready for a n-a-p around 1," Josh nodded towards Audrey, who was already beginning to fade after an exciting morning. "I can call my mom and have her swing by to pick her up."

"No, Joshua," Donna almost scolded. "Your mother has plans today. Let her have a few hours to herself. It's take your child to work day, so she's staying here."

Josh chuckled. "I understand, but I don't think the organizers of today's festivities intended for me to take my 2 year old to a meeting with the majority leader."

"Well, obviously." Donna rolled her eyes. "She can stay with me while you're in your meeting and then she can spend the rest of the afternoon with us in your office." Donna stated her plan with confidence but lowered her voice to an understanding tone. Some decisions she'd prefer not to make for him. "Unless you really want her to go home..."

Josh looked at her like she'd grown a second head. "God, no, I don't want her to go home," he announced immediately. "If it were up to me neither of the two of you would ever leave my field of vision."
Donna flushed a bit as his comment, looking at her plate, and Josh, realizing what he'd just stated fidgeted a bit before kissing the top of Audrey's head and changing the subject. "How'd you like to spend the whole day with Daddy and Donna, Shortcake?"

"Yeah!" Audrey let out a little cheer and then went back to concentrating on feeding herself the tiny bites of cheese pizza and a few of the peas that Donna had placed in front of her.

Josh and Donna quickly went over a few things that they needed to accomplish and what Josh would need for the afternoon between exchanging pleasantries with the other White House employees and their families.

And as Josh cleared their plates and dashed off to the hill Donna wandered back to his office and situated Audrey with a few toys so she could get some work done. It wasn't long before nap time was approaching and Audrey was drifting off in Donna's arms as she tried in vain to type a memo before throwing in the towel.

She made her way to Toby's office, which she found empty, and situated them on the couch. Before she knew it Donna dozed off, too.

An hour later Josh wandered through the West Wing, trying to locate Donna and Audrey when he found his office empty. He peered through the window in Toby's office and smiled, quietly letting himself in. The girls were curled up on the couch with a blanket tucked over them as Toby worked quietly on his computer.

"How long have they been sleeping?" Josh adjusted the blanket gently, pulling it up from where it had slipped off of Audrey's shoulders as she'd moved closer to Donna and drooled a little on her dress shirt, which amused Josh greatly.

"I found them on the couch about twenty minutes ago," Toby stated quietly, and covered them up.

"Thank you," Josh extended his appreciation for letting them sleep and sat down in Toby's spare chair.

Toby nodded once in acknowledgment. "No need," he stated flatly. "We take care of family around here."

"So while I've got you, how do you want to handle this afternoon's briefing on the article regarding-" Toby handed Josh a sheet of paper, his preferred response to the anticipated questions outline. "Take a cue from the kid," Toby nodded to Audrey. "And work quietly."

"Hmmph," Josh grumbled, watching Audrey out of the corner of his eye and knowing she was awake but pretending to sleep. "And I was going to invite you to the ice cream sundae bar," he emphasized the words ice cream.

Audrey gasp a little at the concept of a treat, sitting up and placing her hand on Donna's face to wake her. "Donna," she whispered excited. "DonnaDonnaDonna..."

"I'm up," Donna removed Audrey's hand from her face and sat up, smoothing her own hair and clothing and then reaching over to do the same to Audrey.

"Where are your shoes, Audrey Joan," Josh laughed.

Audrey looked to Donna, who reached over and grabbed them, placing them on her little feet and struggling to tame her curls and get her headband back on as Audrey wiggled around.
"Why are you so excited?" Donna couldn't figure out why the little girl was bursting to get out the door.

"Ice cream," Josh and Toby responded in unison, both standing.

"You coming?" Josh asked Donna. "The President will be down there and he wanted to see her."

"I'll pass on this one. I have to get a few things done."

"I'll bring you a bowl," Josh responded, knowing she wanted hot fudge and two cherries. "Toby and I will finish our meeting in my office."

Donna nodded her appreciation and walked to her desk to get back to work. She hadn't accomplished much of anything that morning and had loads to do. She barely noticed when Toby and Josh returns, thanking him quickly for the snack and returning to her typing as Toby, Audrey and Josh holed up inside the office.

"Donna!" Josh bellowed from his desk an hour later.

"DONNA!" Audrey immediately screamed at the top of her lungs from where she was perched on his lap, mimicking her father and then letting out a string of giggles before repeating, "DONNA! DONNA!"

Donna appeared in the doorway, hands on her hips and an unamused look on her face. She couldn't help but to immediately zone in on Josh's completely amused and somewhat proud expression.

"Uh-oh," Audrey blurted out as soon as she saw Donna.

Toby was trying his hardest not to laugh.

"Joshua. What have I told you about the bellowing?"

"Sorry," he grumbled.

"And Audrey," she turned her gaze, which softened considerably. "You know better than that. Inside voice," Donna rounded his desk and picked her up from Josh's knee.

"Sorry," Audrey almost whispered.

"Okay. Now let's go find the file that Daddy needs."

Audrey swing her feet a bit as Donna toted her off to the bullpen.

"Hold on to this," she handed her a small folder. "Be very careful. You're our special helper today so you're going to help by giving this to Daddy."

They walked back to Josh's office, passing Toby on the way. "Night Toby," Donna told him in passing. "Goodnight, ladies."

"Bye Bye Unca Toby!" Audrey called out, still proudly clutching the folder that Josh needed.

Donna and Audrey delivered the requested materials to Josh who thanked them and sat back in his chair with a groan. "Well, ladies," he began, "I'm exhausted and nowhere near finished so what do you two say to grabbing some dinner and finishing this at home?"

"Sounds good to me," Donna smiled.
"French fries?" Audrey asked hopefully, perking up a little bit more. She was certainly her father's child.

"You can have a bite of Daddy's," Donna answered, receiving a few little claps of excitement from Audrey and a grumble from Josh, who muttered something about not having anything to eat by the time the two of them were done picking over his meal.

"Go get Walter," Donna instructed referring to the floppy eared Bunny Audrey toted everywhere. "I'll pack up and call in our order and we can go in 10 minutes."

"Nah," Josh stood and began to gather his own things. "Let's go somewhere nice."

"Oh." Donna was taken aback a bit. They had a routine involving take out and working from Josh's apartment down to a science.

"It's a special day," Josh told her with a shrug. "And it's a working dinner, really."

"Alright," Donna gave him a bright smile, making it all worth it in Josh's mind.

And when they were seated in a corner booth, full from a delicious meal of fresh pasta and a charred steak, neither of them were jumping at the opportunity to get back to work. Audrey was fading fast, struggling to keep her eyes open as she slowly nibbled on her fries. They both saw it and Josh motioned for the check, paying the bill as Donna wiped off Audrey's face and hands, the three of them making their way back to his brownstone.

Audrey nodded off in the car and Josh gently unbuckled her seat and carried her down the sidewalk.

"I received quite the interesting phone call this afternoon," Donna told him as they slowly made their way up the stairs.

"Oh?" Josh didn't look at her, knowing what she was about to say. She was right and he knew it. He'd admit it... eventually.


"Perhaps," Josh grumbled. He'd been watching Audrey closely since Donna had mentioned her lack of socialization and he had to admit she was right- Audrey was very shy.

"Well I think that's great," Donna reassured him. "You're scheduled to do a walk through of the facility next Tuesday at 1:45 and then you can sign her up for a trial at that time if you're pleased with what you see."

"Thank you," he told her as she fished his keys out of her purse. "Wait... me? You're not coming with me?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course I'm coming with you. And you're buying me a fancy coffee on the way."

He grinned. "Deal."

Audrey shifted a bit in his arms, her eyes blinking heavily a few times, getting her bearings once again.

"I'm going to lay her down," Josh stated softly.
"I'll get everything you need to review the banking bill set up," Donna told him, taking his backpack off his shoulder.

"Goodnight, Sweet Pea," she kissed Audrey's head and smoothed her wild curls.

Audrey opened her eyes just a crack. "Lubb eww," she muttered sleepily but the I Love You came ringing through loud and clear to Donna, who's heart melted.

"Love you, too, little one. So much."

Josh grinned broadly at the exchange, his dimples popping out a bit. It would occur to him, later that night as he lay alone in bed, that nothing had made him happier in years.
Chapter 7

Josh saw a flash of a blonde hair zoom by his office door. He lifted his head from the memo he was previously absorbed in to try and see what was happening.

"Donna?"

She appeared in his doorway, balancing against the frame as she slipped on a pair of black stilettos. Her hair was falling down around her shoulders, loose from the professional way she'd had it pinned up all morning and she'd removed the blazer she'd worn over her dress to reveal... well, considerably more than she could show at work.

"You bellowed," she asked, stepping into his office to apply some shiny lip gloss in using the reflection of herself in his framed law school diploma.

Josh raised his eyebrows when he realized what she was doing.

"That's my law school diploma," he stated. "From Yale. Where I studied for three years. It's a good school, Donna."

She stilled her motions and turned slowly to face him. "Well now someone's finally getting some use out of it," she quipped, returning to focus her concentration on her lip gloss.

"Everybody's a comedian," he mumbled. "Why are you so dressed up tonight anyway, Gilda?"

"I," she softly smacked her lips together. "Have a date."

"A date?!" His voice increased in pitch several octaves.

She turned to look at him again, leaning her hip on her desk. "You know... two people, meeting for drinks and dinner and, lord willing, other things."

He gulped, taking in the vision of her in a little black dress. He forced himself to look away. She was his assistant. It wouldn't be appropriate. His young, beautiful assistant... and so much more, his brain screamed. But he silenced that part of his mind.

"You can't!"

She raised her eyebrows at him in surprise.

"I mean..." he recoiled, trying to think of a reason for her to stay. Wasn't he supposed to be able to think on his feet? "I'm not done with the... bill."

She narrowed her gaze. "What bill?"

"The..." he looked around his office. "The..." Come ON, Lyman, he prodded himself. "The... uh... electric pencil sharpener subsidy." What?!

She blinked twice, an unamused expression on her face.

"It's for the kids, Donna," he mentally kicked himself. He swore he was even starting to sweat under her scrutiny. "Education reform?" It came out as a question.

She rolled her eyes at him, gathering a few file folders and placing them neatly into his backpack.
"I'm not staying late tonight and neither are you. You need to leave now to pick up Audrey. There's construction on Virginia Ave so give yourself a few extra minutes to get to her art class."

Damn, he thought. He couldn't even invent a reason to make her stay at work. "What's the class theme tonight?"

"Macaroni art," Donna supplied, having memorized the schedule. "So take your tie off before you go or you'll end up glued to something."

"You're sure you don't want to join us?" He made a habit of leaving Audrey out of it but desperate times called for desperate measures.

"Tempting," she smiled, grabbing her things and walking with him to exit the building. "But I think I'll pass just this once."

"Suit yourself," he smirked, parting ways with her and hating himself for letting her walk away.

OoOoOoOoO

Josh shuffled over to his front door, recognizing the familiar rhythm of the knock but not expecting any company. He was clad in sweats watching the end of the Mets game with Audrey who was already in her little pink polka dot jammies and bunny slippers.

"Hi," Donna appeared to be a little nervous.

"Hi," he looked her up and down, quickly assuring himself that she was alright. "I thought you had a date?" He'd tried his best to sabotage it but Donna had gone anyway. Dinner with someone Josh had immediately deemed a waste of her time, though he wasn't going to allow himself to acknowledge just exactly why her date bothered him to begin with.

Donna just shrugged her shoulders. "I did. It's finished."

"Didn't go well?"

"Would I be standing outside your door at 8:25 if it did?"

Josh let out a little laugh. "No, I don't suppose you would be."

"So are you going to let me in?"

He stood aside as she breezed through and hung her sweater up, removed her heels and made herself at home while Josh locked up behind her.

Audrey hopped down from where she was curled up on the couch and hurried over to Donna, who immediately picked her up. "Hi, Sweet Pea," Donna kissed the top of her head.

"Hi Donna." She threw her arms around Donna's neck and rest her head on her shoulder with a small smile.

"So what's in the bag?" Josh peered into the white sack.

"Dinner," Donna announced, picking it up and carrying it, and Audrey, into the kitchen.

Josh looked a little confused.

"He ordered for me," Donna began. "Insisted that I have the steak. Wouldn't take no for an answer."
That phrase made Josh a little queasy and more than a little grateful that Donna was safe and sound in his apartment. If this guy wouldn't let her say no to a steak who knows what else he wouldn't have taken no as an answer to. He shook his head, pulling himself from the dark direction in which his mind wandered, and listened to what she was saying.

"Anyway, so he ordered me the steak and I asked them to burn the life out of it. And then I didn't eat it." She popped the container into the microwave for a minute and looked back to Josh. "And since I'm assuming you scarfed down a bowl of Cheerios over the sink after you fed her, I figured you could use a real dinner." The microwave dinged and she pulled the container out and handed it to him.

"Thanks," Josh muttered. This woman never ceased to amaze him. She could anticipate his every need, he swore. "But what are you eating?"

"I had a salad at the restaurant."

"A side salad?" He eyed her skeptically as she moved through his kitchen as though she lived there. "Donna, you have to eat more than a side salad for dinner. You have to-

She stopped in her tracks and turned to shoot him a glare, Audrey still on her hip. "Really? Now YOU'RE going to tell me what I have to eat? Do you really think that's a good idea right now, Joshua?"

"No," he gulped.

"Save your parenting for Audrey, I can take care of myself," she snapped a little more than she meant to.

"Okay," he held his hands up in surrender, looking a little sheepish. If only he knew how far from parental his thoughts about here really were. Picking up his plate and the utensils she'd handed him and heading back to the couch as the game came back from commercial.

Donna went back to what she was doing and spoke a little softer, turning her attention to Audrey. "You and I are going to have a little treat, too." Donna grabbed the smaller second box from the bag. "Restaurant dessert, Audrey Lyman, is a necessity in every girl's life."

Audrey, bright eyed and completely enthralled, hung on to every word Donna said, as she always did.

Donna put Audrey down and grabbed a spoon and a napkin. "Go sit on the couch by Daddy," she instructed her. "I'm right behind you."

Donna wandered out of the kitchen, slowing as she walked by Josh.

"I didn't mean to snap at you," she admitted softly from behind him, her hand gently grazing his shoulders and dragging lightly across the back of his neck as she walked by in a tactile apology. "I'm sorry."

"Okay," he muttered, unable to take his eyes off of her. He swore his whole body was tingling at the sensation from her touch. He shook his head a little bit, clearing his throat and focusing on the baseball game.

Donna sat down at the opposite end of the couch and gave Audrey a bite of the cheesecake. "Never let a man order for you. Or order you around," she told her. "If he won't let you choose your own meal he's not going to let you be your own woman in any other capacity either." Audrey stared at
Donna, not understanding her dating advice but smiling every time Donna gave her a bite. "Keep your standards high, Audrey," she gave her another bite of cheesecake. "And don't settle."

"Okay," Audrey agreed, squirming around to settle into a more comfortable position on Donna's lap, considerably more interested in dessert than figuring out what Donna was saying to her.

Josh listened carefully, not interrupting, completely unsure of what to say. He hoped Donna knew that advice applied to her as well.

"Thanks for dinner," he told Donna. "Time for bed, kiddo."

Donna stood up and walked Audrey down the hall to her room, Josh trailing behind.

"Pick out your story," he told Audrey. "Just one tonight since we had dessert with Donna."

Audrey immediately grabbed her favorite book as Donna pulled the blankets back and she crawled into bed with her little stuffed bunny. Donna lay down on top of the covers, curling her legs up to fit on the small toddler bed as Audrey snuggled in closer to her and Josh sat down against the headboard with the book. Audrey clutched her bunny and shifted her attention to her father, who began to read through then book that he practically had memorized, using different silly voices for each barnyard animal character.

They were only a few pages in when Audrey's eyes fluttered closed and before they knew it she was asleep.

"Goodnight, Sweet Pea," Donna kissed her forehead and gently rolled off of the bed.

"Sweet dreams," Josh added, repeating the same process and pulling covers up around her before double checking the nightlight and quietly leaving the room.

They both walked softly back to his living room before speaking again.

"We need to go over the most recent education report," Donna stated, getting down to business.

"Kay," he agreed, grabbing a beer for them to split and flopping down on the couch. "Let's get to work."

If all of her dates ended like this, Josh thought, maybe that would be alright with him.
Chapter 8

Donna opened the gate to the pool area at Edie Lyman's condo complex and was immediately greeted by an unmistakable little voice cheering her name. "Donna! Hi, Donna!"

She gave Audrey a little wave. "Hi, Sweet Pea." She was pleasantly surprised to see that they had the entire pool area to themselves that afternoon.

Josh swam around for a minute, Donna trying not to stare at him. She sometimes let herself indulge in taking a glimpse at his muscular, bare forearms when he rolled up his sleeves in the office late in the evening or changed into a tshirt after they'd worked halfway through the night at his kitchen table. But she was certain that she'd never seen him like this.

He easily bobbed in the water and she tried not to make her stare obvious. She knew Josh was in shape but she'd never seen him shirtless. He was lean and chiseled and something else... ah, yes. Relaxed.

"Hey there," he greeted her with a full dimpled grin from behind his designer sunglasses. He ran his hand through his wet curls and swam over to the edge. "Thanks for coming over."

She gave him a genuine smile. There was, in her mind, no reason to thank her. He'd extended the invitation the previous evening just after they'd put Audrey to bed after another round of restaurant dessert and life advice after Donna's failed date.

She sat her bag down on a sun lounger, sliding out of her sandals and pulling out her own sunglasses before removing the t shirt dress she'd worn as a cover up. Grabbing a towel from her bag, she walked over to the edge of the pool.

"Water's fine," he smirked, unable to come up with anything intelligent to say as he tried his hardest not to let his jaw drop at the sight of her body in the small black bikini.

She tilted her head and gave him an odd look. "Yes," she stated slowly. "I'd imagine it would be in August."

Donna sat down on her folded towel and dipped her feet in the pool, leaning back a bit to feel the sun on her whole body.

Josh kicked over and pulled himself halfway out of the water resting on the edge of the pool. "You're not getting in?"

She shrugged her shoulders a bit. "Maybe later. "This is nice for now."

She heard the pitter patter of little feet behind her, Audrey grinning from ear to ear in her Minnie Mouse swimsuit and water wings as she approached Donna.

"Donna, watch!"

"Are you going to jump in?" Josh stood right in front of her.

"Yes," Audrey stated, squirming a bit as Donna reached out and fixed her barrette.

"Alright, kiddo. Lets show Donna how it's done. One... Two..."

"Three!" Audrey yelled and jumped, Josh grabbing her practically before she hit the water.
Donna clapped animatedly and Audrey grinned with pride, shouting again as Josh popped her out of the water and they repeated the process time after time.

"Okay," Josh hoisted her out of the water for what felt like the hundredth time, "go get a drink of juice from Bubbe. Daddy's getting tired," he instructed her and Audrey ran over to Edie who was reading a book in the shade.

"Don't run," Donna called over her shoulder without even looking.

Josh kicked over to where she sat. "You ready to get in yet?"

"Eh," she shifted her weight. "I don't know."

"Come on, you know you want to."

"It's pretty nice right here," she admitted.

He gave her a playful splash, barely getting her wet. She responded by giving a gentle kick of water in his direction. Josh then gave a larger splash and she returned in kind, letting out a cross between a shriek and a giggle as the cool water hit her.

Edie looked on from where she sat with Audrey and smiled. She loved everything that this woman was to her family.

Josh stopped his movements abruptly causing Donna to do the same.

"What?" Donna asked confused. He was staring at her.

"Donna, there's something-" he reached slowly for arm, taking her by surprise and pulling her quickly into the pool. She let out a scream of surprise as she flew towards the water but Josh caught her, not allowing her head to go under. She'd reflexively grabbed for him in the process. "Well you're in now," he told her.

Donna caught his gaze and only then did Josh realize her arms were draped loosely around his neck and her legs had wrapped around his waist. His hands steadied her almost bare hips, their bodies pressed tightly together in the water. She licked her lips subconsciously, their faces close together and Josh almost couldn't resist. But this was Donna. Beautiful, smart, caring, Donna. She was his assistant and his friend. And he wasn't going to throw all of that away over what he was sure was a one sided attraction.

He was pulled back to reality by the sound of tiny giggles coming from the pool deck as Audrey found herself highly amused by his antics.

He couldn't help but to notice, however that Donna didn't move immediately away from him. Their bodies were still touching when she shifted a bit in the water, her hands running down his chiseled chest and lingering a bit as her legs slowly uncoiled, her silky skin grazing directly against his in the process. Josh had to stifle a groan and tell mentally himself to pull it together.

When she moved away from him the loss of contact with her body immediately made him feel empty. He took a moment to pull himself out of his haze and went back to normal a few moments later, convincing himself that nothing had happened.

Audrey returned back to the steps of the pool and Donna picked her up, holding her and dancing around in the water, both of them smiling and happy. Josh swore he saw her catching sideways glimpses of him the rest of the day but by the time they were ready to get out and dry off he'd
convincing himself that he was truly imagining it.

Donna toweled off Audrey and packed a few remaining items away in her beach bag. Edie had returned to the condo to thaw something for dinner.

Josh ran a towel coarsely through his hair, distanced once again by Donna's bikini.

"Josh."

"Huh?" He was confused, his mind wandering to places it shouldn't.

"I can't find her shoes."

Josh glanced around the pool deck. "Oh. Uhhh... Bubbe must have grabbed them."

Donna opened her mouth to voice concern but Josh cut her off.

"Up you go," he told Audrey, tossing her up to sit on his shoulders and holding onto her bare feet. The toddler grinned in satisfaction and gave her Dad's hair an accidental little tug. "Easy, shortcake," he pulled gently on her foot. "Ready, Donnatella?" He gave her a thousand watt smile and placed one tenderly hand on the small of her back, his thumb caressing her skin softly. He couldn't help himself. She gave him a small smile in return, eyes bright with curiosity. The moment was over as quickly as it began and the three made their way inside for dinner.

After quickly rinsing off the chlorine and changing into dry clothes Donna popped into the kitchen to give Edie a hand while Josh helped to fix a few things around Edie's condo and threw the chicken on the grill.

Audrey wandered into the kitchen, with her stuffed bunny in tow, and made her way over to stand by Donna, who popped her up on the kitchen counter. Donna continued to chat with Edie, handing Audrey tiny bites of the avocado and cherry tomato she was chopping for the salad.

"Chicken is ready," Josh announced, walking over to lean against the counter holding the barbecue tongs. "I put it on the table."

Donna placed the completed salad to the side and turned on the faucet, washing her hands and then Audrey's.

"You have dinner plans on Tuesday?" Josh furrowed his brow as he looked at his mother's calendar on the fridge.

"Yes, it's Bridget's birthday. You know Bridget. From my book club."

"Kay." Josh pinched the bridge of his nose. "The President is speaking that night and I have to be there."

"Oh. Well Audrey can go with me I suppose..."

"I'll take her," Donna piped up. "She has art class that night anyway. I think they're making little musical instruments."

"Really?" Donna did a lot for Josh but he didn't want to make her feel obligated to take Audrey that evening.

"Yes, really," Donna rolled her eyes at Josh and dried Audrey's hands with a towel, sitting her down from the counter. "Since I don't get to go with you anyway," she gave him a teasing smile. She'd
been trying to find a way to go to the event for weeks but there wasn't any extra room in the motorcade.

"It's one insignificant night, Donna. How many times have you heard the President speak?"

"You'll be lost without me," Donna quipped.

Josh gave her a grin and carried the salad to the table, Donna toting Audrey along to place her in her chair. "Somehow, Donnatella, I'll survive. Promise."

After all, it wasn't a cross country excursion. They were simply crossing the bridge to Rosslyn.
"Donna? Is everything alright?" Edith Lyman had to admit- seeing Donna Moss show up at this time of night unannounced made her a little nervous. Especially after receiving a call from Leo two weeks ago that shook her entire world.

"Everything's fine," Donna assured her quickly. "Josh is fine."

Edie let out the breath she didn't realize she was holding. "I'm sorry. Come in," she opened the door and stepped out of Donna's way. "I thought you would be with Joshua."

Donna walked in and sat a small duffel bag down in the entryway. "I was. But he practically shooed me out of his room," Donna chuckled a bit. "He said I needed some rest. I would have fought him but he double teamed me with Abbey Bartlet and I think I was about 2 minutes away from secret service intervention."

Edith laughed. She was sure that it took a lot of convincing to get Donna to leave.

"So Sam agreed to stay the night with Josh," Donna continued. "And I thought you could use some rest too. So I came over to stay with Audrey."

Edith pulled her into a hug. "You're so good to us, Donna. What would we do without you?"

Donna embraced her as well. The last two weeks, since that fated night at Rosslyn, had been an emotional rollercoaster. She loved these people. They were her family now. "Let me make you a cup of tea before you go," Donna offered. She knew she needed to talk to Edie.

Edith didn't refuse, working with Donna in the kitchen as they quietly poured hot water into their mugs and grabbed the tea bags that Donna kept in Josh's cupboard and slid into chairs in his dining room.

"How are you doing, Edith?" Donna reached out and took the older woman's hand. Her concern was genuine.

"Oh, just fine dear." It was a standard response and Donna knew it. Edith's eyes were still puffy from tears and she'd never seen the older woman look so exhausted. The dark circles under her eyes and her shaking hands told a different tale.

"Edie..." Donna gave her a look. "I think we're past that."

Edie sighed. "It's been hard, Donna. Not that I need to tell you that." Edie wiped her eyes.

Donna gave her hand a squeeze and nodded solemnly.

"I just don't know what I would have done if-" Edith couldn't even finish the sentence. But Donna knew what she meant. Her stomach churned at the very thought. "I'm just so tired, Donna. And the thought of coming that close to losing him- After Joanie and Noah I just don't think I could go on if-"

"Edith? We're friends. You can be honest with me- do you need a little break?" Donna didn't want to overstep but she knew someone had to take control of this situation. They were far from back to normal.

"I'm just so tired, Donna."
"Josh mentioned a few weeks ago that you were thinking about looking for a place in Florida?"

"Well, I was. But I just don't know now. I mean, I wasn't sure about moving away from Josh and Audrey to begin with but now I really don't think I should leave."

"Edith, you need to take care of yourself. These were supposed to be your retirement years. You deserve some relaxation. You need to take the time and do these things. I love Audrey too, and I understand why you're doing what you are. But we can't have you burning yourself out either. What if something happened? I don't even want to think about what that would do to Audrey and Josh. And me," she admitted, hoping Edith knew that Donna truly loved her like a mother.

Edie nodded slowly. She couldn't argue with Donna's logic.

"Edith, whatever you need- if you need to take some time. A few days or however long you need- just to kind of reset and get some good sleep or take a vacation..."

"But what about-"

"Edith." Donna met her gaze. "I'm not going to let anything happen to them."

Edie smiled. "I know. You're right."

"I have some vacation days saved up and Leo has been more than accommodating with my schedule. I can easily stay here and make sure they're both taken care of when he gets home. We can come up with a schedule or whatever you're the most comfortable with."

"You'd do that?"

"Of course." Donna didn't hesitate.

"Well... yes. Okay. Maybe you're right. Maybe I do just need a little bit of time."

"We'll work out the logistics and talk to Josh tomorrow. Just get some sleep tonight." Donna gave her a hug goodbye and locked up, placing their mugs in the dishwasher and wandering down the hall, peeking in to check on a still sleeping Audrey as she passed her open door.

Exhausted and in need of a hot shower, Donna let herself into Josh's master bathroom and stood under the running water. She'd held herself together for the most part over the last few weeks but now she was alone and the tears began to fall. She allowed herself a few moments of emotional purge before pulling herself back together and stepping out of the shower. She dried off, changing into a pair of comfortable pajamas and making one last pass through his apartment before she turned in for the night.

She stood in the kitchen, rooting around in the pantry for a late night snack of some sort. Her meals were all off schedule that week.

"Daddy?"

Donna stilled her motions at the sound of the soft voice and peeked her head around the corner.

As soon as Audrey saw Donna her face lit up. "Daddy?" She asked again. Because in her world, where there was 'Donna' there was usually Daddy, too.

"No, Sweet Pea. It's just me," Donna walked over to Audrey who stood planted where she was in the hallway, clutching her bunny, Walter, and whimpering softly. It killed Donna to see how much
Audrey missed Josh.

Donna scooped her up and held her tight as Audrey cried. She kissed her forehead and reassured her that everything was okay as she swayed her back and forth in the dimly lit room. Audrey held on to Donna for dear life, eventually dozing off.

Donna, who didn't care what the optics were, crawled into Josh's unmade bed. He'd likely left it that way in a hurry to get out the door for work two weeks ago. She could still smell a hint of his aftershave on his pillow. She pulled Audrey close and listened to the steady rhythm of her breathing and eventually drifted off to sleep herself.

OoOoOoOoO

It had been a rough morning. Audrey wasn't listening to a word that Donna said, but Donna couldn't be too hard on the little girl. Her world had been turned upside down in the last few weeks, too.

"Audrey?" Donna sat down on the edge of the couch but Audrey didn't look up as she stood at the coffee table and continued to color, PBS playing in the background.

"Audrey," she began again, "I want to talk to you about Daddy."

Audrey immediately stopped coloring and looked up to Donna, wide eyed and listening intently.

"Did Bubbe tell you that Daddy... umm, doesn't feel good?"

Audrey, completely captivated with the conversation, nodded her head in an animated yes. "He has an owie," she told Donna softly. "On his heart," she pointed to her own chest.

"That's right, Sweet Pea," Donna tried to remain emotionally stable. She didn't want to scare her. "But I know he misses you. And you miss him too, don't you."

"Uh-huh," Audrey nodded again.

"Okay. Well, I'm sure he'd like to see you. So why don't we get dressed and go visit him."

Audrey popped up quickly, leaving her coloring where it was and thinking the news was too good to be true.

"Come on, let's get you out of your jammies and take a bath."

Audrey instead ran to the front door. "Now."

"As soon as you're ready we can go."

Donna picked her up and toted her down the hall, dressing her in a little sundress with strawberries on it that Josh loved and fixing her hair with a bow.

She loaded her into the back seat of Josh's car and made the quick trip to GW, walking Audrey to the elevator and pausing upon arrival on Josh's floor. Donna crouched down to Audrey's eye level and took a soft tone one again. "Okay. We're going to see Daddy now but do you remember what we talked about? About Daddy's heart?"

Audrey, wide eyed and uncertain of her surroundings, gawked at a group of passing nurses.

"Audrey, look at me please." Donna stroked her little cheek, drawing her attention back in. "We need to be careful around Daddy, okay? No jumping or climbing on him. Okay?"
"Okay." Her voice was soft and reserved. Her dad has always wanted to play and crawl around with her. What had changed.

Donna picked her up, preventing any running or over excitement, and peeked in to Josh's room. They'd timed it perfectly. He had just finished with his therapist and had a little break before anyone would be in to prod and him again.

"Knock Knock," she announced them.

Josh glanced up, a smile on his face the second he heard her voice. It broke in to a full dimpled grin when he saw Audrey in her arms.

"Surprise! You have a visitor," she announced.

"Daddy!" Audrey practically lunged out of Donna's arms to reach Josh.

"Hi, baby girl!" Josh was clearly elated as Donna sat Audrey carefully on the non injury side of his hospital bed.

Audrey threw her arms around his neck and though Josh cringed he looked happier than Donna had seen him since their day together at the pool.

Josh pulled his daughter close with his uninsured arm and kissed the top of her head. "Thank you," he told Donna softly, meeting her gaze. And when he did, Donna saw the building emotion in his eyes, causing her to shed a few tears herself as she reached out to give his shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Of course," she whispered softly.

Josh swallowed hard, unashamed to have Donna witness the tender reunion, and closed his eyes, holding on to Audrey as long as she'd let him.

Eventually she squirmed around in Josh's grasp and sat up on his bed but it was clear that he wanted her to remain close by.

Josh asked Audrey about her morning, searching desperately for a since of normalcy. "Have you been good for Bubbe and Donna?" He reflexively smoothed her little curls.

"Uh huh," Audrey nodded eagerly. "I ate a 'nana for breakfast." She then proceeded to explain, in excruciating detail, the episode of Sesame Street she'd watched while Donna did a load of laundry.

Josh, who determined he would need another dose of morphine to get through the rest of the details of Big Bird's most recent adventure, gave Donna a pleasing look.

"Why don't we show Daddy what you made for him during art hour last week.'

Audrey's attention did a 180 as Donna pulled out a finger painting and Audrey proudly showed it off. "Great job, Shortcake," Josh told her. "Is this for me?"

Audrey told him that it was and Donna grabbed a piece of tape from the nurses station to hang it up by his bed.

After an hour of Josh and Audrey spending some quiet time together reading books and lounging around together, Donna glanced at her watch and announced that it was time to go. Both Josh and Audrey's faces immediately fell.

Donna reached for Audrey, ready to assure her they'd be back to visit soon. The last hour had done
so much good for all three of their souls.

But as she came closer, Audrey shranked away from Donna for the first time in her life as large tears formed in her eyes and her chin began to quiver. "NO! DONNA, NO! GO AWAY!"

Donna's eyes immediately filled with tears, her heart breaking. She worried that bringing Audrey here had been a mistake. Josh needed his rest, and it was almost Audrey's nap time, too. In fact, she'd probably fall asleep in the car. She tried to steel herself against the pain, after all this is what parenting was- sometimes you have to enforce the rules even when it breaks your heart. Josh pulled his daughter close and whispered something in her ear that immediately soothed her panic.

After a moment, Donna reached for Audrey again, but this time it was Josh who protested. "Please? Just a few more minutes." The look of desperation on his face almost broke Donna in half.

Donna quickly relented. "Okay. One more story." She pulled Audrey's favorite book out of her oversized bag but when Josh reached for it, she simply shook her head. "Why don't you close your eyes for a minute? I'll read it."

Josh tightened his arm around his baby, and smoothed her curls with his other hand.

After a few minutes of listening to Donna's gentle voice, they were both fast asleep, side by side. And Donna Moss knew she'd do anything for either of them.
Chapter 10

They'd only been home from the hospital for a few hours but Josh was fading fast. Donna knew it would be an early night and she was glad she'd had the forethought to have an easy dinner planned.

Audrey was watching a movie as Josh took quick shower with the intention of crawling directly into bed for some rest.

Josh slowly dried off with a towel, hating how exhausted he was after a task as simple as quickly rinsing off. Donna sat perched on top of his bathroom vanity, quietly waiting for him. He'd protested but she insisted that she was nearby incase he became dizzy.

And while he hated to admit that he needed help with such a routine task, as always he was glad she was nearby. He grabbed the clean pair of boxers and sweatpants she'd lay out for him and quickly changed, Donna turning her back to him for some privacy.

"Kay," he told her when he was finished, tossing his towel into the hamper.

She popped down from where she was perched and watched him slowly, carefully, walk over to her. "Do you need to sit down?"

He grumbled a non-response.

"How ya doin?" She cocked her head to the side and watched him, hoping he'd give her a moment of honesty.

"I'm sore, I'm exhausted and this damn thing itches," he motioned to his chest incision.

She'd sat all of the needed supplies to cover his healing wound with gauze but she could see he was ready to just take a quick breather.

"Come on," she took his arm on his uninjured side and walked him to bed, helping him sit down as she returned to retrieve his bandage.

Donna heard the door to Josh's room, which was previously cracked, squeak on the hinges.

When she emerged from the bathroom she saw Audrey standing stock still in the doorway staring at Josh's scar.

"It's okay," he told Audrey softly, extending his hand.

She took a few cautious steps towards him, Donna watching on silently.

Once she was standing at Josh's knee she paused and stared at the incision a little bit more before slowly turning to Donna. "Make it better," Audrey told Donna in a timid voice, her eyes wide with concern.

Donna almost melted at the sentiment. She walked over to join them and sat Audrey next to Josh on the bed. Josh explained to her in the best way he knew how that he was healing and Donna was helping. Audrey watched silently and closely as Donna applied the bandage.

"All done," Donna tried to keep her voice chipper.

"See?" Josh turned to show Audrey the bandage before he put his shirt back on.
She studied it closely and moved to give Josh a gentle kiss on the cheek, mimicking his own actions to his daughter after scraped knees and bumps to the elbow. "All better," she said in her tiny voice.

Josh beamed at the sentiment. "Yeah," he agreed, kissing her forehead. "It really is."

OoOoOoO

On Monday night, Josh and Audrey both complained about the number of vegetables that had suddenly appeared in their diets.

On Tuesday, he stayed up late reading her stories and was a cranky with Donna when she woke him up for PT the next morning.

On Wednesday, he tried give Audrey a bath on his own, resulting in a crying toddler, an exasperated father and a soaked bathroom floor.

On Thursday, Audrey wanted a piggy back ride and Donna could see that he was actually thinking about it before she snapped him back to reality and put her foot down.

On Friday, Josh finally saw how worn down Donna was from trying to cook, clean, and care for him and a preschooler- especially when neither he nor the preschooler had shown much appreciation. He realized, though, that he had to do something- which lead him to the conversation he was currently having.

"4 pounds," Donna warned him. "The doctor said not to lift anything over 4 pounds."

Josh practically rolled his eyes. "Yeah, I was there. I heard him. It was only three days ago, Donna."

"I know you heard him," Donna continued, "but I'm not sure you were really listening."

"Donna. You're going to be down the block for what, twenty minutes? I'm not going to shatter into a million pieces while you're out getting groceries for dinner. Go."

She bit her lip. She had been reluctant to leave his side in the last few days but they really needed a few groceries. "It's just- maybe I should take Audrey."

"She's napping."

"Yes but I could wait for her to wake up and-"

Josh pinched the bridge of his nose. "Donna. You're going to worry yourself sick over nothing, I swear." She'd been running herself ragged taking care of both of them. The least he thought he could do was to keep things in check at home while she had a few minutes outside of the house. It wasn't exactly a spa day but sending her to the grocery store alone was all he could come up with.

She shifted her weight, clearly not comfortable leaving him.

"Look," he softened his tone, reaching out to touch her arm. "She will probably still be asleep when you get back and if not, she knows to be careful. You did a great job explaining that she can't jump and climb on me yet. And I promise, Donna, I'll call the second I need anything."

She nodded her head. "Okay," she finally agreed, albeit reluctantly, grabbing her keys and heading out.

Josh remained where he was on the couch, dozing lightly with the TV on for the better part of twenty minutes, until he heard Audrey wake up, soon followed by the rustling of toys in her room.
and her footsteps walking down the hall. He was so glad to be home, and he could easily tell she was equally as thrilled. But there was still a voice in the back of Josh's mind telling him that as happy as he was, he needed to think of the big picture.

He knew that she was as bored, if not more so, as he was cooped up in the house. "Bubbe used to take me swimming," she'd lament. "Bubbe took me to the park, Bubbe took me to story time at the library, Bubbe took me shopping." And lord knows Donna had gone above and beyond. But there was a limit to what one person could do— even Donna.

Josh stood up, knowing she always wanted a drink as soon as she woke up, and wandered into the kitchen to find a juice box.

When he came back around the corner Audrey was practically bouncing off the walls with her extra energy.

"Hey kiddo," Josh began, sticking the small straw into the cardboard box. "You thirsty?"

"Yeah!" Audrey exclaimed, jumping up from where she had crawled onto the couch. "Juice!" She jumped again, losing her balance in the process and tumbling towards the coffee table.

Josh instinctively reached out and grabbed her, preventing any harm to his baby girl. But the second he grabbed her he felt the pain shoot through him.

Josh practically doubled over, managing to place Audrey gently on the floor.

"Daddy?" She watched him closely after he'd stifled a groan. "It's okay," he muttered. "Daddy's okay."

But Josh didn't move, leaning where he was on the couch. "Audrey, go get my phone." He could see it resting on the table at the opposite end of the couch, just out of reach.

He was trying to figure out what to do next when he heard her key in the lock and Donna jostling some bags as she came through the door.

"Hi guys," she announced, closing the door behind her and depositing the bags in his kitchen. "What have you been—" her causal questioning stopped when she turned the corner. "Josh?!" She was instantly by his side. "What happened?" She asked softly, studying him to try and determine what the problem was.

"I- I just pulled something," he told her as she took his arm and helped him sit down.

"Audrey, why don't you go pick out a toy to play with in your room," Donna suggested, distracting her for a minute so she could figure out what was wrong with Josh.

Josh recounted the whole story and Donna carefully pulled his shirt up lightly touching the areas that were causing him pain.

"Your external stitches aren't broken, I think someone needs to check you out. Come on. Let's go to the hospital."

"No," he flat out refused, shaking his head.

"Josh you could have ruptured something internally. Or the artery..." she was getting a frantic look
on her face.

"I'm not going back to the hospital," he grumbled with more intensity than he'd intended to use.

"I can call the First Lady if you'd prefer," she offered.

Neither of those options struck Josh as particularly appealing but he knew that Donna wouldn't relax until he was checked out. "Fine," he consented, "I'll see a doctor. But don't bother the First Lady."

Donna, after a very convincing phone call, was able to get Josh in at his cardiologist before the doctor went home for the night.

They were assured that everything was fine- he'd simply pulled a muscle near his incision.

Josh buttoned his shirt up and Donna grabbed her purse, thankful that Toby was able to pop by and stay with Audrey while she took Josh to the doctor.

They made their way back to the vehicle, both relieved that nothing more serious had resulted from the incident that afternoon.

"Toby's staying for dinner," Donna broke the silence. "We can stop by the bakery and pick up a pie if you'd like."

Josh nodded that he would. He didn't know how he was going keep his wits about him cooped up inside his apartment for the next months. And he certainly wasn't going to pass dessert if Donna was offering.

She parked the car and ran in while he waited, emerging a few moments later with a peach pie and a mini cupcake with pink frosting and sprinkles for Audrey.

She handed him the bakery box, which he held on his lap.

"You're right." Josh stared out the passenger side window of the moving car. "It's time."

Donna didn't say a word. She knew what he was thinking- it had clearly been occupying his mind since she'd brought it up, and she could see that he realized that she made a valid point in the doctor's office. But this was something he had to decide on his own. She wasn't going to push him.

"Only if you're sure," she told him. "We can make it work."

"It will be good for everyone. You can't be at my place 24/7, I can't be alone with her and she needs the interaction with other kids."

Donna had recommended enrolling Audrey in preschool several times but Josh had always fought her on it. He wanted to find a way for her to stay at home with him. But he was seeing the light after the events of that afternoon.

"I'm going to assume you've done the research on all of the best preschools and Montessori's," Josh continued. "So we can review them together tonight and pick one."

"Okay," she told him lightly, not wishing to gloat. "We'll try it and see how it goes."

They returned to the apartment and had an enjoyable dinner with Toby, who after 90 minutes alone with Audrey was so exhausted he didn't even return to the office. They put Audrey to bed without incident and as soon as she was out Donna saw Josh yawning.
They both changed into pajamas and Donna grabbed her trusty notebook and all of her information on preschools, knocking softly on his door.

"Do you want to wait until tomorrow on this?" Truth be told, she was as tired as he was.

"No," Josh spoke while yawning. "Let's get started while she's asleep." He pat the spot next to him on the bed and after only a moment's hesitation Donna crawled on top of the covers and handed him the information on preschools. Josh smirked a bit when he found a color coded index card paper clipped to each brochure. She was prattling on about her favorite options while he read over the highlights, weighing the pros and cons of each program, school location and times.

Her sudden silence caused Josh to look over and see that she'd fallen asleep practically mid sentence. He smiled at her sleeping form and cleared the bed of all of her research material, stacking it on the nightstand before pulling his comforter over her and clicking out the light. He smoothed her hair softly and whispered goodnight. He was just glad she was actually getting some sleep- and that maybe she'd given up the pretense of sleeping on his uncomfortable fold out couch. He too was asleep as soon as he closed his eyes.

At some point in the night Josh woke up to a soft rustling sound. He was pleasantly surprised to find Donna snuggled in close to him, fitting perfectly into the crook of his arm with her head on his shoulder as she slept peacefully, her legs intertwining with his at some point in the night.

The noise, he quickly realized, was Audrey, huffing a little bit as she tried, and eventually succeeded, to climb onto Josh's bed with Walter the Bunny tucked under one arm.

"Shhh," Josh placed his finger to his lips to keep her silent. She was so sleepy it wasn't necessary and Audrey immediately scoot over and curled up next to Donna, who stirred slightly and subconsciously pulled Audrey closer, both of them falling back into a deep slumber.

Josh swore he could lay there forever a happy man. But before he knew it he was asleep too.
"Thanks again, CJ," Donna told her in somewhat of a rush. "I'll only be a few minutes. If you need anything just call Margaret and-"

"Oh my God, Donna. Not the first time I've been alone with a child. Not even the first time I've been alone with THIS child." CJ gave her friend a strange look, wondering if Donna was going to completely unspool in her office. "Go do your thing," CJ waived her off. "C'mere Audrey! Let's have a snack and catch up. And then we can go find Uncle Toby when he's out of his meeting in a few minutes."

"Bye, Sweet Pea," Donna crouched down to Audrey's level and gave her a kiss on the cheek, immediately rubbing the lip gloss off of the toddlers face. "Have fun with Aunt CJ and listen to what she says. I'll be right back."

Audrey made her way to CJ, who pulled her onto her lap and reached into her side drawer to pull out some gold fish. "So what's new, Miss Lyman?"

"Ummmm..." Audrey thought about it between gold fish. She'd certainly adopted Donna's ability to chitchat and all of the senior staff knew that if you asked this little girl a question, you'd get an answer. "Daddy is home from the doctor now," she told CJ. "But he can't play with me yet. And he has to eat his vegetables."

CJ smiled at the candid response.

"...and Donna lives at my house now!" Audrey grinned from ear to ear when she said it.

"Yeah," CJ agreed. "For right now. Do you like having Donna there?"

Audrey nodded emphatically. "I love Donna."

CJ smiled softly at the sentiment. "I know you do. And Donna loves you too. I bet it's fun to have her there. It's like a sleepover, huh?" She was trying to find the best in the situation.

Audrey shrugged her shoulders. "Donna sleeps with Daddy," she said casually, taking another goldfish from the pile on CJs desk.

CJ's reaction was anything but nonchalant. She practically spit coffee out of her nose screeching, "She what?!"

Audrey blinked a few times, staring at CJ due to her outburst. "Donna sleeps in Daddy's bed," she repeated, unsure what CJ didn't understand.

CJ attempted to suppress her natural reaction and remember where she was.

"She... does?"

Audrey nodded her head. "And I sleep in my big girl bed." CJ remembered Donna telling her they'd converted Audrey's crib to a toddler bed a while ago, and stopping by a home furnishings store to pick up a tiny bedding set to match Audrey's lavender walled room. But that wasn't the point right now. She'd do a little more digging the next time she saw Donna. Or maybe she and Toby would just pop in to check things out for themselves.
“So, CJ,” switched gears. “I hear you’re going to start preschool soon, young lady…”

CJ and Audrey played for a while, stopping over to say hi to Sam and Ginger.

Just under an hour later, Donna arrived back at the White House from her errand, squared her shoulders, walked through the staff entrance and headed straight to CJ’s office. Earlier, she’d had a difficult conversation with Leo. Everything was just proving to be too much for her to handle on her own. Between Josh’s care and watching Audrey, she couldn’t balance her job responsibilities too. As hard as it had been, she’d met with Leo and requested a leave of absence from her job at the White House.

She’d thought that if she could get Audrey into preschool, maybe she could have managed. They had found a great preschool, but they wouldn’t have an opening for at least 6 weeks. There was no way she’d settle for a second rate school for Audrey, so Donna had to find another way to make things work.

She’d ended up on the phone to Edith in Florida the prior night, hoping that some advice and perhaps a bit of help would work things out. But Josh’s mother had found a condo, and Donna couldn’t believe how well she was doing in Palm Beach.

"You guys will have so much fun down here,” Edith had told her enthusiastically. “I can't wait for you to visit. There's a playground for Audrey right behind my unit, and Joshua will have access to 5 golf courses within a 15 minute drive and oh Donna you'll just love the views of the ocean. It's so peaceful. And I'll have to take you to a little cafe down the block"

Edith sounded so happy, and in such a better mental place than when she left that Donna couldn’t bear to bring her down by asking her to come back to DC and lend a hand yet again. And it was nice to think about Josh and Audrey’s future including a great place to visit. So she’d stuffed away her concerns about how she’s going to handle everything on her plate right now, and encouraged Edith.

"That sounds fantastic. We are all great here,” Donna made sure her voice held a smile. “Josh is recovering so quickly, and Audrey will be starting preschool soon. I'm sure they will want to visit as soon as possible." And with that the call had turned to chatter about daily life before Audrey commandeered the phone.

Which lead her to her morning meeting. Leo had been as accommodating as possible, but in the end, she’d had no choice. She was out of vacation time. She'd had to take a leave for 30 days. Unpaid.

Which is why, after no hesitation on her part, Donna sold her car to make ends meet. She slipped the cash into her pocket and vowed not to say anything to anyone. The last thing she needed was the unsolicited opinions of people who didn't know what they were talking about.

Donna gathered Audrey’s bag and they said their goodbyes to their friends in the West Wing before heading to pick Josh up from his morning’s appointment with the physical therapist.

Once they’d settled back into the apartment Donna tried her best to persuade Josh to take a warm bath and relax his muscles after his most strenuous appointment to date. But Josh declined, opting instead for a nap.

Donna sat in Audrey’s room near the miniature kitchen play set watching the little girl pretend to make dinner while the pair played baby dolls.
Audrey stirred the empty plastic pot with a purple spoon and hummed a little tune, Donna biting a smirk back as she watched so many little traits of Josh's shine through. She rambled on about what she was cooking for Donna and dug though the little oven for a piece of pretend toast to put on a tiny pink plate.

Audrey handed Donna a doll to hold and then turned to do something else but stopped. She slowly turned back to Donna and tilted her head a bit, a sure fire sign that she was thinking something though.

"Donna?"

"Yeah, Sweet Pea?"

"Can I have a baby brother?"

Donna's eyes widened to the size of saucers. It shouldn’t have been that big of a surprise, she told herself. After all, Audrey’s best friend in her dance and movement class was about to become a big sister, and Elsie’s mom was visibly pregnant. But still… how was she supposed to answer that? "Ummm...."

"Because I really, really want a baby brother."

"Well," Donna tucked her hair behind her ear, trying to figure out how to go about this conversation. "Maybe someday," she told her.

"When?" Audrey didn't seem interested in dropping the topic.

"Well, I… don't know," Donna continued. Talk about a hard question to answer, she thought. "But that's a big decision..." she was quickly losing control of the topic and she knew it. "...So your Daddy-"

Audrey giggled.

"What?" Donna smiled, hoping that the topic was about to change.

"Daddy's don't have babies. Mommies do."

"Well that's… true..." Donna tread carefully.

"So can you give me a baby brother now, Donna?"

Donna knew she was doing her best impression of a gold fish, her mouth agape as she searched for an answer.

"Please," Audrey tried again, climbing onto Donna's lap.

Donna pulled her close. "I love you, Audrey. But I'm sorry, I can't give you a baby brother."

Audrey's shoulders slumped in defeat and she leaned into Donna who kissed the top of her head.

Truth be told, she'd love to give Audrey a little brother but she knew that Josh didn't see her that way, and she had to stop dreaming about it.

Besides, Donna had this sweet little girl in her life and she didn't think her heart could be any more full.
Josh let out a silent sigh from outside the doorway as he held the snack he’d grabbed from the kitchen. He hadn’t meant to stick Donna with the hard questions but frankly, he wasn’t sure he could have answered that any better himself. As Audrey aged he knew she’d have more questions like that—some even more difficult about her mother—that he just wasn’t sure how to answer. But at the end of every day Audrey knew that she was loved unconditionally by Donna, and Josh couldn’t have dreamed for more than that.

As he heard Audrey laugh again, he pad quietly back down the hall to do a little thinking and perhaps finally get some rest.

Josh woke just before dinner time, almost unable to believe how sore he was. It was a chore to sit up and once he did he knew he was in deep trouble.

“Donna?” It wasn’t so much a bellow as a plea. She appeared from practically nowhere and Josh hated the worried look on her face as she stood in front of him.

“You’re sore,” she told him softly. He was grateful that the statement didn’t come with an I told you so or a lecture on taking warm baths after PT. Donna simply grabbed Josh a muscle relaxer and a glass of water and rubbed his back for a minute. “Do you want to lay back down?”

Josh shook his head no. He was so sick of laying in bed. He at least wanted to have dinner with Donna and Audrey on the couch.

“Okay,” she told him, helping him up and walking slowly down the hallway with her hand around his waist. “But just take it easy tonight, okay? I’ll get your plate.”

Josh slowly sat on the couch and in almost no time at all Donna was back in front of him with a plate of lemon pepper chicken with orzo and roasted vegetables.

“It’s yummy,” Audrey whispered almost conspiratorially to Josh as she pointed to their meals. Neither of the Lyman’s were huge fans of vegetables, but they were warming up to the thought of healthy dinners.

But the second Donna tried to sit down there was a knock at the door. “I’ll get it,” she announced as she stood. “You guys eat while its warm.”

Donna was surprised to see CJ on the other side of Josh’s door. “Hi,” she smiled, “Everything okay?”

“Oh, yes. Sorry, didn’t mean to alarm you.” CJ hoped she didn’t look as guilty as she felt. She’d spent most of the day wondering about Audrey’s comment about the sleeping arrangements in the Lyman household and by her afternoon briefing her stomach was in knots. Not, she realized, because of the potential for bad press, but because these two were her friends and in her heart CJ knew they were made for each other. “I just wanted to stop by and say hello,” CJ admitted.

Donna slipped out into the hallway, pulling the door mostly closed behind her. “I’ll be honest with you, Ceej. It’s not really a good time. He’s in a lot of pain and he just took a few things…”

“CJ waivered her hands slightly. “No need to explain, I just- I wanted to let you know I’m here if you—any of you—need anything. Leo told me you’re going to be out of the office for a while and I just want you to know I think that this whole situation is- above and beyond. You’re doing a very selfless thing, Donna. And we all admire you for it. Toby and Sam said they’d like to come over on Thursday, if you’re not busy. They can spend a few hours with Josh and Audrey and maybe you and I can go out for dinner?”
CJ’s kind words choked Donna up a little bit, but she remained humble. She’d never even considered it that way. She’d just don’t it- after all, it was Josh.

CJ gave Donna a friendly hug and Donna eventually let a few tears slip. It had been a rough few weeks and she’d been holding it together. “Thank you,” Donna told her. “I’d really like that.”

Donna heard the front door squeak on its hinges and looked over to see Audrey peering out into the hallway with wide, curious eyes.

“Daddy!!” she yelled as soon as Donna glanced over, a frightened look on her face. “Donna’s crying!”

“It’s okay, Sweet Pea,” Donna said as she crouched down to Audrey's eye level. “I’m okay, I was just talking to Aunt CJ. Don’t worry. Go back inside.”

“What’s wrong?” Josh looked more frantic than Audrey when he appeared behind her, practically throwing the door open. She didn’t know how he’d managed to make it to her that quickly but she could tell he was in excruciating pain from doing so. “Ceej?” Josh was now confused.

“Nothings wrong,” Donna stood. “CJ just came by to say hi, but she’s going to come back on Thursday so she can visit for a while.” Donna herded Audrey back inside. “Go back to your dinners, I’m right behind you.”

Josh glanced over at CJ to ensure that everything was alright and she gave him a wink of confirmation. “We’ll catch up later, Mi Amor,” she told him. “I just wanted a quick word with Donna but I have to head out anyway.”

Josh nodded slowly and started to shuffle back to the couch. CJ saw first hand the toll that the extended recovery was taking on all of them that night. Giving Donna another quick hug and a sincere ‘we all love you guys so much, call any of us if you need anything,’ she was back down the stairs and gone as quickly as she came.

Donna, Audrey and Josh finished their meals and went to bed early that evening, each of them exhausted from a long day.

Josh had just pulled the covers over his battered body while Donna was putting on some lotion in his en suite. Though a scene this domestic wasn’t in his day to day routine even two months ago, it all felt so natural to him, but he couldn’t exactly pin point the reason.

"So you'll never guess what Audrey asked me for today." Donna began a bit awkwardly, but Josh knew what she was going to say and almost confessed that he overheard the conversation. But Donna began rambling nervously, clearly uncomfortable with the topic that she brought up. "A baby brother! Sorry, the best I could think of to say was maybe someday. I mean, she's too young to understand that it takes a man and a woman, hopefully in love, to make a baby, and that you aren't even dating anyone right now. But maybe someday you'll meet the right woman and she'll get a little brother. She asked me if I could give her one. Me!" Donna let out a nervous laugh. “I obviously couldn’t explain to her why that wasn’t a possibility but I didn't want to just say that it completely wasn't possible for her.” Donna flipped the light off in the bathroom and peeked her head around the corner. “I hope that was okay.”

And in that moment, Josh's beautiful picture of a future and a family with Donna, Audrey and a little boy, vanished.
"Joshua. Lyman."

Josh looked up to see Donna standing in the doorway to his bedroom with her hands on her hips. He glanced around, trying to figure out what he did wrong.. or more accurately how much she knew. "Uhh, yes?"

She narrowed her gaze at him. "Did you make a promise regarding hot fudge sundaes?"

"Oh," he relaxed and began to smile a bit. If Audrey was just asking about dessert he was probably in the clear.

Donna made her way over to stand next to his bed and she shot him an inquisitive look, tilting her head as she spoke. "And did you make that promise after you swore a two year old to secrecy about Ed and Larry smuggling you work all week?"

Josh's eyes went wide and he gulped. "I refuse to incriminate myself," he stated pretending to be engrossed in the book he was reading.

"There are rules, Joshua," she continued without missing a beat. "And they're in place to be followed."

Josh grumbled something under his breath.

"And if you break the rules, and bribe the accomplice, then you'll have to be punished."

A smile quirked up on the side of his mouth. "Yeah? Did you grab your equipment the last time you were at your apartment?"

Two could play this game.

"Oh, Joshua," she batted back, keeping her voice low and sultry. "I'd need you to be in peak physical shape to keep up with me if we went that route," she quipped.

Josh's jaw dropped. He thought he'd had the upper hand but his mind was spinning.

"I have something much worse in mind..." she turned and sauntered out of his room but Josh's mind was still racing. Had she just implied what he thought she had? He shifted nervously in bed trying to regain the ability to speak before she returned.

And only a second later Donna appeared once again with a tray of ice cream sundaes and Audrey in tow.

Audrey ran to Josh, clutching a movie close to her chest and grinning wildly.

"Oh no," Josh groaned, knowing what was coming before he even looked.

"Muppets!" Audrey practically squeaked in delight as Donna started the movie and the girls climbed into bed next to Josh.

But thirty minutes later Josh wasn't paying any attention to singing frog on tv, but to Donna who was dozing beside him with her hand resting on his arm and Audrey, fast asleep between them.
His whole world was at peace.

OoOoOoO

Donna stepped out of her hot bath and wrapped up in one of Josh's oversized towels. The house was completely quiet, Audrey napping in her room and Josh asleep in his bed after a particularly strenuous PT session. She pad carefully out of the bathroom past his sleeping form in the bed and quietly pulled out the drawer that housed a few of her clothing articles.

Donna pulled the pin out of the bun that sat high atop her head and let her hair fall around her shoulders before quickly dropping her towel and stepping into a a pair of panties.

"Donna?" Josh croaked out. He hadn't been asleep. Eyes wide and unable to look away from her form her was propped up on his elbows, staring at her from his bed.

Donna startled at the sound of her name, whipping around to face him. "Josh? OhMyGod!" She was panicked but had nothing to cover herself with. Unable to think quickly, she just stood there for a moment.

"Oh my God..." Josh echoed her words with a very different connotation. His eyes ran up and down her as he swallowed hard.

"OhMyGod," she stated again, "Josh!"

The frantic tone in her voice when she said his name pulled him from his daydream. "Huh?"

"Don't... LOOK!"

"Oh," Josh slammed his eyes closed. "I, uh... sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," she rambled as she hurried to throw on an old tshirt of his and a pair of pajama pants.

"Oh, Donna, you've got nothing to be sorry about," he told her with a smirk, eyes still closed on the bed. Josh almost immediately felt a pillow hit him. "Alright," he admitted, "I probably deserved that."

Josh heard the drawers close and Donna walk to the hamper and drop the towel in.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

"Yeah," she muttered, her arms crossed in front of her as she looked away. This wasn't the way he'd imagined this particular scenario playing out but he wasn't going to let it come between them.

"I don't want this to be weird," he told her with a serious voice. "So I'm willing to make you an offer."

"Huh?" She was completely caught off guard.

"You showed me yours. I'll show you mine." He was grinning.

Donna let out a giggle, which turned into a chuckle which became contagious. She shoved him a bit and they both broke into laugher.

"I guess we're even then," she told him. "Because I've already seen yours."
"Donna!" He was exasperated.

"Well I have," she smirked.

"Call it even," he offered.

"Deal," she smirked.

They may have been in unfamiliar territory, but Donna was absolutely sure of one thing. No matter what life threw at them or what they labeled each other, this man was her person.

OoOoOoO

Josh slowly opened his eyes to a dimly lit room. The streetlights were barely streaming through the curtains and he was cocooned next to Donna under the warm covers on his bed. She’d started sleeping next to him when he’d first come home from the hospital and neither of them ever questioned the fact that she was still there, in his bed, even though he was long past the point of being unable to sleep through the night.

Donna was sleeping soundly, her breathing deep and steady, tucked in to the crook of his arm, her head resting on his chest and her arm draped across him.

No matter how they fell asleep, Josh noticed they’d gravitated to the same position in their sleep every night. He’d wake up, sometimes in pain, sometimes in a mild panic, but he’d find Donna in his arms and he’d be comforted immediately. He’d pull her close and close his eyes, breathing in her scent and absorbing her comforting presence and soon, he’d be asleep again too.

That particular night, however, he awoke with a bit of a startle, breathing heavy and feeling a cold sweat barely begin to break out. It took him just a split second to regain his bearings, Donna stirring slightly the process.

"Josh?" She didn't even open her eyes, shifting her weight as she barely woke up.

"It's okay, go back to sleep," he whispered, softly stroking her arm. But his heart was still beating faster than normal.

"Mmmm," she mumbled. Donna rolled slightly, her leg snaking between his as her hand found its way under his shirt and moved up his chest to rest on his sternum.

Josh froze. The lines between them were blurred to begin with but lately he couldn't read any of the signals she was or wasn't sending him. He wanted so badly for this platonic orbit they were locked into to become something more. But this was Donna- the woman that meant more to him than any other in the world. He wasn't going to mess this up.

OoOoOoO

Donna stepped out of the shower and toweled off, changing into a casual outfit. She was glad to have had a fleeting few moments to herself. Josh was getting cabin fever after nearly two and a half months indoors. He also wasn't sleeping so well lately, she'd noticed, and he was becoming easily irritable.

She pad down the hallway towards the kitchen and when she rounded the corner she saw him on his hands and knees on the floor, the kitchen littered in spilled cereal.

"Josh, what are you doing?" She was a mixture of curiosity and concern. Though he'd improved
quite a bit he still wasn't back to 100% and shouldn't be doing anything that could hurt him.

"Picking up. What's it look like," he halfway barked. Audrey had asked for a hand full of cereal as snack and he'd fumbled the box getting it open, spilling the contents.

Donna dropped to her knees beside him and began to help him pick up. "I've got this," she told him. "You can go watch TV with Audrey."

"I can take care of myself."

"I know you can but-"

"I don't need you to hover, Donna. God, you're driving me crazy! Just leave me alone."

Donna felt, and looked, like she'd just been slapped.

"Donna, I didn't mean that." He scrubbed his hands over his face. But the damage was done for the moment.

Josh sat down on the floor leaning back against the cabinets and sighed. Donna continued to clean up, somewhat frantically, not meeting his gaze.

"Donnatella." Her motions stilled and she risked a glance in his direction.

He extended his hand towards her. "Come here," he almost whispered.

She moved towards him and sat down, looking at the floor.

They sat in silence for a moment, Josh unsure of how to begin. "I'm sorry," he finally stated.

She could tell by the timber of his voice that he was full of emotion. It had been a rough few weeks for everyone and it was especially no exception for Josh. He just felt somewhat... useless.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," she told him timidly.

"Donna-" he closed his eyes and leaned his head back. "You know I didn't mean that. You know I couldn't do this without you. Any of it. Recovering, raising Audrey, hell, getting President Bartlet elected. And please, Donna, tell me you know that."

She was quiet for a moment and Josh reached out, placing his hand on her leg, palm up. "You're the most valuable person in the world to me, Donna."

She intertwined her fingers with his, leaning her head on his shoulder. She felt Josh kiss the top of her hair and then lean his head back again.

"I should have let you do it yourself. Froot Loops are definitely your department," she teased.

"Hey, don't be jealous of my fan club," he smirked, tossing a bite of cereal into his mouth.

Donna snickered. "Those we're on the floor."


"Come on," Donna stood up and extended him a hand. "I'll clean this up and get dinner started."

OoOoOoO
"Eat your breakfast and then you can get dressed for school."

"Okay," Audrey didn't complain one bit about the banana pancakes Donna had made in the shape of little A's in celebration of her first day.

"Are mine shaped like J's?" Josh piped up once he saw Audrey's plate, giving Donna a little tease as he cut Audrey's food into reasonable sized pieces.

Donna rolled her eyes but a little smirk graced her face as she grabbed his plate of J's and her cup of yogurt and sat down.

Josh couldn't help but to grin too. "What's on your agenda today?" He glanced over at Donna.

"Same as yours," she quipped. "Take her to school," she emphasized the last word for Audrey's sake, "your PT appointment and then head back here. And I thought maybe we'd get carry out for lunch. It's a special day, isn't it?" She reached over and tickled Audrey, the table immediately filling with smiles and laughter.

"I thought I wasn't supposed to go out," Josh grumbled.

"It's her first day of school, Josh. I know you wouldn't miss that for the world."

Josh looked like a kid loose in a candy store. Donna shook her head. She knew that the doctor said but she also knew that it would crush Josh not to take Audrey to her first day himself and watching her start preschool was hard enough for him as it was. Besides, he had a PT appointment afterwards. It was on the way.

After all three were dressed and ready, Donna pulled Audrey's lunchbox from the fridge and grabbed the tiny pink backpack they'd picked up earlier in the week. They made the short drive to the preschool and Donna pulled into a parking space, unloading onto the side walk as Donna slipped Audrey's backpack on. Josh beamed with pride as he took Audrey's hand and walked slowly towards the little school. Donna grabbed the camera from the car and fell into step beside them, pausing briefly just inside the gate.

She stood Audrey by a flower pot and snapped a few photos of her with a big smile on her face, and one of Josh crouching next to her with a full dimpled grin.

"Excuse me," Josh flagged down another parent as she walked by. "It's her first day. Would you mind taking a picture of all of us?"

Before she could say anything, Josh pulled Donna close and wrapped an arm around her waist, as Donna held Audrey for the perfect family photo.

Setting Audrey back on the ground, Donna bent down beside her. "Okay, Sweet Pea. Remember what we talked about?" Donna smoothed Audrey's curls. "You're going to go to school today. And Daddy and I will be back to pick you up at lunch, okay?"

Audrey looked around a bit as Donna spoke.

"You're going to have a lot of fun and meet lots of friends. And I packed you all of your favorites in your lunchbox, okay?"

Audrey was growing visibly nervous. "I wanna go with you and Daddy," she whispered to Donna, her bottom lip beginning to quiver.
"Okay," Josh practically shouted before Audrey could even finish the request.

Donna shot him a warning glance from the side her of her eyes and he immediately looked sheepish. Donna reached out and softly touched the back of his calf as she remained at eye level with Audrey, giving Josh a bit of unspoken support.

"Audrey, we talked about this, Sweet Pea. You're going to start going to school like a big girl. But you don't have to stay all day this week, okay? Daddy and I will be back right after lunch."

Audrey threw her arms around Donna's neck and held on tight. "Please Donna? I want to go with you and Daddy. I'll be good. I promise."

Donna wrapped Audrey in a hug. "You're always good, Audrey. You're not being punished, okay? I just think you'll have lots of fun. Can Daddy and I go in and look around with you?"

Audrey nodded slowly and Donna stood, taking one of her hands as Josh held they other and they wandered inside to a flurry of activity. Finding Audrey's room they met each of the teachers and took a short tour before Donna placed Audrey's belongings into a cubby with her name on it and sat the three of them down to color so Audrey could acclimate.

"Donna? Audrey?"

Donna turned at the unfamiliar voice, relieved to be met by a smiling familiar face. "Audrey, look who's here! It's Paige!" Donna pulled Audrey away from her coloring and was pleased with Audrey's reaction to running into a familiar face from her Toddler Art class. Donna stood up and offered Paige her little chair, the two girls quickly becoming consumed in their art as Josh watched on and Donna chat with Paige's mother Ellen.

Not long after the teacher gathered all of the kids to sit in a circle and start the day, Audrey trailing happily along after Paige and waiving goodbye to Josh and Donna without any further ado. Josh grabbed his coat and followed Donna quietly out the door with his hand on the small of her back, growing a little more bold as they excited towards the street and pulling her close to him.

"You did a great job in there," he told her. "I don't know what we'd do without you, Donna."

Donna beamed with pride and moved a little closer to Josh. "I love you guys."

He gave her arm a gentle squeeze and walked in step with her back to the car.

OoOoOoO

"So what exactly are you mailing in?"

"It's a revised copy of my will," he handed her an envelope and Donna dropped it in the drive through mail box. "I realized that I hadn't exactly crossed all of my t's and dotted my i's in that particular arena and after this summer I couldn't escape it any more. So I updated a few things. You were already Audrey's guardian but I needed to make sure you wouldn't have any trouble accessing anything the two of you needed financially. And I had medical power of attorney drawn up for Audrey and I as well so you can make any necessary decisions for either of us."

Donna couldn't help but to notice how matter of fact he was about the whole topic.

"Between my thrift savings account, social security and life insurance, she should be taken care of. I've got an untimely death policy on the condo that will pay off the loan, and I've got a small house, an investment property out in Colorado, that I inherited from my Dad. I'm sorry, there isn't really
anything more- I'm just a government employee."

"Well there goes my big plan to convince you to marry me, then slowly poison you for your money."

"Har, Har. What were you planning on doing with Audrey in this little scenario of yours?"

"I thought she and I would get a flat in Paris and just be two well dressed women with nothing to do all day. Live a life of leisure." She shoved him in the shoulder but then took a more serious tone. "Josh. You know I'd protect her with my life if something happened to you."

"I know. You already do." He reached over and gave her leg a gentle squeeze before getting back on track. "Anyway. The safe with my will and other documents is in my office at home. The combination is 270."

She chuckled a bit.

"What?"

"You," she grinned. "270. You really do have a one track mind sometimes."

He shrugged. "Hey, it beats picking something I can't remember," he thumbed through the rest of the stack of mail. "Make a right here."

"Why?" She made the turn.

"I want to stop for coffee."

"You don't need coffee."

"Donna..." he whined as they drove by Starbucks.

"You don't. We're not stopping.

"Since when did this become a hostage situation? Last time I checked I was the boss."

She shot him a death glare.

"You know... I heard myself say that and I didn't like how it came out either." He had the decency to look ashamed.

She smirked at his embarrassment, putting on her blinker and pulling into the back parking lot and parking the car in front of a second Starbucks.

"Let me get this straight," she began as they took their places in the back of the line, slowly moving forward towards the barista. "You have a place in Colorado and you've never taken me there? AND you refused to buy me skis? I'm wounded, Joshua." She gave him a pout.

"It's a small cabin, not a sprawling ski chalet, Zsa Zsa."

"Still..."

"Still what?" He laughed.

"You've still never taken me there."

"I've never even been there. I inherited it from my dad," he pulled out his wallet as they approached
the counter. "It was some kind of a bonus from his firm. Supposed to be a hunting cabin. But the taxes and maintenance are cheap so I hold onto it."

"Because you're an outdoorsman," she batted back with sarcasm.

"Precisely," he told her, not acknowledging the joke. "Venti Dark Roast with 10 pumps of syrup," Josh spouted off to the barista.

"He'll have a tall decaf with nonfat milk," Donna piped in.

Josh glanced at Donna before looking back to the barista. "She's trying to kill me," he announced with a straight face.

Donna smacked his arm. "Don't tell people that! They'll think you're serious!"

Josh continued to speak the barista, a wide grin on his face. "See how she treats me?" He laughed softly. "Anyway. I guess I'll take a tall decaf, she'll have a chai latte and we'll take a cookie and a box of milk to go"

"You don't need a cookie!"

"It's for Audrey."

"She doesn't really need a cookie either." Josh could easily see that she was wavering, Donna had a hard time denying the child anything, too.

"But look how cute it is. A flower. She'll be so happy."

"Okay. We'll take the cookie too. The yellow one, please," Donna added.

OoOoOoOo

With her belongings gathered and packed neatly into a suitcase, Donna leaned down by the front door to speak to Audrey. "I'm leaving now, Sweet Pea," she pulled her close. "Thank you for letting me stay with you for a few months. I love you so much."

"Why do you have to leave," Audrey asked Donna, giving her a pout.

"Because I have to go back to my house now."

"But you can just live here," she tried again. "In Daddy's room."

Donna kissed the top of Audrey's head. "We're still going to spend time together, Sweet Pea," Donna offered. "I'll pick you up from school one day this week, okay?"

Audrey was defeated but didn't continue to argue. Josh had warned her about Donna's departure. "Go pick out a book, shortcake," he told her. "I'll be in to tuck you in in just a minute."

Audrey made her way back to her room, leaving Josh and Donna in a heavy silence.

"Okay, so I'll see you tomorrow at the office?" She wasn't sure why this all of the sudden felt so unnatural.

"Um, Yeah. You've got your toothbrush?" He fumbled a bit, unsure of what to say.

Josh wrapped her in a right hug, pulling her close and speaking softly into her ear. "I'll never be able
to find the right words," he told her. "Thank you isn't even close to enough. I just- you're incredible. I guess that's what I'm trying to say. I don't know why you put up with us but I'm so grateful that you do. We would never have made it through this without you."

She opened her mouth to tell him they would have been just fine but found herself choked up by his words and instead simply squeezed him back.

Josh kissed her forehead and stepped away. "You're sure you don't need help?"

He eyed her duffel bag.

"I'm fine," she waved him off knowing she was just going to take the metro. She still hadn't admitted to him that she'd had to sell her car to make ends meet.

He nodded his head in understanding and picked up a small box and card from the entry table. "This is for you," he told her. "From Audrey and me. It's uh- well it's not much but we'd like you to have it. You can open it when you get home."

She gave him a soft smile and tucked it safely inside of her purse, stepping outside into the cold and closing the door on the feeling of family she'd come home to for months.

Josh sighed and leaned against the door, watching her until she was out of sight through the peep hole before returning to Audrey to read a story and tuck her in.

"Daddy?"

"Yeah, Shortcake?"

She looked up at him with big, sad eyes. "I miss Donna," she told him ever so softly.

Josh sighed. "Me too, baby girl. Me too."
Chapter 13

After what Donna was certain must have been the longest, loneliest night of her life, she was delighted when her cell phone rang, displaying Josh’s number. She was already walking down the street towards the office, pleased to meet Josh in his office for his first day back. She’d only moved out of his apartment the evening before but after what felt like the loneliest night of her life she was eager to see him again. He must have felt the same way, she thought.

"Good morning," Donna chirped into her cell phone.

"Donna?"

She could immediately hear the edge to his voice and Audrey's loud cries in the background.

She stopped in her tracks, her face falling. "What's wrong?" Her pulse sped up and she felt a wave of panic wash over her.

"I'm sorry to have to do this," Josh began. "But she's just not having a good morning and she thinks I'm doing everything wrong... would you mind?" He didn't even have to vocalize that he needed her help. She could read him and knew what he meant.

Audrey let out another wail for Donna in the background and Donna immediately threw her arm up to hail a passing cab. "I'll be there in 10 minutes," she told Josh. "Is she already dressed? I put her outfit for picture day on a hanger in the front of her closet before I left last night."

"Yeah, thanks," Josh told her. "I saw it but she's not exactly ready to go and I have senior staff in 45 minutes-"

"Calm down," Donna told him. "Just let her watch a little TV and I'll get her ready and take her to school. I'll brief you when I get there."

"Kay," Josh told her. "See you in a bit."

When Donna arrived she wasn't sure who was more traumatized by the morning's events- Audrey or Josh.

Josh looked as though he was about to pull his hair out. "Hey," she gave him a gentle smile. "Need a hand?"

His relief was instant. Just her arrival calmed his fraying nerves.

Josh opened the door a little more wide and Donna stepped inside, handing him her cup of coffee. "You take this," she told him, her hands moving to start work on the tie hanging loosely around his neck. "And head to work. You've got senior staff at 3, the statistics you need for the NEA funding Leo wants to discuss are on your desk in the green folder. The information for the waterways bill is condensed to a one page brief in the blue folder. Your morning is open for us to go over a few things and then you have a meeting with the Speaker at 11. I'll take care of Miss Priss."

"You're a lifesaver, Donna." He walked over and kissed Audrey goodbye. "Be good for Donna," he warned the still huffy child. "I'll see you after school." He slipped into his suit jacket and overcoat. "Thank you," he told Donna sincerely. "I'd be lost without you," he kissed her softly on the cheek and head out the door.
Donna sat down next to Audrey who hardly acknowledged her when she entered the condo. Wordlessly, Audrey crawled onto Donna's lap and snuggled in close to her, hanging on to Donna as she continued to watch Sesame Street.

Donna pulled her in tight and kissed the top of her head. "What's wrong, Sweet Pea?" But Donna knew the answer. She'd wondered how Audrey would react to another major change in her daily life when Donna moved out, but Donna had assured herself that it wouldn't make a large impact. Clearly, she was right with her first assessment.

She waited the 7 minutes until the program was over before calmly shutting the tv off and taking Audrey to her room to get dressed. Donna perched Audrey on the sink and washed her tear stained face, relieved to see that her eyes were becoming less puffy from the morning's crying. And then Donna softly began to brush Audrey's curls- the hair, Josh had advised her, was the root of the issue that morning. Audrey had insisted that Josh just wasn't doing it right.

Donna tamed Audrey's wild curls and sectioned off a small portion to clip back with a bow on the uncharacteristically silent girl. "Okay," she took Audrey's hand, "lets go."

Donna grabbed their belongings and put Audrey in a coat, glad that Josh had left his car for them and taken a cab into the office.

They drove down the street to Audrey's preschool and Donna went inside and stood with Audrey in the photo line. "Give them a big smile, pretty girl," she leaned down and gave Audrey a tickle, trying to get a good photo out of her. But after the photographer was finished Donna didn't walk Audrey to her classroom, instead informing the school that they'd be back in an hour or so.

Donna drove them to a local diner for breakfast, ordering Audrey silver dollar pancakes and having a heart to heart with her. "I know things are different again," Donna assured her. "And I know that you and Daddy don't like it when things change. But Audrey, I want you to listen to me."

Audrey looked right at Donna. "I need you to be good for Daddy, okay? I know you love him and you know he loves you. So maybe if he doesn't do your hair like I do that's okay- he's trying his best. Do you understand?"

"Come home?" Audrey offered an option of her own. If Donna just moved back in, everything would be perfect again.

"Sweet Pea, we talked about this, remember? I have my own house and I have to live there now. You and Daddy live at your house, but I’ll still come to visit. I promise."

"Miss you," Audrey looked crushed. She'd loved the time that Donna had spent living with them and she didn't understand why that had to come to an end. "Sleep in Daddy's room," she offered with bright eyes, wondering if perhaps she had just solved the whole problem.

"Well I'm not sure how he would feel about that," Donna chuckled.

"Daddy is sad," Audrey quickly added. "Come home, Donna. Please, Donna? Please, Please, Please?"

"Audrey." Donna gave a warning tone of voice.

She pouted in defeat. They’d discussed this before, and Audrey and Josh had been twenty rounds on the topic that very morning.

"So are you going to be extra good for Daddy from now on?"
Audrey nodded her head vigorously.

"No more tantrums in the morning?"

"Okay!" Audrey told her enthusiastically.

Donna paid the check and walked Audrey back to the car, heading to the White House. She knew Josh and Audrey well enough to know that their morning would eat at both of them all day.

So when Josh rounded the corner into the operations bullpen after senior staff, already spitting fire and barking demands, he was shocked to say the least to see Audrey standing in front of his office holding Donna's hand.

"What are you guys doing here?" The question was clearly for Donna, to whom he shot a worried look.

"Audrey wants to tell you something," Donna supplied, letting go of Audrey's hand as Josh crouched down to her eye level.

Audrey threw her arms around Josh's neck and held on tight. "Sorry, Daddy," she told Josh softly, bringing a tender smile to his face.

He hugged his daughter tightly and gave Donna a thankful look. "It's okay, Shortcake. I love you so much," he told her before Audrey stepped away, both of the Lyman's looking to Donna for approval.

"Go get your coat, Audrey," Donna instructed. One she was out of earshot Donna turned to Josh. "I think she was just in a mood this morning. And I know you can handle this without me- you've been doing fine for years. But I don't see why this can't be a little easier on everyone... so how about I come over 3 mornings a week- when you have early start for Senior Staff and get her ready and take her to school. I just think it'll work better for everyone."

Josh stared at her. "You'd do that?"

She rolled her eyes. "Of course, Josh. When are you going to get that through your thick skull? There's nothing I wouldn't do for her. Or for you," she added softly.

Josh looked at her intently, trying to find his bearings. But the moment between them was quickly interrupted when Audrey found her coat and became anxious to get to school and Ed and Larry appeared with a stack of files for Josh.

OoOoOoO

"The doctor will be with you in a moment Mr. Lyman." The nurse jot a quick note on the clipboard and exited the room as Josh took a seat on the edge of a paper lined exam table.

"Take your shirt off," Donna told him, reaching out for his jacket so he wouldn't toss it down. She knew the cardiologist would need to see his bare chest- he had during all of the other appointments.

"Donna, we only have a few minutes. But if you insist..." Josh smirked at her.

Donna rolled her eyes at him. "That joke is just as funny as the last 7 times you've told it," she poked him in the arm, taking his dress shirt and then his undershirt.

"Cute bandaid, Mr. Deputy Chief of Staff. Did the minority leader know that you had a hot pink hello kitty bandaid on during your meeting?"
Josh glanced down at himself and saw the haphazardly placed bandage that Audrey offered up for his "owie" that morning. "I forgot that was there," he mumbled, picking at the adhesive sides to remove it. "And speaking of that meeting, you'll never guess who I ran into... Ron Butterfield's wife. She's working on The Hill. I didn't even know Ron Butterfield had a wife..."

A tender smile danced across her lips as he spoke.

"What?" He asked, wondering what she was thinking.

"Nothing. It's just- you're a really good Dad, Josh. I'm proud of you."

"Well you're a really good-" His face twisted in an odd way, almost as he caught himself in the middle of a sentence he wasn't sure how to finish. He knew what he was thinking but he couldn't quite say that to her. He swallowed hard. "You're a good... Donna."

Donna beamed at his words. They may not have been poetic, but just as she always did, she knew what he meant.

OoOoOoO

"Uh huh," Josh agreed, his cell phone wedged between his shoulder and his ear as he cut the crusts off of a PB&J and slipped each of the quarters into a ziplock bag. "But if you review the report from the Department of Labor it clearly contradicts that." He licked his fingers and stuck Audrey's sandwich into a lunchbox. He continued to listen to the call he was on with Leo and some economists while grabbing his backpack, handing Audrey her lunchbox and taking her hand to walk out the door. They made their way out of the apartment and into the car, Josh settling her into the backseat.

Becoming quite bored with the lack of conversation with her father she began to sing softly. "A, B, C, D..."

"All I'm saying," Josh continued, "is that we need to be sure of the number crunching before we make a statement either way..."

"...E, F, G..."

"...so double check the figures and I'll get with Toby and Sam..."

"...H, I, J, K..."

"...and we'll have something for you by the end of the week, Leo."

"...elemeno, P..."

"It's L, M, N, O, not elemeno," Josh told Audrey in a gentle aside. 

"What?" Leo asked from the other end of the phone, completely thrown off. Audrey concentrated for a moment before repeating very clearly, "L, M, N, O."

"I was talking to Audrey," Josh muttered. "I'll see you in 30 minutes, Leo."

Leo grunted a goodbye to Josh and added a softer, "say good morning to Audrey for me."

Josh clicked off the phone and closed the door to the car, heading towards the White House.
Donna stood in Josh’s office fixing his bow tie and prattling on about a book she’d read on the history of Modern Greece.

It may not have been standard procedure to take your assistant to state dinners, but no one even blinked when Josh inevitably showed up with Donna on his arm. It’s just the way those two were.

Josh escorted her to the ballroom and watched with pride as she mingled with guests and stood confidently with foreign dignitaries. Josh was pulled away for a moment, lending his opinion to Leo for a development in the situation room, and Donna shifted quickly back into work mode, never missing a beat.

By the time they arrived back to the party, dinner was concluded and the guests had made their way to the dance floor.

Donna sighed.

“What?” Josh looked over to her, waiting for an answer.

“I was hungry,” she admitted. “And dinner looked good.”

“Yeah…” Josh glanced around the room woefully, trying to determine if there was any way to snag a plate. It wasn’t looking too good. But he didn’t want Donna to be hungry—especially if they were going to spend the better part of their night in his office waiting for word from the situation room. Josh dug around in his coat pocket, pulling out Donna’s lip gloss, a small purple bow that Audrey had taken off at an inconvenient time, and finally, his cell phone. Speaking softly Josh ordered a double cheese pizza and a garden salad to be delivered to the front gate.

Donna grinned but didn’t tease him. She was famished and she knew the gesture was mostly for her benefit.

“It’ll be here in twenty minutes,” Josh announced. “And I’ll share on one condition.”

“Oh?” Donna tilted her head towards him playfully.

“Dance with me?” Josh extended his hand to her and they made their way to the center of the ballroom.

He pulled her closer than an assistant would typically dance with their boss. But then again, these two were anything but typical. He knew, without a doubt, that he was crazy about her. But he was her boss and his ethics always thwarted any plans for happiness his mind could dream up. He’d wait, he told himself, until he could do this right. He owed her that at the very least—if, he tempered his optimism, she even felt the same way.

They sway softly to the music and Josh, just for a moment, allowed himself to breathe her in. He’d missed her more than he would ever have imagined. The nights since she’d left had been increasingly difficult on him, and the simple act of having her close enough to smell the lavender and vanilla in her hair did wonders for his soul.

He more. He wanted everything. But to do this right, to make sure everything was perfect for Donna, he could wait. He had to.
"Hi, Donna."

"Hi, Cindy." Donna had struck up a friendship with Audrey's preschool teacher almost immediately. It was nothing above and beyond but Donna was an easy person to get along with and she felt better knowing more about the teacher with which Audrey spent 8 hours of her day.

"Donna!" Audrey crashed into Donna's legs, wrapping around her with a wide smile.

"Hi, Sweet Pea," Donna smoothed her curls. "Ready to go?"

Audrey nodded that she was and ran over to the cubby with her name on it to wait while Donna grabbed her belongings.

"She has an art project to take home today as well," Cindy told them. "They're on the table in the hallway. They should be dry by now."

Donna zipped Audrey's coat up and put her backpack on, taking her hand and exiting to the hallway, quickly finding the arts and crafts project with the Audrey L. scrawled in the bottom corner.

"Did you make this? You did a great job!" Donna bent over and looked at the Thanksgiving turkeys created out of Audrey's two small palm prints and adorned with various feathers and craft supplies.

Audrey nodded eagerly, beaming at Donna's approval.

"And a list of what you're thankful for," Donna read out loud, pointing to each item on the list that the teacher wrote neatly in the corner of the page for each student.

"Audrey is thankful for... Daddy & Donna, Bubbe, Walter the Bunny and Cookies."

Donna pulled Audrey close. "I'm thankful for you, too, Sweet Pea," she became a little choked up. "You have no idea how thankful," she kissed her forehead and stood up, composing herself and handing Audrey the paper. "Hold onto this so you can show Daddy when we get to the office."

Donna held Audrey's hand as they walked to Josh's car and Donna fastened her into her seat.

Audrey talked and talked about her day. A trait that Josh joked she picked up from Donna. They stopped by to pick up carry out for senior staff and made their way back to the White House, Donna carrying a huge box of food under one arm and Audrey with the other. As soon as they were through security Donna dropped dinner off in the Roosevelt room and she and Audrey set out to round up the senior staff.

Donna held Audrey on her hip as they navigated the corridors of the west wing, Audrey proudly clutching her artwork.

They rounded the corner to see Josh pouring over some notes with CJ. "Daddy! Look!" Audrey held her painting up for him.

"Wow, very nice!" Josh fawned over the artwork and leaned in to kiss Audrey's cheek hello. "Turkeys?" He asked Donna in quiet aside.

"Yeah," she nodded her head, understanding why he was struggling to place what exactly was on the paper as she had never personally encountered any purple crayon turkeys within neon pink feathers glued haphazardly to their bodies.
"We will hang that on the fridge when we get home," Josh assured her. "Did you have a good day at school?"

Audrey nodded enthusiastically. "Donna picked me up!"

"And," Donna interjected, "dinner is here. It's in the Roosevelt room if you want to head that way. We'll grab Sam and Toby and say hi to Ginger if she's still here if you'll let Leo know."

Josh agreed, grabbing a binder off of his desk and heading down the hall as Donna and Audrey wandered to communications.

Audrey became completely captivated by a sheet of paper and some new fluorescent highlighters at Ginger's desk so Donna popped in to Toby's office.

"Glad you stopped by," he stood with a sheet of paper. "I need a fresh set of eyes. Third paragraph," he told her.

Donna read carefully over the document and began to discuss the finer points with Toby when she felt Audrey tug at her sleeve. Donna reached down and picked her up, never missing a beat in the conversation as Audrey squirmed around slightly and then carefully reached for the antique silver locket hanging around Donna’s neck.

She fumbled with it for a few moments, occupying herself with the shiny piece of jewelry that Josh had given Donna the night she had moved back into her own apartment. It had been his grandmothers, he’d informed her in the card, and he wanted her to have it. Leo, who was walking by, entered the room when he overheard Donna’s commentary, and placed a gentle hand on Audrey’s back while he listened, but she was hardly phased.

A mystified gasp escaped Audrey’s lips a few seconds later when she accidentally opened the clasp to the locket. The three adults glanced over to her but continued with their conversation.

“It’s me!” Audrey exclaimed as soon as she saw the photo inside. “And Daddy!”

Leo and Toby glanced towards the locket, which contained a photo of Josh, Donna and Audrey on her first day of school and another of Audrey sporting a huge grin.

Donna softly took the locket out of Audrey’s hands and closed it, laying it to rest carefully on her sweater. Toby gave her a gentle smile. He’d always had a soft spot for Donna, and he loved watching her find happiness, albeit unconventionally, with Josh and Audrey.

Leo, too, gave a grin, placing his hand on Donna’s shoulder and giving her a soft squeeze. “Good girl,” he told her. “Now, let’s get this meeting started before dinner gets cold.”

OoOoOoO

Josh and Donna were sitting together on the couch after Audrey was finally down for the night.

"You're quiet." Josh said, tilting his head and studying her. His eyes cautiously roamed over her, looking for any sign that the date went worse than she'd previously indicated. He didn't like to admit it but one of his deepest fears was that something will happen to her on one of these dates. He could never quite breathe easily until she stopped by with a slice of dessert and a life lesson for Audrey so he could see for himself that she was fine. Safe and sound where she belonged- with him.
"Something odd happened tonight."

Josh's heart skipped a beat. Did he miss something when he was finishing off the last of the girls' apple pie a la mode? He looked her over again and tried to clear his throat as if to sound casual. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah," though she was speaking to him she seemed somewhat lost in thought. "I got my wallet out because he asked for your card, and when he saw Audrey's picture, he freaked out a bit."

"What did he say?" Josh was on full alert now that this gomer had brought his daughter into it too. They'd come back around to the fact that this idiot was asking Donna for a political favor on a date.

"He said 'Is that your niece?' and I said 'No, it's my Audrey.' Then he said, 'What the hell? You have a kid?' And I tried to explain that she was yours but then he was freaked out that I keep a picture of my boss' daughter in my wallet. Am I weird, Josh? Is this whole situation weird?"

"NO!" He responded a bit more defensively than he'd intended. "He was just a jerk." Josh tried to distract her. "Which picture was it?"

She picked up her purse and flipped the wallet out to show him.

"Hey?! Are these the new school photos? I don't have one yet. How'd you get this?"

"I have my sources, Josh," she smirked. "They're in my desk at work. You were in that meeting with Barryhill and then you left early. I was going to update your wallet tomorrow."

Josh grinned at the photo, and Donna moved a little closer and craned her neck to look too.

"She looks just like you in this one," Donna remarked proudly. "Look at those little dimples."

"She really does, doesn't she?" Josh was amazed.

But what never ceased to amaze him was Donna's unwavering love for his daughter.
Chapter 14

The gentle light from outside peeked through Donna's bedroom windows but she didn't open her eyes. Instead she moved closer to Josh under the warm blankets piled on her bed. It had been a long, late night and she'd insisted he stay with her. It was freezing in his apartment, she'd rationalized, and even though she'd had the super fix the window while Josh was with Stanley the day before, the heater hadn't had time to catch up.

For about the millionth time in the last few months she lay in then silence of the morning and thanked a higher power that it hadn't been any worse. And she was never so grateful that Audrey had been with Edith for the last two nights. He was once again on the road to recovery.

Donna moved her head slightly where it rest on his chest and felt his hand move to softly stoke her hair.

This was all they had of each other. A few tender moments in the early hours, in which neither of them would allow themselves the luxury of acknowledging what this truly was. They both thought that if it remained unspoken perhaps neither would be hurt by the others rejection.

And so the both clung to each other with everything they had, embracing the other and loving them unconditionally while they could.

Eventually they rose, still silent and Donna took a quick shower while Josh stayed in bed thinking of all that happened over the last 24 hours. Donna emerged clad in a clean pair of pajamas. "It's all yours," she motioned to the shower. "I packed you a few things. But put on the pajama pants and Harvard sweatshirt."

"We aren't getting dressed?"

Donna shook her head. "No. Your mother and Audrey will be here for Christmas morning. We have to do breakfast and gifts in pajamas. Then we will get dressed for Christmas dinner."

"Whatever you say," he chuckled.

His mood was shifting. It was music to her ears.

When he stepped out of the shower with a head full of damp curls he found her standing in front of the window with her hands wrapped around a large cup of coffee.

"Merry Christmas," he almost croaked, a little bit surprised at how hoarse his voice sounded.

She gave him a million watt smile. "Merry Christmas, Josh. It snowed last night."

He was endlessly amused by the fact that she could be so over the moon about something as simple as a fresh powder on Christmas morning. She'd plugged the tree in and even he had to admit that the soft glow of the lights created a soft warm feeling.

He was content standing next to her as she leaned back into him slightly. It may have been the proximity to the radiator, but he swore his whole body warmed up with the simple touch.

Content to watch the city go by in silence, she handed Josh her mug of coffee and he didn't hesitate as he took a drink. He swore he could stand there forever.
He glanced around the room a bit, taking in the apartment that felt like a second home. Though Josh knew for a fact that Donna was meticulous when it came to decorating her tree, this year it was completely out of sorts. He knew immediately that this was in no small part his daughter's doing. The tree was adorned with Donna’s coordinating globes and ornaments from her childhood, and sprinkled with a few glitter coated paper snowflakes that looked to be a product of craft time at Audrey’s school.

She'd come to him in the weeks prior, asking to take Audrey for the evening on several occasions for Christmas related festivities and he’d gladly agreed. Even though they’d be celebrating Hanukkah at his house, Josh had no problem letting Audrey and Donna bond over some holiday fun. She'd taken Audrey ice skating, shopping at the mall and to see Santa. They'd baked cookies, decorated a tree and Josh didn't even know what else.

It wasn't long before the silent morning was interrupted by a knock at the door and Donna greeted Edith and Audrey with warm hugs.

"Daddy!" Audrey immediately sprinted through the doorway towards Josh, who crouched down to wrap her up in his arms.

"Merry Christmas, Donna," Edith sat down several large bags of varying contents. "How's he doing," she asked softly.

A sad smile passed over Donna's lips. "Better this morning, I think. Having Audrey close by always helps."

Edith had noticed the changes in Josh too, but hadn't seen him in the last two days. Donna had called the previous evening to let her know that his session ran long and that he'd cut his hand but she didn't elaborate. She didn't have to.

"These need to go into the fridge," Edith busied herself with the contents of one of the bags. Donna gave her a hand as they both moved around the kitchen listening to Audrey's quiet conversation with her father in the living room. She'd asked what had happened to Josh's hand, immediately seeing the bandage. Josh deflected, telling her it was just a little cut.

"Careful, Daddy," she'd told him, mimicking his own advice to her on so many occasions.

Donna closed her eyes at the exchange, still not able to completely process what had happened to him two nights prior. She shook herself out of it and plastered a smile on her face, determined to make the morning a great experience for Audrey.

And before long the smile was genuine as the four of them crowded around her small kitchen table for breakfast.

"This is delicious, Donna," Josh complemented her. She smiled softly, just glad to see him eating a full meal.

"Yum!" Audrey chimed in. She'd learned months ago to take her cues from her dad and eat the healthy portions of Donna's cooking without protest.

Donna grinned at Audrey's enthusiasm. "Eat two more bites of eggs and then..." she leaned over conspiratorially, "we can go see if Santa Clause came to my house last night!"

Josh had never seen his daughter cooperate so quickly in her life.

Once the dishes were cleared Donna took Audrey's hand and lead her into the living room.
Audrey let out a small gasp as her eyes lit up when Donna pointed out the gifts under the Christmas tree.

Even Josh was stunned. They weren't there when he'd woken up and he wasn't exact sure when Donna had a free second to make the morning so magical for Audrey. He looked over at his mother, a normally put together woman, who on this particular morning had driven across town in a pair of snowman pajamas to celebrate Christmas in Donna Moss's apartment.

Just another testimony, he thought, to prove there truly wasn't anything they wouldn't do for Donna. She was family.

They all made their way to the living room and sat down, Josh and Donna on the couch, Edith comfortable with her cup of warm tea in the armchair.

Audrey planted herself under the tree next to the pile of gifts wrapped in red and white paper, eager to begin opening them.

"We start with the stocking," Donna informed her as she picked up the overflowing red and white stocking from the window sill and moved to her seat, Audrey trailing attentively behind her.

"Now?" Audrey asked eagerly.

Josh stretched his uninjured arm out across the back of the couch where Donna was seated and made himself comfortable as Audrey crawled in next to them.

"Go ahead," Donna offered her approval and watched on as Audrey pulled out a multitude of small treasures. Donna had been collecting tiny gifts for Audrey for months, prepared to fill her stocking and have something to open each night of Hanukkah.

Between small trinkets Audrey pulled out snacks and candies, many of which were favorites of Josh. He reached down and selected a peanut butter cup from Audrey's mounting pile and popped it in his mouth, giving Donna's shoulder a soft squeeze as he watched his daughter in all of her excitement.

Edith snapped a few photos but mostly she sat quietly and observed her son. Audrey eventually came bounding over to her, showing off a small toy.

Donna stood and refilled the coffee mugs and grabbed a juice box for Audrey before returning to her spot next to Josh on the couch. "Sweet Pea, why don't you see what else is under the tree?"

Audrey hopped up and ran over to the tree, grabbing the biggest box.

"That one is for you. From Santa," Donna told her, making her way over to sit next to Audrey. "Go ahead and open it."

Audrey, with help from Donna, tore into box after box, unearthing a few clothing articles, several books and a few educational toys.

"Those are pretty neat, huh?" Josh leaned forward and spoke to Audrey, winking at Donna in the process.

Audrey nodded eagerly, already playing with her new items.

"I think there is something under the tree for Daddy, too," Donna reached for a box tucked away under the tree and handed it to Audrey to deliver to Josh. Josh's face lit up the moment he removed the lid of the box to find a coffee mug hand painted by Audrey.
Donna had taken her to a paint your own pottery location last week and Audrey created a gift for her Dad. It was an art project that only a parent could love and Josh adored it, beaming with pride. He gave Audrey a huge hug of thanks and smiled at Donna in the process.

They spent the morning exchanging gifts and chatting while Audrey played with a few toys. Donna stood and slipped into her bedroom, returning with two aspirin that she discreetly slipped to Josh. He gave her a sad smile of appreciation, wondering how she knew that the slight throbbing in his hand was beginning to increase.

Edie helped Donna in the kitchen while Audrey played quietly at the table and Josh took a short nap. Donna knew he desperately needed the sleep.

"Come here, I need your help, baby girl."

Audrey hopped up at the sound of Donna's voice and hurried over, standing on her tip toes and trying to see what was happening. Donna popped her up onto the counter to sit next to a pie crust, showing her how to pinch the edges. Audrey smiled brightly when Edith and Donna praised her work.

"When does Uncle Toby get here?" Audrey asked as Donna wiped down the counter.

"Any minute," Donna assured her.

Because Hanukkah and Christmas overlapped that year Donna had invited Toby over for dinner. Edith was making dinner while Donna had been in charge of the morning's festivities.

Josh woke from his nap at the sound of the knock at the door, shuffling in to Donna's room to change into jeans and a sweater.

"Uncle Toby!" Audrey threw her hands up in an exciting greeting as soon as Donna opened the door.

"Hey kid," he bent down and gave her a high five.

Audrey bounced around Donna's apartment. There was no shortage of sugar in her system.

"Hey, Toby. Thanks for coming," Donna enveloped him in a warm hug.

"How is he today?" Toby had barely slept the night before, thinking about the pain his brother was in.

Donna gave him a sad smile. "Better. He's going to get better."

Toby squeezed her hand and gave her a small nod. And with that small gesture she knew that Toby would do everything within his power to make sure that Josh received the support and care he needed.

"Edith," he changed his focus, his voice livening up a bit. Well, as lively as Toby ever was. "A pleasure to see you as always. It smells wonderful in here."

"Ah, Tobias." Edith welcomed Toby with a hug and a kiss. He was family, too. "I hope you're hungry."

The five spent their evening together in the most pleasant of company, all of them throughly enjoying the holiday meal and all that came with it. As the evening wore on Toby said his goodbyes and
headed back to his apartment. He had an early meeting the next day.

Edith and Donna finished cleaning up and made a pot of tea. Donna clicked through the channels on the television until she found White Christmas on TV. She grabbed a warm blanket and sat on the couch next to Josh, pulling Audrey onto her lap.

"This is my favorite Christmas movie," Donna told her, going into detail about how her family always gathered around the living room with mugs of coca to watch Danny Kaye and Bing Crosby serenade them for ninety minutes.

Audrey watched contently for a few moments before dozing off. Donna pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. And it wasn't long before Donna found her eyelids heavy as well.

"I'm leaving, Joshua," Edith whispered as she placed her hand on her son's cheek. He was beginning to doze too, Donna wrapped in his arms and Audrey snuggled in close to Donna, a long forgotten Christmas movie playing softly in the background.

"Night, Ma," Josh whispered, perfectly content in his surroundings and not wishing to disturb anyone else. "Thanks for everything today."

"Of course," she leaned down and kissed his forehead, taking in the scene in front of her. "I love you, son. No need to thank me. I'm here when you need me."

Josh gave a small, sad smile of appreciation.

Edith placed her hand on Josh's cheek, watching as he held Donna and Audrey close, Donna's face nuzzled in close to the crook of his neck. "And Joshua?"

"Hmm?" He glanced up to her.

Edith met his eyes, glancing pointedly towards Donna. "Get a grip."

Josh was speechless, watching his mother silently make her way from Donna's apartment into the cold winter night.
"Hey Shortcake. What are you drawing?" Josh stood behind Audrey, who was coloring contently at Donna's desk, an extra chair pulled in as Donna typed a memo.

"It's the ocean, Daddy!" Audrey stood and Josh picked her up to hold her close. "The… The… Pacific Ocean!"

"It's very pretty," he assured her. "Did you learn about fish at school today?"

"Uh-huh," she nodded enthusiastically.

"But did you learn to make a fish face," he asked her, squeezing his own lips to mimic a guppy. Audrey erupted in a fit of giggles and a big smile. "You're silly, Daddy."

Josh continued to make a fish face at Audrey, adding a little 'glug glug' sound effect. It wasn't long before Audrey joined in, making fish lips back at Josh.

Donna stood and walked to the file cabinet to double check a statistic, a warm smile on her face as she watched the exchange between father and daughter.

"Fishy Kiss, Daddy!" She turned to him and brushed her puckered lips over his.

"Fishy Kiss, Donna!" Donna was given the same treatment, stopping as she walked by with a file. "Okay, now Daddy and Donna, fishy kiss!" Audrey clapped her hands lightly. They obeyed Audrey's order without thinking, simply turning to each other and brushing their lips together. But something in her eyes drew Josh in. Before he could even think about it he reached forward and gently cupped her jaw in his hand. The pull was magnetic, and all he wanted was to really kiss her. He leaned forward, tilting his head slightly, until Audrey broke the spell.

"My turn again! Fishy kiss, Daddy!"

Josh started slightly, and Donna quickly looked away, fidgeting nervously. It was a good thing the bullpen was empty.

Donna quickly made her way back to her desk and busied herself. She knew her face was flushed. Her heart was still pounding. She'd certainly felt something, and she wondered if he had too.

Josh watched her walk back to her desk and swaying a bit. He was weak in the knees and felt a little delirious. He mentally kicked himself but he also knew that it wasn't a good idea to kiss his assistant in the bullpen. And it certainly wasn't a good idea to kiss Donna in front of Audrey. She'd ask questions to which he didn't have the answer.

"Daddy!" Audrey was tapping insistently on his shoulder, still trying to get his attention. "Can we go to the 'quarium, Daddy?"

"Aquarium," Josh corrected her pronunciation. "And we'll see."

"Please," Audrey bat her eyelashes a few times at Josh and used her sweetest voice. "Pleeeese, Daddy?"

"Did you ask Donna?" Josh and Audrey both turned to look at her.
Donna glanced up from the memo she'd been typing to see both of them looking at her with eager anticipation. "I think you have a few free hours this weekend. You can work it in tomorrow morning," she smiled.

"Alright, I guess so," Josh told Audrey, who was still happily sitting on his hip before whispering conspiratorially. "And maybe some chocolate chip pancakes for breakfast."

"Joshua…" Donna gave him a warning tone as she went back to her typing.

"Okay, okay. We'll have some eggs, too."

She shook her head, a smile still on her face as she clicked print and spun around in her chair. "You've got a meeting in the Roosevelt Room in five minutes. You should be done in no more than a half hour," she told him. "Audrey and I are going to walk this memo down to Leo's office an then call in everyone's dinner order. We'll meet you in the Briefing Room for State of the Union practice?"

"Kay," he told her before turning his attention back to Audrey. "You going to hang out with Donna for a little while?"

She nodded her head yes.

"Be good," he kissed her forehead and put her down, heading off to his meeting. "And talk Donna into going to the aquarium with us in the morning while I'm gone."

"Kay," Audrey grinned.

"Not fair, Lyman," Donna called after him. "You play dirty."

"Oh, Donnatella," he turned and bounced on the balls of his feet, a smirk crawling across his face. "If only you knew."

OooooO

"Can you show Margaret how you can count to ten in French?" Donna asked Audrey as she held her hand.

Audrey complied, rattling off the numbers as she fidgeted in place a bit. "Un, deux, trois, quatre, cinq, six, sept, huit, neuf, dix."

"That's very good," Margaret stated with a serious face.

Audrey stood a little taller and looked up at Donna with a proud smile.

"Do you know why the French only eat one egg for breakfast?" Margaret continued.

"Why?" Audrey tilted her head a little bit and asked Margaret with genuine curiosity.

"Because one egg is un oeuf."

Audrey stared blankly at Margaret for a moment before turning her gaze back to Donna in curiosity. Donna gave Audrey a knowing smile and swayed a bit, bumping her softly. "It's a joke, Sweet Pea."

Audrey grinned and let out a soft little giggle, still not understanding the joke but following Donna's cues.
"So, anyway," Donna began after a moment, "here's a copy of the memo Leo requested. We're going to head back and order everyone's dinner and I'll see you for the read through?"

"Sounds good," Margaret filed the memo away. "See you guys later."

"Excuse me, Miss Margaret?" Audrey was attempting to use her best manners.

"Yes?"

"Is Papa Leo in there?" Audrey pointed to the Chief of Staff's closed door.

Margaret nodded her head in affirmation. "Yes, he is. He's with Admiral Fitzwallace and Nancy McNally. Do you know who they are?"

Audrey looked curiously at Donna.

"I don't think you've ever met them before. But we'd better not interrupt Papa Leo's meeting."

But before Donna could even finish her sentence Margaret was on the phone. "Audrey Lyman is here to see you."

She sat the receiver back in the cradle and nodded to Audrey. "He will see you now."

Audrey, once again, looked up to Donna.

"Go on in," Donna confirmed. "Best behavior, please."

Audrey quickly made her way to Leo's door and reached up for the knob, letting herself into the office. She was over to Leo like a bolt of lightning, throwing her arms around her neck and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Papa Leo!" She exclaimed. Leo was most certainly on Audrey's list of favorite people.

"Heya, Smiley. What's new?" Leo's gruff facade faded quickly as he grinned at the toddler.

Donna couldn't help but to smile herself as she watched on from the door frame as Audrey climbed onto Leo's lap.

"Papa Leo, the ocean is dirty and it's bad for the fishies."

Nancy McNally stifled a smile. The little girl was pitching her agenda to the Chief of Staff and she didn't even realize it.

"Well, that sounds very important. We will have to see what we can do about that," Leo told her.

"I can write my name!" Audrey's face lit up, excited by her own announcement and pleased with her new accomplishment.

"Let's see it," Leo popped her up to sit on the edge of his desk and sat a pen and paper in front of her. His attention was now entirely focused on Audrey. The Chief of Staff wasn't afraid to put his meeting on hold.

She concentrated intently, her tongue sticking slightly out the side of her mouth as she stared at the paper. "A..." she narrated as she carefully drew each line. "U...D...R...E...Y...L...Y...M...A...N."

"Excellent work!" Leo beamed with pride.
"Ah, a little Lyman," Fitzwallace chuckled. "That explains so much."

OooooooO

"Uncle Sam, guess what?!

"What?" Sam pivoted in his chair and leaned over with a huge grin, immediately stopping what he was doing to give Audrey is full attention when she walked through the doorway into his office.

"I get to stay here tonight and help!"

"You do? Well aren't we lucky," Sam grinned. The entire West Wing had been high strung all week and the preparation for the State of the Union was only adding to their stress. A visit from Audrey was always a welcome distraction to the Senior Staff.

"We're taking dinner orders, Sam," Donna chimed in from where she leaned against the door frame. "What would you like from District Deli?"

"Turkey club, please," Sam replied. "And a cup of whatever the soup of the day is."

"I'm having grilled cheese, Uncle Sam," Audrey offered as she climbed into his visitor's chair.

"Are you picking up dinner?" Charlie peeked into Sam's office to ask Donna.

"District Deli," Donna confirmed. "Put you down for a meatball sub?"


"Hi, Charlie," Audrey greeted from where she sat.

"Hey, Little Bit," he walked over and Audrey gave him a low five.

"Oh, Donna, if you have a second CJ said she wanted to order something too. She's in her office," Charlie added. "See you guys later."

"Alright, kiddo, let's go." Donna instinctively reached down to fix Audrey's hair, re-clipping the small lavender bow that matched her outfit.

"Uncle Sam?"

"Hmmm?"

"What does lather mean?" Audrey looked at Sam curiously.

"Lather?" Sam glanced up from his laptop at the odd question, trying to figure out how to explain the definition. "It means sudsy. Like what soap does when you wash your hair."

"Oh." Now Audrey looked completely stumped.

"Why?" Sam was curious. So was Donna.

"Cause Daddy said Uncle Toby would be… working in a lather tonight."

Sam laughed, softly and just once at first and then increasing in volume and frequency. "Work himself into a lather? Yeah, that's probably an understatement." Sam shook his head, glad for the distraction, stifling his continued laugh when he saw Donna's face.
Donna bent down to Audrey's eye level. "What are our rules, Audrey Joan?" She asked very softly.

"Be kind, be safe and don't fib."

"That's right," Donna agreed. "And that is not a very kind thing to say."

Audrey's eyes widened in regret.

"I know you didn't know what it meant," Donna continued without missing a beat. "And it's always okay to ask Uncle Sam a question, or to talk to me or Daddy. But in the future let's not say that, okay?"

"Okay," Audrey responded softly. "I'm sorry, Donna."

"It's okay, Sweetie. You didn't know." Donna stood and took Audrey's hand. "And Uncle Sam knows a lot of cool words, doesn't he?" Her voice became chipper again, swinging everyone back into a good mood.

Audrey nodded eagerly.

"He was a good person to ask," Donna commended Audrey for that. "But waive goodbye and we'll see him at dinner. Thirty minutes in the Roosevelt Room, Sam."

"Bye Uncle Sam," Audrey called, skipping along beside Donna.

Sam just smiled and shook his head as the two walked away. He was fairly sure that his best friend was oblivious to the fact that Donna loved both Josh and Audrey with her whole heart. Sam just hoped that Josh would decide to let her.

OooooooO

Audrey sat in a chair in the briefing room, coloring intently as Senior Staff mingled.

The side door opened and the President stepped inside, the latest draft of the State of the Union in his hand.

Audrey quickly sat her coloring aside and scrambled to her feet.

The little girls proper use of protocol wasn't lost on anyone in the room, particularly the Commander in Chief himself.

"Good Evening, Miss Lyman," he smiled.

"Hello, Mr. President," she greeted him confidently.

Josh and Donna exchanged little glances with each other, both of them proud of the way Audrey carried herself without instruction.

"Will you be assisting us this evening?" He leaned forward to speak to Audrey.

Audrey nodded her head. "Yes."

"I see. And just what is your assigned job for the night?"

Audrey didn't hesitate. "To color. And eat my apple slices."
"Very good." The President stood up and put on his glasses. "It's about time we got some decent help around here."

President Bartlet wandered over to Leo as Senior Staff grabbed their notepads and settled into their spots with stopwatches.

"Did you see that?" President Bartlet whispered to Leo. "Do you suppose that Donna's been working with Audrey on protocol? It feels a little odd to have her feel like she has to follow those kinds of rules. She's so little."

Leo glanced over at his surrogate granddaughter. "Mr. President, I doubt she's been forced into standing when you enter the room. That little girl is just very bright. She watches and absorbs everything. She's the best of Josh and Donna combined."

"Yes, I'd imagine you're right about that. You know, sometimes I forget that she's not actually Donna's daughter."

Leo gave a crooked smile. "Who says she's not, Mr. President?"

President Bartlet glanced over to see Donna situating Audrey with a few activities and a snack, kissing her on the head as she gathered the files Josh needed her to review. "Well, touché."

He took the podium and began to read from the prompter, the agreement being that he'd make it through each section once, and then they'd each begin to argue their relevant points on that particular topic. He paused at the end of the environmental portion of the speech, removing his glasses off and perching on a stool behind the podium for feedback. "Alright," he took a drink of water. "Seaborn, start us out."

Sam read over his notes on the section, most of which were met with unanimous agreement.

"Very well," the President nodded. "Ziegler?"

Toby outlined some notes about pausing for emphasis but stopped short of critiquing the content of the speech as he'd drafted that portion himself.

"Lyman?"

"Turtles eat trash but it's bad for them so that's a reason why we can't litter," Audrey stated all at once, never looking up from her coloring book.

Josh's head spun over to Audrey, his eyes widening. This, he supposed, is why he didn't make a habit of carting Audrey along to staff meetings.

"Oh, thank God," the President softly muttered.

"Sir?" Josh looked up, curious.

"Were just all so relieved that she takes after Donna instead of you," President Bartlet smirked.

"Believe me, Mr. President," Josh smiled and smoothed Audrey's curls. "No one is happier about that than I am."

OoooooooO

"I wouldn't believe it unless I'd seen it with my own eyes," CJ slid into the empty seat next to Josh as the President took a short break for a drink of water. "But Toby is sharing his pie."
Josh raised his eyebrows in interest, glancing behind him to the rear portion of the room where Toby had been quarantined during State of the Union practice. And there, on the seat next to Toby with her own plastic fork, sat Audrey. She was swinging her feet and grinning wildly, a smear of cherry pie on her face, eating directly out of a pie tin.

"Don't let Donna see you doing that," Josh called out.

Toby cleared his throat. "Thank you for that piece of obvious information. Neither I nor Audrey were born yesterday," Toby replied, passing the pie tin over and holding it while Audrey scooped another bite.

"You've been warned," he smirked, returning to his notes.

OooooooO

Josh leaned back in his chair as far as he could, craning to see. He finally made eye contact with Ginger and summoned her over with a jerk of his head. Audrey was sleeping soundly in his arms.

"Grab Donna, will you?" Josh whispered.

Ginger nodded and exited the room and it was only moments before Josh felt Donna's presence as she silently slid in next to him.

"She's out," Josh stated in a soft whisper, stating the obvious.

"I'll take her home," Donna responded just as quietly, brushing Audrey's curls out of her face as she slept peacefully against Josh.

President Bartlet, mid speech, watched the scene in front of him unfold. "Let's call it a night," he announced out of the blue causing everyone to look around. "We've all had a long week. And the only person in this room who has agreed with everything I've said tonight is asleep. See you guys tomorrow."

Josh and Donna gathered their respective things and Donna slipped Audrey's jacket over her for warmth.

Josh loaded Audrey into her car seat and Donna deposited both backpacks in the backseat floorboards. Audrey stirred slightly as Josh clipped her in, eyes fluttering over to Donna.

"Shhhhh," Donna softly cupped her little cheek. "Go back to sleep, Sweet Pea," she whispered and Audrey did that, leaning slightly into Donna's hand.

Josh and Donna closed their doors as stood on opposite sides of the car.

"Goodnight," she offered over the roof of the vehicle.

"What?" He furrowed his brow. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Home? The President said we could all leave."

"Yes, and how do you plan to get there?"

"The Metro..."

"I don't think so. Get in the car."
"Josh. Audrey's asleep. You need to get her home."

"I need to get you home first. No way are you taking the Metro this late."

"But I-"

"Donna!" He looked somewhat terrified.

"Fine." She rolled her eyes and climbed in to the passenger seat. Of course, it gave her a warm fuzzy feeling when he did stuff like this. It made her feel cared for. Loved, even. She just had to keep reminding herself that they are just friends. Of course he worried about her- He worried about everyone.

She thanked him politely when he pulled up in front of her building and waved to him just before she closed the door as softly as she could manage.

He waited until he saw the light in her apartment flip on and she passed in front of the window.

As he pulled away he looked in the rear view mirror, back at the still sleeping Audrey.

"One of these days, Audrey, taking her home is going to mean taking her to our home. I just don't know when."
"Go play, shortcake," Josh zipped Audrey's jacket just a little bit higher.

"Will you come with me?" She looked at him wide eyed and hopeful.

"I have to talk to Uncle Sam," Josh informed her. "But look," he nodded towards the merry go round, "all of those kids are playing together. Why don't you go over and make a new friend?"

Audrey bit her lip and looked towards the merry go round, stepping over a little closer to Josh and softly shaking her head no. "Donna said I'm not suppose to go on that," she informed him.

Josh sighed. "Well, it's okay this time since I'm here."

Audrey looked up at him with wide eyes and blinked a few times, considering what he was saying, before she ran off to play.

"What does Donna have against merry go rounds," Sam asked.

Josh shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. She's always telling me stories about getting scraped up as a child. I think she was just a clumsy kid. She's got those long legs, you know?"

A sly smile crept across Sam's face. "Oh, I know. Do you know?"

Josh furrowed his brow and shot Sam a glare.

Sam held up his hands in surrender. "Hey, I'm just asking a question. I'm not the one with the photo of my assistant on my desk."

"It was Audrey's first day of school! It's a good photo!" Josh was getting defensive, and rather indignant.

"It's a great photo," Sam commented, amused at the fact that he'd managed to get a rise out of Josh.

Josh looked the other way and muttered a few choice words under his breath. But before either of the men could continue their conversation Josh saw a blur of a hot pink jacket out of the corner of his eye and heard Audrey's cry. His feet were moving before he knew it, scooping her up and depositing her on a park bench where he crouched in front of her, trying to figure out what was wrong.

"Where's it hurt," he asked, softly, brushing her curls out of her face in a moment of love and patience Sam rarely witnessed from Josh.

Audrey held her hand out to Josh and picked up her left leg to indicate pain.

He quickly determined that aside from light scrapes on her knee and palm, Audrey was fine. The fall from the spinning merry go round had just startled her more than anything.

"Okay, Shortcake," Josh picked her up to tote her to the car. "You're going to be fine, but let's go home."

She clung to him and he softly rubbed her back, whispering quiet words of reassurance as they walked. Audrey's cries had softened but still didn't subside completely until they reached his car. Josh buckled her into her seat and Sam slid into the front.
"Daddy?"

"Yeah, kiddo?" Josh glanced into his rear view.

"You and Uncle Sam are going to be in trouble," she stated.

"What?" Sam piped in, turning to look at Audrey in the back seat, her eyes still puffy and her cheeks tear stained.

"Why?" Josh questioned.

"Cause," Audrey continued, "Donna will be mad that you let me get hurt."

Sam's eyes widened and Josh's eyebrows shot up. "It's not that I let you get hurt..." he muttered. "It was an accident."

Sam shifted in his seat a bit. "Maybe you should drop me off at my place on the way?"

Josh smirked. "Afraid?"

Sam didn't hesitate. "Yes."

Josh chuckled outright, making a left turn into his neighborhood. "You can run, Sam, but you can't hide."

OoOoOoO

"Ok, kiddo. Do we need anything else?" Josh held Audrey's hand and a shopping basket piled with essentials.

"I need lipstick," Audrey stated confidently.

"Lipstick?!" Josh was somewhat horrified.

"Yes." Audrey stood tall. "I'm out of lipstick."

"You're... out?! When did you have lipstick to begin with?"

Audrey rolled her eyes. "I wear lipstick, Daddy. I'm a lady."

Josh's jaw dropped. "Well... we're not buying lipstick."

"Hmmph," Audrey stuck her bottom lip out.

Josh just shook his head and walked to the cashier, completely befuddled. He'd have Donna explain it to him when they got home.

And when they arrived back at his apartment Donna was already there, waiting for them.

"We're home," Audrey announced in a singsongy voice.

"I'm in the kitchen," Donna responded. "Don't throw your backpack on the floor," she added for good measure, causing Audrey and Josh to exchange guilty glances with one another and both pick up their respective backpacks and hang them on their designated hooks.

"It smells great," Josh grabbed a beer and leaned against the fridge, loosening his tie.
"Thanks," Donna beamed. "It should be ready in 20 minutes. Go get changed."

He didn't think much of the fact that Donna had already changed out of her work clothes and was sporting a comfortable outfit she kept in the bottom left drawer of his dresser. He handed her his beer and she took a drink, stirring the sauce and watching Audrey play in the living room out of the corner of her eye. Josh continued to speak to her, recalling his last meeting with Leo and something that he'd heard CJ mention as he wandered into his bedroom to toss on some sweats.

When he rounded the corner to return to the kitchen he stopped in the doorway and stood quietly, watching Donna and Audrey.

His daughter handed Donna her art project from school that day and Donna oohed and ahhed over it before hanging it proudly on the refrigerator. Donna then bent down to eye level with Audrey and removed the bow that she'd placed neatly in Audrey's hair that morning before gently pulling her soft curls into a pony tail.

"What did you learn at school today?" The question, Josh knew, was standard practice between Audrey and Donna.

"Mmmmm..." Audrey thought for a brief second. "Math."

"Oh really? And what about math did you learn?"

"Patterns," Audrey said distractedly, looking at the rolls rising for dinner inside the oven.

"Give me an example of a pattern," Donna requested.

Audrey thought for a moment before reaching out to softly touch the beads on Donna's necklace. "Purple, blue, white, purple, blue, white, purple, blue, white," Audrey repeated.

Donna smiled. "Very good."

"Donna?"

"Hmm?"

"I need lipstick."

Donna smiled softly. "Okay," she stood, grabbing her purse and pulling out a stick of chapstick.

Audrey watched on in awe as Donna took the cap off and gently applied the chapstick. "Stop biting your lip and it won't be so chapped," Donna told her, popping the cap back on as Audrey lightly smacked her lips together. "All better."

"Your turn!" Audrey stated excitedly, taking the chapstick and applying it very liberally to Donna's lips. Donna puckered up in a very animated fashion and Audrey grinned wildly, showing her tiny dimples as she proudly surveyed her work and letting out a satisfied little giggle.

"How do I look?" Donna asked Audrey.

"Beautiful," Josh responded breathlessly from the doorway. Even he was shocked to hear his response out loud, intending only to internalize his thoughts.

Donna and Audrey both turned to look at him, Donna emitting a nervous laugh and looking at the floor while she stood, fumbling with the cap on the chapstick and placing it back into her purse.
"I have a situation." CJ stated with a scratchy threat before she leaned on Donna's desk and took a sip of tea with lemon and honey.

"Oh?" Donna was listening but continued with her task, in a hurry to finish her project.

"It's Leo's birthday. And we've all been so busy planning for the state dinner tonight that it... slipped all of our minds."

"I sent a card," Donna commented.

CJ wasn't surprised by Donna's admission. She was able to juggle two dozen things at once, keep Josh Lyman in line, run the DCOS office and remember everyone's birthday. "Well, be that as it may," she let out a little chuckle, "the rest of us forgot. So I ordered a cake and we're all going to meet in his office later and sing." CJ smiled widely. "He'll hate it."

Donna chuckled too. "Okay, so what's the problem?"

"I'm loosing my voice so we need to find someone else to lead the singing," CJ coughed lightly. "Can anyone around here carry a tune in a bucket?"

"Josh can," Donna offered absentmindedly, never looking up from what she was writing.

CJ stopped what she was doing. "Josh?" She gave a little laugh at the thought.

Donna glanced up, a blank look on her face. "Yes. Josh has a beautiful voice. It's low and flawless." And it always cut straight to her soul, she thought.

"Well," CJ considered Donna's words. "Okay." She drummed her fingers on the desk a few times. "How do you know that?"

Donna gave a soft smile. "He sings Audrey to sleep. When she was a baby and she was crying in the middle of the night he'd pull her close and sing softly but in this rich baritone and he'd sway. It was the only thing that would get her back to sleep."

CJ couldn't help but to smile too. "Okay. Well, when the time comes we'll all follow Josh's lead."

Donna nodded her head, putting her memo away and heading off to get changed.

She returned a few moments later in a floor length gown, her makeup flawless and her hair pinned back loosely. She held her cell phone to her ear, saying very little to the caller on the other end of the line.

"Donna!" Josh sat the receiver of his phone down as he heard the soft click of her heels entering the bullpen. The phone line at his mother's had been busy all three times he'd tried to call.

He grabbed the bow tie off of his desk and wandered into the bullpen to find her putting on earrings while continuing to speak into the phone.

"Uh huh.... uh huh... okay. I have to go now, Sweet Pea. But here's Daddy. I love you," she handed him the cell. "Your turn," she smiled.

Josh grinned. Of course Donna was on the phone to Audrey. If anyone was tying up the lines it was those two. He took the phone from her and listened to Audrey speak for a moment. "Time for bed, Shortcake," he told her, checking his watch after a few minutes. "I love you. Hang up the phone and
Josh closed the phone and sat it on Donna's desk before holding up his bow tie with a smile. Donna stepped closer to him, looping the fabric around his collar and letting her fingers find the familiar rhythm.

The dinner was well underway, senior staff coming and going to handle an escalating situation in the Philippines but for a brief moment Josh and Donna found themselves alone as she completed the last loop on his tie, swaying a bit.

"I love this song," she stated, listening to the music filtering in through an open door as she gave the bowtie a final tug.

"So dance with me," he asked before he could think about it.

"What? Here?" She looked around a bit.

"Yeah. Why not?" He was treading into the unknown, his heart pounding in his chest.

She blushed slightly, her eyes soft and welcoming when she met his gaze.

He took both of her hands with his, backing into his dark office as she followed, secluding them from the open air of the bullpen.

The music was barely audible but Josh didn't care. The room was illuminated only by the lights filtering in from the bullpen and the streets, and when he lead her into the shadows he found the courage to indulge himself and pulled her close. He wrapped his arms low around her waist, his hands grazing across the soft skin of her almost backless dress.

Donna's hands snaked around his neck, her fingers absentmindedly playing with the curls at the nape of his neck. She let herself melt into him, resting her head on his shoulder and closing her eyes, taking him in.

She'd never known it possible to be so perfectly at peace in a room with air so electrically charged. They didn't speak of this cosmic force between them, but in moments like this they couldn't help but to be swept up in it. She doubted so many things about how she interpreted her relationship with Josh. She didn't know how a man like Josh could possibly have feelings for a woman like her. But in the dark of the room, swaying together in perfect unison, it became almost undeniable. All she could conclude was that he was attracted to her, but he didn't want to be.

Josh moved to rest his head against hers, burying his face in her hair and breathing deeply, his thumb caressing her lower back. He moved to whisper in her ear, telling her how beautiful she looked and how incredible she was. His lips brushed against her temple and he paused for just a moment resting his face against hers.

"Donnatella..." he whispered breathlessly.

"Josh..." she responded breathlessly.

"JOSH!" CJ's voice rounded the corner from the corridor of the bullpen. "It's birthday song time!"

Donna jumped away from Josh on reflex and bit her lip, looking away as though she was afraid. He was devastated. Everything he knew screamed that he shouldn't kiss his assistant in his office. But this was Donna. The woman he thought about all hours of the day and night. The woman he
cared for more than he ever knew possible. The woman that he wanted by his side every second of
the day. He held on to her hand, not wanting the moment to end just yet. But Josh realized the
moment was broken. He gave her hand a soft squeeze before letting her go.

CJ peeked around the corner to the DCoS office and took in the scene before her. "Oh. Uh, well...
whenever you're ready is fine." She hesitated for a moment. "I'm just going to... uhh... go..." she
hooked her thumb over her shoulder.

"We should join everyone else," Donna stated softly, not looking at him.

Josh cleared his throat, thinking perhaps she was trying to let him down gently. And as much as he
wanted to pull her close again and kiss the breath out of her lungs he knew he didn't want to do
anything to hurt her, or to damage their relationship. He wanted her in his life, and if he had to settle
for the role of friend rather than lover just to have her in his life at all, he'd do it. "Yeah," he told her
in a rough voice, "I'll catch up to you in a minute."

Josh closed his eyes and took a deep breath, regaining his composure before he stepped into the
bullpen. Whatever this was- he needed to figure it out.
"H'lo," she mumbled a muffled greeting into the phone, pulling her pillow onto her face. She didn't know what time it was but she certainly wasn't prepared to wake up.

"Donna?" A soft voice and a little whimper came through the phone.

"Audrey?!" Donna shot bolt upright in bed, flinging the pillow across the room and already rushing to get up and find her shoes and purse. "Sweetheart, what's going on? Where's Daddy?" A million worst case scenarios raced through Donna's mind.

"I'm right here," Josh's voice came through the phone, which was obviously on speaker, a little scratchy but strong.

Donna slowed down but continued to gather her things. She let out a deep breath of relief. "Oh, Josh. Thank God." She placed her hand over her pounding heart. "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

"We're okay, Donna. It's not an emergency."

She shoved a few things into a bag and grabbed her purse, heading out the door.

"Didn't mean to startle you," he croaked out. He could hear the panic in her voice. "But we're both just a little under the weather."

"I'm already on the way over."

"Donna it's 4:45 in the morning," he chuckled, listening to her racing around on the other end of the phone. "You don't have to rush over here."

"I'm already in the cab," she told him, moving the speaker on her cell phone away from her mouth to give the driver Josh's address, and tell him to hurry.

"But we could be contagious. You shouldn't-"

She heard Audrey interrupt with a grumble in the background. "I want Donna," she reiterated in an unusually grumpy tone.

"I know you do." Josh's patience too was wearing thin. Donna could tell he was borderline exasperated.

"How long have you two been up?" Donna was almost afraid to ask.

"Couple hours," Josh admitted somewhat sheepishly.

"Josh! Why didn't you call me?"

"It was the middle of the night, Donna! I can handle it!" Now he was getting testy.

"Donna! I want Donna!" Audrey repeated. She was right on the verge of a meltdown, an anomaly in the Lyman household.

"I'm almost there," Donna reassured her. "Josh? What are her symptoms. Should I stop and pick something up?"
"No!" Just blurted out a little too quickly. "I mean, please. I'd just rather you get here. I'll run to the pharmacy later this morning."

Donna sighed as Josh continued.

"She just has a mild fever. She can't sleep and she's cranky."

"No I'm not," Audrey insisted.

"I gave her some Tylenol before bed last night."

Donna's eyes widened. Last night?! This has been going on since last night

"And what about you, Josh?" She asked with soft concern.

"I'm fine," he grumbled. But she could easily tell he wasn't.

"Okay," she told him softly. "We'll see about that. I'm pulling in. I'll be right up."

Donna paid the driver and grabbed her bag, practically running up the stairs.

He was standing there, Audrey in his arms in the open doorway to his apartment waiting for her. Audrey immediately leaned out to reach for her and Donna pulled her close, seeing the tears in Audrey's eyes. Audrey clung to her.

"You're okay," Donna told her, kissing the top of her head. "You'll feel better soon."

It was obvious to Donna that Josh hadn't looked in a mirror lately. Sure, he was exhausted and clearly under the weather. But there was something else too.

He was immediately relieved to see her, even if it did strike him as odd that his assistant had just taken a cab in the early morning wearing pajamas and a fleece pullover and sporting some serious bed head. She was, Josh decided, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

She let out a little laugh, biting her lip as her face changed.

"What's so funny?" He asked, not at all amused with her ability to find humor in the situation.

She stepped forward and placed her hand on his cheek, thumb grazing across his stubble with a gentle sympathetic smile on her face. "Joshua Lyman, you have the chicken pox."

His eyebrows shot up to his hair line as he looked down, carefully examining his arms.

She moved her hand near a spot on his neck that was now home to a red bump, then giving a soft tug to the neckline on his tshirt to reveal another. She lightly directed him to turn around and she inspected his back.

Audrey watched on, pulling her pajama top up a bit to peer curiously at her own tummy.

"Uh-oh," she stayed, poking her finger at a spot. "Donna, I got one too!"

"I see that," she told her, moving towards the couch.

"How does she have the chicken pox?!" Josh was completely flummoxed. "Didn't she have the vaccines? We haven't missed any." Josh carefully examined Audrey's legs, forgetting his own illness completely.
"She had one as a baby. The next booster is scheduled for the summer before she starts kindergarten."

"What?! Why didn't we move that one forward when she started preschool?"

"There was a lot going on at that point," Donna's stomach did a backflip just thinking about the reason Audrey had to start preschool early. "I'm so sorry, baby girl," she sat Audrey down on the couch, tears welling in her eyes.

"It's okay, Donna," Audrey consoled her. "Don't cry."

Josh placed his hand lightly on Donna's shoulder, chest welling with guilt at the thought that he'd just implied this was her fault. "Donna, I didn't- that's not what I meant," he stated softly.

"I know," she grabbed his hand with hers. "Okay," she strengthened her voice, standing up. "I'm going to run to the drug store. I'll be right back."

"No!" Audrey looked panicked again.

"Audrey..." Josh warned. But honestly, he wasn't thrilled about Donna leaving for an errand either.

Donna smoothed the little girls curls. "I'm coming right back," she promised, glancing at the clock. "You can turn on Mr. Rogers and I'll be back before it's over, okay? And then we can all have breakfast. But I need to go get a few things so you and Daddy feel better. Okay?"

"Okay," Audrey consented with a pout, sticking her lower lip out.

Josh half rolled his eyes. He knew exactly where she'd adopted that trait.

Donna hurried to the pharmacy, grabbing the items that she knew she'd need and making her way back to Josh's place as fast as she could. She called Leo's office on the way, leaving a voicemail explaining the situation and letting him know that Josh would call in for senior staff and Donna would be in the office to pick up some things to work on at home and forward their phones.

"I'm back," she announced, and Audrey was off the couch and to the doorway with record breaking speed. Donna immediately picked her up. She didn't care how big Audrey was getting, her little girl didn't feel good and she was going to tote her around if that's what she needed.

"I made you some coffee," Josh told her, taking the bag from the drugstore out of Donna's other arm.

"Thanks," Donna told him. "Don't scratch," she added as Josh absentmindedly itched his left arm.

Donna dug through the bag, placing several products on the counter and then feeling Audrey's forehead for a fever. It was still mild. She moved over and did the same to Josh, who was burning up.

"Okay," she let out a breath, trying to get a handle on things. "Josh, take this," she handed him a bottle. "Two of them with a piece of toast," she instructed, popping in a piece of bread and grabbing a cup of milk while she continued to tote Audrey around. "They're on the list of approved OTC meds from your cardiologist. We'll call when the doctors office opens and ask if they want to see you. Meanwhile, you have a senior staff call in 5 minutes."

She grabbed the toast when it popped and lightly buttered both slices, placing one on a plate for him and cutting Audrey's into quarters before giving her a bite, and following it with children's antihistamine and fever reducer and carting Audrey off for an oatmeal bath.
"This is yucky." Audrey scrunched up her nose in displeasure after only a few moments, looking up at Donna as she held her arms out of the oatmeal bath.

Donna sighed. She had a point. "I know. But we've gotta do it. It'll make you feel better," Donna explained.

"But... why?" Audrey blinked up at her. She was miserable.

"Because," Donna sat down on the edge of the tub, "you won't itch so much afterwards. It's oatmeal so it's good for your skin."

Audrey still wasn't amused with the entire situation but she said nothing, resigned to her fate for the moment. Though she wasn't nearly as sick as Josh, it was apparent that Audrey wasn't feeling her normal self and had no interest in any of her bath toys. Donna grabbed a towel and sat it on the lip of the tub for Audrey to rest her head. Donna brushed Audrey's hair out of her face and spoke softly, telling her a story.

"You know," she began, "I had the chicken pox once."

Audrey glanced up at her, barely moving. "You did?"

"I did," Donna nodded. "I was about your age."

"When you lived in Wisconsin?"

Donna smiled at the extra letter in Audrey's pronunciation. "Yes. When I lived in Wisconsin. It was cold and snowy and I was stuck inside all itchy and sick while my brothers and sister played in the snow."

"Did my Grammy Moss take care of you?"

"Yes, she did." Donna smoothed Audrey's hair.

"Like you take care of me and Daddy?" Audrey's eyes fluttered closed. She was fighting sleep but losing the battle to the antihistamine.

Donna gave a soft smile. She always hoped she gave Audrey and Josh the type of loving care she always received from her mother but hearing it from Audrey in her own words choked her up a bit. She leaned over and gave Audrey a kiss on the forehead before draining the tub and getting Audrey situated in a pair of soft pajamas.

"Here's Walter," Donna handed Audrey her stuffed bunny before picking her up. "Do you want to lay down in your room or Daddy's room?"

"Daddy's, please," she requested using the manners that Donna had instilled in her since before she could talk.

Donna made her way to Josh's room, handing Audrey over to him as he wrapped up his call with Leo. She grabbed the bag from the drugstore and made her way back into his bathroom, running him a bath and adding the oatmeal.

"What are you doing?" He whispered at her, trying not to wake a now drifting Audrey. "No, not you Leo," he said into the phone.

"I'm running you an oatmeal bath," she told him.
"I'm not taking an oatmeal bath!" His voice went up several octaves as he held the phone away from his ear to speak to her, wanting to ensure the senior staff didn't get wind of this conversation.

Donna shot him a look that left very little room for argument.

"...or maybe I am taking an oatmeal bath," he muttered after seeing her face.

Josh returned his attention to the call once again, listening to Leo wrap up the meeting and send his staffers on the way.

"Donna will be in later to pick up a few things," Josh advised him.

"Great. I’m sure she’ll take care of everything," Leo told him, sorting through a stack of memos. "Oh, and Josh?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't forget your rubber ducky." Leo was smirking in his office.

Josh groaned and ended the call, sure he would never hear the end of this.

And as much as he hated to admit it, he did feel considerably better thirty minutes later when he rinsed off and stepped out of the tub, patting his irritated skin dry as Donna had instructed him.

He slipped into a pair of pajama pants and cracked the door to see Audrey sound asleep as Donna watched over her protectively.

"Are you just watching her sleep?" Josh asked quietly.

Donna nodded her head that she was, in fact, doing just that. "Don't you?" She wondered.

"I do," he added quickly. "I just didn't know that you did."

"It's calming," Donna stated plainly, tucking a blanket around Audrey before she carefully stood. "Now," she looked at Josh. "Calamine lotion time."

Josh's shoulders slumped but he knew better than to argue this time as Donna grabbed the pink bottle from the nightstand and lead him back into the master bathroom. He peeled his shirt off following her instructions and stood as she gently daubed the pink lotion on each of the spots they had appeared on his body.

He flinched the first time, surprised at the temperature of the solution.

"What?" She asked, worry in his eyes.

"It's cold," he admitted somewhat sheepishly.

Donna leaned forward and blew gently on the spot, her warm breath hitting him and sending chills all through his body.

"Uh," he cleared his throat, trying not to completely lose his composure and shifting his weight from foot to foot somewhat awkwardly, "actually... never mind. It's fine. I'm fine."

Donna raised a perfectly arched eyebrow at him but said nothing of his reaction, continuing with the calamine lotion and shifting the topic to a recap of his call into the senior staff meeting.
She screwed the cap back on the bottle when she was all done, moving in front of him and placing her hand on his forehead. "You're still warm," she announced. "Let's go call then cardiologist. Someone should be in the office by now."

"We don't need to call the cardiologist for every little thing," he whined.

She could tell he was going to argue with everyone and everything this morning. He was always somewhat of a petulant child when he was running a fever.

They slipped past a still sleeping Audrey and Donna grabbed the thermometer and placed it in Josh's ear, waiting for a reading. Everyone else thought the ear thermometer would be a great tool for Audrey, but the reality of the situation was that the toddler would sit still and cooperate if asked but Josh couldn't stop squirming around and running his mouth long enough for Donna to get an accurate reading. So, yes, she thought. The technology was a lifesaver.

"101.8" Donna announced with a frown. "Maybe we should go-"

"No!" He interrupted. "I'm a grown man. I can handle a little fever."

"But Josh I just think that-"

"Donna, please. I'll call the cardiologist but I'm not going anywhere. I'm fine. Really."

She bit her lip but relented. She'd choose her battles today.

Settling in to his dinging room table she called the doctor and left a message with the answering service to speak to the cardiologist as soon as he arrived. She then began some quick internet research on chicken pox and fevers in adults. Was she over reacting.

Midway through her reading she heard Josh shuffle over from the couch to stand behind her, reading over her shoulder as his fingers absentmindedly played with her hair.

"Rash, fever," he read out loud, muttering the side effects of the virus in a bored tone. "Headache, aches and pains, STERILITY?!" He almost gasp, his voice shooting up two octaves. "Donna! Do you see what that says?!" His face was scrunched up in abject panic. "It could make me... I could be..." he waived his hand around, completely flustered. "You know...!"

"Sterile?" She offered, trying to suppress a smirk at his reaction to the rogue possibly.

"Yes!" He ran his hands roughly through his hair. "It's not funny, Donna!"

"I'm sure you'll be fine. You're very virile, Joshua," she placated him. The article clearly stated that the chances of that were slim to none, but Josh hadn't bothered to read that far before panicking.

"But what if I'm not. And then I can't..." he trailed off before he finished the sentence. He realized at that he'd come very close to uttering the phrase 'what if WE can't have more kids.'

"Do you want more children?" Her voice had soften. She was no longer kidding around.

"Well... yeah." His tone matched hers. "I mean, maybe not tomorrow but... if I had a, you know..." Josh gulped, suddenly feeling nervous. "Wife."

"Right." Donna's heart beat quickly in her chest. "Well, I'm sure everything will be fine," she deflected, feeling the tension rising in the room.

"Yeah," he agreed, wishing she hadn't broken their gaze.
"Besides. You're already the luckiest dad in the world. You have this little pumpkin," Donna added in an overly chipper voice, glancing around Josh and opening her arms for Audrey, who wandered down the hall and climbed directly into Donna's lap.

"Well that didn't last long," Donna gave Josh a smile. Audrey had never been big on naps.

Josh just chuckled.

Once Audrey was situated on the couch with a video and Josh was reading briefing memos next to her Donna slipped out to grab a few things from the office and check in with Leo.

She grabbed the folders she needed and placed them into her oversized bag, thumbing carefully through the stacks of items on Josh's desk. Donna’s intent was to slip in and out of the office as quickly as possible but as word quickly spread of her arrival, she ended up being in the White House for nearly an hour. Several staffers dropped by with files for Josh’s review, requests for Donna’s opinion and well wishes for Audrey. There was no doubt that the little girl was loved by all.

She gathered her bag and locked the door to Josh’s office behind her, turning around and almost bumping into Leo.

“I heard you’d stopped by,” he stated. “How’s the patient?”

“The baby’s a little fussy,” Donna stated, shifting her heavy bag, “but Audrey’s taking it like a champ.” She let herself smile at her own joke.

Leo smirked. “That doesn’t shock me at all.” He reached out and took her bag, walking with her to the front doors. “You’ll let us know if you need anything?”

Donna nodded that she would.

“And Edith was already scheduled to be back from Florida on Sunday evening?”

“Correct,” Donna confirmed. “Josh will be back in the office on Monday morning.”

“Abbey said you can call her at any time. Same goes for me. You’re a good girl, Donna.” He rest his hand on her shoulder and paused for a moment, letting the sincerity of his words sink in before waving down Larry to carry Donna’s bags to her car.

She picked up lunch on the way and once she arrived back to Josh’s apartment she was pleased to find the man himself on the phone to the doctor. He ended the call shortly after her arrival, assuring her that the cardiologist didn’t foresee any complications with they way they’d proceeded with medications that morning, and to keep on the same course for the time being. Audrey had immediately found her way back onto Donna’s hip and Audrey silently rest her head on Donna’s shoulder as she moved around the kitchen putting their lunch onto plates.

After a small lunch and another round of medication, Josh and Audrey were both dozing off again. Much to Donna’s surprise they both agreed to relocate to Josh’s room, Audrey quickly passing out snuggled in close to Josh as he faded out while CSPAN played softly in the background.

Donna covered them both with a blanket and moved a little closer, feeling Josh, mostly asleep, wrap his arm around her and pull her close. Life may have thrown them another curve ball, but she’d make sure they were all find in the end. She always would.
"Leo gave us the night off." He sat against the edge of her desk and slouched.
Donna looked Josh over skeptically. "He... did?"
"Yeah. It's odd, right?" Josh stared down the corridor towards Leo's office. There was something going on and he knew it. But he couldn't figure out precisely what, and he wasn't in the room just yet.
"Very," she told him as she closed the file she was working on. "But who am I to judge?" The sound of a night off was music to her ears. She was absolutely exhausted and wasted no time gathering her belongings.
"What are you doing?" Josh raised his eyebrows.
"I'm leaving?"
"Oh." He fidgeted with the small cup of paper clips on her desk.
She sighed sat back in her chair and placed her bag down. "We don't get the night off do we?"
"You can go," he mumbled.
"But you were going to ask me to stay," she added.
"Well, I...," he picked up a paper clip and examined it closely, unsure of what to do with his nervous energy.
She sighed. "Alright. I'll pick up something for dinner while you get Audrey. What do we need to work on?"
"No. That's not what I meant. We have the night off. I was just going to see if you wanted to join us for dinner and the zoo."
She smiled softly. "That sounds great, actually."
"You don't have to," he continued. "If you have other plans-"
"I want to," she supplied quickly.
"Really?" He paused, still staring at the odds and ends on her desk.
"Really." She couldn't think of a better way to spend her evening.
Josh looked up at her, a full dimpled grin on his face. "Okay."
"Let's get moving," Donna stood. The zoo is only open for 2 more hours and she's going to want to see the panda bears. You know there's always a line."
Three hours later as Josh walked down the streets next to Donna, who was holding a very happy Audrey after a trip to the zoo and dinner, he promised himself he'd take more evenings off. This, he thought, was his happy place.
OoOoOoO
"You changed." It tumbled out of his mouth as soon as he saw her. It was a knee jerk reaction.
She glanced down at herself, clad in a pair of flannel pajama shorts and an oversized sweatshirt she'd pilfered from his dresser, and then slowly turned to look at him, a curious expression on her face.
"Yes. I did." She was making enchiladas for dinner with Audrey and didn't want to ruin her work clothes. They had a stack things to do for Leo, who was wound as tightly as Toby lately.
"But the sweater looked nice."
She raised an eyebrow at him.
"Not that you don't look nice now," he fumbled, already mentally kicking himself. "You do. You look nice. But it's a different kind of... nice."
"I see..." she stood up and leaned against the counter top, crossing her arms and just waiting for him to continue his rambling.
"I mean, I liked the purple sweater. That's all. Well, okay, not just the sweater. But the way you wore the sweater, I suppose. No. Wait. What I mean is-" Josh's face flushed red.
"Josh?"
"Yes." It came out an octave higher than normal.
"Stop talking."
He nodded his head vigorously in agreement. "Probably for the best," he muttered. She smiled at him. "And thank you," she added. She was becoming well versed in how to speak the language of Joshua Lyman and she knew how to take his failed attempted at a complement.

OoOoOoO
"Donna! I'm back! Get me on the phone with the majority leader's office... now." Josh started bellowing orders as soon as he zoomed into the bullpen from his meeting at the airport. "Josh." Donna hopped out of her chair and fell into step with him. "Also pull the justice department's expenditures for the last five years."
"Josh, I - Donna tried to interrupt him, fidgeting a bit as she matched his stride. "And then grab any statistics we have on tobacco use in teens."
She scribbled a quick note.

He rounded the corner into his office, mid yell. He was intending to tell her to have Larry pull a report on the Senators who taken contributions from big tobacco but his words died on his tongue as he practically screeched to a halt, Donna fumbling into him from behind at the unexpected stop. "Hi, Daddy!" Audrey looked up from where she was coloring in Josh's visitor chair. "Hi," he walked over and examined her closely, reflexively putting his hand to her forehead to check her temperature. "What are you doing here?" He asked, smoothing her curls as she went back to what she was doing.
"Coloring," Audrey thought it was obvious.
That got a chuckle out of an otherwise stressed Josh. "And why are you coloring in Daddy's office instead of at school?"
Audrey looked up at him and shrugged her shoulders. She had no idea but wasn't at all upset by the change in scenery.
Josh glanced over to Donna for an answer. "I picked her up," Donna tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear and shifted nervously. "I hope that's okay."
"Of course it is," he responded immediately. "But... why?"
Donna shot him a look, trying to explain that she didn't want to spell it all out. "Because of... you know... the thing."
"What thing?"
Donna gave him another exasperated look. "The thing... From the memo."
"Huh?" A look of understanding suddenly crossed his face. "Oh. The satellite?! Donna," he sighed. "Close the door."
She did so, standing with her back nervously against it. He hadn't been himself all week. There was something bothering him. Something he couldn't talk to her about. "I'm sorry," she blurted out, wondering if she'd overstepped. "It's just- I thought that if something happened she'd be safer here. With us."
"Come here," Josh motioned Donna over towards him and wrapped her up. "I'm not mad. You know that right? But Donna the sky isn't falling," he smirked. "We get that fax once a week. Debris fall out of the sky all the time. They've never hit anything."
Donna blushed, feeling slightly embarrassed at her overreaction. "Oh. I just thought..."
"I know," he gave her an extra squeeze. "And you protected her. Thank you. It's one of the many reasons you amaze me," he kissed her temple. "But the sky isn't falling and it probably wouldn't go over too well if the whole country found out we hide Audrey in my office at the first sign of disaster."
Donna shrugged. "Some things are more important than bad press," she ventured a look at him. "Yeah," he met her gaze. He'd been coming to that realization himself.

OoOoOoO
Donna tried, unsuccessfully, to suppress a yawn. "Ready to call it a night?" Josh smirked, finding her absolutely adorable. "Only if you're done," she answered.
Truth be told, he'd had at least two more hours of things to do. But she was exhausted and he
probably needed some sleep before his morning meetings.
"Let's go," he announced, grabbing only the bare minimum he'd need to be home for a few hours, and clicking off the lamp on his desk.
She stood in his doorway waiting for him, reaching into her purse and checking the clock.
"Late for something," he quipped.
"Just calculating how long I'll have to wait for the train," she yawned, not thinking before she spoke. She was exhausted.
He immediately went into over reaction mode, his eyebrows shooting up as his blood pressure skyrocketed at the thought of her taking the metro and walking the rest of the way home at this hour. "You don't take the Metro after 11! Donna! If you don't have your car and we are working this late, either I give you a ride home or you take a cab!"
She looked away embarrassed, and all of a sudden something clicked. He hadn't seen her ugly old car in months. And Audrey had mentioned riding the train last week.
"Donna," he advanced on her slowly, taking her arm ever so gently before she could scoot away, "where's your car?"
She wasn't making eye contact, which was intensifying the feeling in his gut.
"Donna?"
"I sold it."
"When did you sell it?"
"A few months ago."
"WHEN?" He can't help but raise his voice. She was obfuscating and he wanted answers.
"August."
"Why?"
"I needed the money."
His heart plummeted to his stomach. He knew the answer to the next question, but he's enough of a masochist to needed to her the answer from her own lips.
"Why did you need the money?"
He tilts her chin up, making her look him in the eye. Hers are bright with unshed tears."I had to take unpaid leave. I sold the car so I cover rent."
Josh pulled her into his arms, crushing her to his chest. Was there anything she wouldn't do for him? Would he ever stop needing her? And HOW THE HELL COULD LEO LET THIS HAPPEN?! OoOoOoO
"Sagittarius." She wasn't sure how else to tell him that she knew.
The look on his face, however, wasn't what she'd anticipated. His concern for her, however, was evident in his response. Just as it was in practically everything he did.
Donna assured him that she was fine. But just as Toby has warned her, there was no time to sit down and talk it over.
"So, 9:00," she reiterated. "In the residence. Senior staff."
He nodded his head.
"I'll grab you some dinner. You're not eating or sleeping enough," she slipped it in just so she was sure he knew he wasn't getting away with anything. "And then you can head over to meet with Leo for a moment- he needs you at 8:15. And then you'll be in the residence most of the night. I'll head to your place and stay with Audrey so your mother can get some rest."
He continued to study her face for a moment, before nodding his consent to her plan. He felt some of the weight come off of his shoulders as soon as she'd spoken the code word to him. She had the ability to keep him grounded.
She'd finished everything he'd need for the meeting that evening and handed him a to go container of grilled chicken and vegetables for dinner before heading to his place for the night.
She'd sent Edith on her way and read Audrey a story before putting her to bed. Donna had only been sitting on the couch for a minute when she heard the front door unlock.
"Josh?" She was surprised to say the least.
He let out a deep sigh. "Hi."
"What are you doing home? I thought you had a 9:00 with the President." She glanced at the clock as she spoke. It was only 9:03. He sat his backpack down and made his way over to her, motioning for her to sit back down on the couch. Josh perched on the coffee table across from her and took her hands, slowly explaining to her what had happened to Mrs. Landingham that evening. "Come here," he told her, moving to the spot next to her on the couch in one swift motion and opening his arms to her. She buried her face his chest and cried, Josh gently stroking her hair and whispering reassurances to her. He knew she'd had a rough day and he wanted nothing more in the world than to be able to comfort her. The loss of Mrs. Landingham hurt them all, but Donna especially had formed a close relationship with the President's secretary. Once Donna's initial tears had slowed, Josh tipped her chin up to look at her face. Her red rimmed eyes made something catch in his own throat. "I should go," she sniffed, feeling slightly self conscious under his intense scrutiny. Josh simply shook his head. "You're upset. Stay here. You can take a bath in my tub and then go right to sleep." She bit her lip, not sure how to interpret his offer but hesitated for only a moment before nodding her head in agreement. "Come on," he stood, placing his palm on the small of her back to lead her down the hallway. "I think I still have some of those fizzy bath products you bought under my sink." He wasn't always sure what to do, especially recently, but Josh knew if he could take care of Donna even half as well as she took care of him, well, that was a start. OoOoOoO "You two take that one," Sam nodded towards the large couch on the far wall. "It folds out." They'd been practically living at the White House for the last week. It was the middle of the night and Toby and CJ had retired to their respective offices to try or a few hours of sleep. Neither Josh nor Donna hesitated to make themselves comfortable on the pull out couch. Sam flipped the light switch off and passed out on the smaller couch while Donna quickly dozed off herself. In the dark stillness of the room Josh pulled her a little closer and tucked the blanket in tightly around her. Worked up and unable to fall immediately to sleep himself, he calmed himself by watching her lay peacefully next to him. All he'd wanted in his life was a career. He'd put everything else on the backburner through college and his 20's, sacrificing to get himself to where he was now. But lately Josh was having a hard time remembering why. He loved what he did, that was certain. And his loyalty to the President and Leo was practically unmatched. But Audrey and Donna had made their unexpected entrances into his life and now, in the still of the night with Donna curled into his side, Josh wondered if perhaps there was life outside the White House. If he was in the same position five years ago he would have been devastated at the thought of the President not seeking re-election. And though he knew that the current administration still had a lot to accomplish in office, a part of Josh knew he'd ultimately be okay with whatever answer the President would provide. And though he'd love the chance to help govern for another term, he couldn't help but to wonder how his own life would change if Donna didn't work for him. If nothing was holding him back. Josh softly kissed her forehead and shifted slightly on the pull out couch, vowing to get a little bit of rest. Aligning his breathing to Donna's, his heartbeat and anxiety both lowered and soon he too was drifting off. OoOoOoO "Donna?" "Yes?" "Is that a macaroni necklace?"
"Yes..."
"And you're wearing it here, to work in the White House."
She stuck her bottom lip out in a pout. "Audrey made it for me."
"Well I assumed that much," he continued. "But I was just surprised you were wearing it to work."
"I'm proud of it," she sat up taller. She'd intended to take it off that morning but she'd forgotten to remove it when she arrived at the office and the day had gotten away from her. "And you're one to talk, Mr. Deputy with the painted Mug." She glanced at the coffee cup in Josh's hand, painted in wild brush strokes and bright colors by Audrey herself.
"Hey, this is art," he defended. "It's abstract! I think it's a commentary on the human experience," he smirked.
Donna rolled her eyes and stood. "Let's go."
"So... You're really wearing the necklace?"
"Yes!" She was going to take it off as soon as they left the bullpen for the motorcade. But she wasn't going to admit that to him.
She turned to look at him, intending to shoot him a glare but was instead met with a full dimpled grin.
She followed him into his office where he grabbed his wallet out of his backpack and a folder from his desk. There was no need to carry along all of his belongings in the motorcade.
The President had made his decision, and the interview was airing as they spoke. And now Josh would stand by him for whatever this press conference would bring.
Donna leaned in the doorway and watched him move about, as she'd done so many times over the last years. This man, intelligent and driven, was in political operative mode. But no matter the mask he wore she knew he was going to take that night's events personally.
She stepped forward, meeting him in the center of the room and placed her hand gently on his lapel.
"No matter what happens tonight, I just want you to remember, Joshua Lyman, that you've done a lot of good for the world. And I'm proud of you." She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek softly. And before he knew what to say she was back in professional mode, standing in the door to the bullpen waiting, ready to follow him into battle.
Chapter 19

"You've got books for the airplane? And snacks?"

"Yes, Josh."

"What about a jacket in case she gets cold?"

"Yes, Josh."

"And Walter?"

"Josh." Donna reached out and placed a calming hand on his arm. "She has everything. You were there when we packed."

"I know," he looked a little sheepish. "I just-"

Donna caught his gaze. "If you're having second thoughts about this it's not too late to change your mind," she told him.

"No," he assured her. "I want you guys to go and have fun. You need to see your family, too."

She wasn't completely convinced. "Joshua," she smoothed his lapel. "There's a lot going on right now...."

"I'll be fine," he told her in a voice that was meant to reassure both of them.

"Oh yeah?" She teased, a playful smile tugging at her lips.

"Well... probably not," he admitted. "And I'm definitely going to miss you."

She felt her face flush slightly, trying to remember that they were currently in a very public place.

"But," he continued, placing a hand lightly on top of Audrey's head, "as much as I hate the thought of you guys being away for four days I still think you need the time with your family."

"You could always join us, you know," she offered playfully. She'd extended the offer to Josh when she'd initially asked him about brining Audrey, but it just wasn't in the cards. There was so much going on at the White House she could hardly believe that she was able to get away.

Josh just chuckled. "Somehow I don't see my ideal vacation being the Moss Family Reunion."

"Awww... come on," she bantered back. "A weekend completely away from the news cycle, in the middle of the forest surrounded by a hoard of republicans. What's not to love?"

Josh grinned wildly at the playfulness of their conversation. But before he was able to toss back a witty retort he heard the announcement for their flight to board.

"That's us," she told him.

He took a deep breath and crouched down to eye level with Audrey. "You're going to have so much fun, Shortcake," he smiled at her. "Be good and listen to Donna, okay?"

Audrey listened intently, reaching for Donna's hand to clutch it tightly, signifying that she
understood. Josh reached out and tucked one of her shoulder length loose auburn curls behind her ear. "You can call me any time, and I'll see you in a couple of days, alright?"

Audrey nodded her understanding, tilting her head to rest it against Donna's leg. "Love you," she told him.

He opened his arms to her and she let go of Donna, giving him a big hug goodbye before resuming her prior position.

Josh stood once again to face Donna. "That goes for you too," he smiled. "Have fun and be safe." He hated the thought of the two most important people in his traveling so far away from him. He reached in and gave her a hug too, allowing himself only a quick moment of indulgence in the airport.

"You can call us anytime, too," she whispered, giving him an extra squeeze before letting go.

Their flight information was announced again and they waived goodbye, making their way towards the gate.

"Have fun," he called. "I miss you already," he whispered, though no one heard him.

OoOoOoO

Donna and Audrey landed in Madison Wednesday afternoon, meeting her parents, Rick and Meredith, at the gate and chatting all the way to their condo. They were all leaving for the cabins in the Upper Peninsula the next afternoon, but since Donna was in town the family that lived close by was headed over for pizza. Donna hoped it would be a good way to ease Audrey into her big Italian family. She knew it would be a stark contrast from holidays with Josh and Edith.

Audrey was briefly enthralled with the family photos hanging on the walls of Rick and Meredith's condo, showing Donna at various stages of childhood.

"You look funny, Donna," Audrey giggled, looking at a photo of Donna at an 8th grade dance, blue eye shadow and big, crimped hair. "You were a little baby!" she exclaimed and grinned when Donna pointed herself out as an infant in a hospital photo.

"Who's that?" Audrey asked curiously, pointing at another photo.

"That's Leslie," Donna explained. "She's my sister. And that's her husband Curt and their kids Preston, Paul and Paige," Donna pointed each of them out as Audrey stared at the picture. "They're coming over for dinner tonight. They're quite a bit older than you are though." Donna continued moving down the hallway covered with photos. "And that's my brother Mark," she pointed out. "And that's his wife Jenny and their kids Maddie and Tyler. You'll have lots of fun playing with them, they're closer to your age."

"What about Uncle Chris?" Audrey had met Donna's middle brother that winter when he'd become stranded in DC on a layover.

"Uncle Chris will be here tomorrow," Donna assured her. "And who's that?" Donna asked Audrey, pointing to another framed photo and wondering if she'd know.

Audrey's blank expression looked closely at the photo of the Bartlet for America campaign, Donna proudly propping up a curly haired infant in socks and a onesie. The smile slowly grew on Audrey's face with realization. "That's me!" She pointed at the photo. "And Daddy and Donna!"
After familiarizing herself with the condo, Audrey quickly took to Donna's father, already well acquainted with Donna's mother from her semi frequent visits to DC.

The four of them made their way down to the play area for Audrey to burn off some energy before dinner. They'd only been playing for a few minutes when Donna's sister arrived with her three children. The large SUV pulled into a parking spot and three identical children hopped out and two of them ran over to the playground, shouting their hellos in passing as they made their way to the swings.

"Mom said she'll be back later to pick us up," Preston stated as he made his way over to where his grandparents were seated and slouched down on a park bench. "She has a nail appointment."

Donna raised her eyebrows. She hadn't seen her sister in over two years, and she didn't even bother to get out of the car and say hello. "That's about right," Donna muttered at a volume no one else could hear.

Donna, who was standing next to Audrey as she rocked on a spring horse, greeted her nephew. "Come here and give me a hug," she beamed. Preston did so, somewhat begrudgingly. "You're getting so tall," she gushed. He rolled his eyes and shuffled back over to his seat, putting his headphones in almost immediately.

Donna lead Audrey over to the swing set. "Hi, guys! It's so good to see you," she greeted Paul and Paige, who were already swinging as high as they could. "This is Audrey."

"Hi!" Paige shouted at Audrey. "Aunt Donna did you bring us presents?"

"Audrey brought you something, didn't you Sweet Pea?" Donna deflected, knowing she packed five boxes of M&M's with the Presidential seal on them.

"How did a baby bring us a present?" Paige scrunched up her face as Paul completely ignored the conversation at hand.

"I'm not a baby," Audrey stated so softly it was barely audible.

"I know you're not," Donna whispered back. "You're a big girl."

Donna led Audrey over to the side of the play set, watching closely as she climbed up the equipment and stood at the top of the slide, Donna waiting for her at the bottom. Audrey went up and down several times on her own before Donna suggested some joint activities.

"Paige, why don't you play with Audrey on the teeter-totter," Donna suggested.

Paige didn't hesitate to stop swinging and join Audrey, Donna carefully placing a hand on Audrey's back for added balance. The two went back and forth several times before Paige was bored, shouting, "Come on, Audrey," as she ran towards the small play house.

"Go on," Donna encouraged her, sitting down next to her mother to supervise the girls playing house from afar.

After trying unsuccessfully to catch up with her nephews, Donna turned her attention back to her parents, asking her father about the baseball team he coached at the high school where he taught history. Baseball was a hobby shared by the majority of the members of the Moss family. Donna played softball through high school and her brothers were both all state in baseball, Chris going on to play college ball at UW and work in marketing for the Brewers.
"Josh can't wait to get her started in tball," Donna nodded towards Audrey.

"Next year will be about the right age," Rick offered. "But I bet we'll have her raring to go by the end of the weekend," he shared a grin with Donna. The Moss family reunion softball game was a legend in its own right.

"Let's head back up to the condo," Meredith suggested watching the playhouse intently. "Paige has the tendency to be a little bit on the demanding side and I think she's taking control with Audrey. Besides, Mark and the kids will be here any minute with the pizzas."

The three stood, Preston and Paul trailing behind, as Donna and Meredith collected Audrey and Paige. Paige threw a small fit, not ready to wrap up her playtime but finally relenting.

"Fine," she stamped her foot. "Audrey, come on. We'll play school when we get up there. But I'M the teacher though. And you have to do whatever I say."

"Paige!" Meredith was exasperated. "Don't be so bossy."

"But Grandma!" Paige protested. "Those toys are mine!"

"They're not," Meredith didn't seem surprised by this behavior and Donna wondered if it was more common than she knew. "They're for all of you kids."

"But Audrey's not even really in our family!" Paige crossed her arms in a huff. "She's a Lyman! My Dad said her Dad is the Lie-Man."

"Paige!" Meredith was mortified.

Donna felt a literal pain in her heart at the words. Audrey stared innocently at Paige.

"Well! She's not!" Paige continued defiantly. "My Mom said! She's not Donna's!"

"That's enough!" Rick's commanding voice boomed through the small fit, stopping any coming words on Paige's tongue.

Audrey turned to look at Donna, big, wondering eyes filling with tears.

Donna scooped her up and held her close, placing a kiss on her hair.

"We're all family here," Rick stated, leaving no room for protest. "Every single one of us. Audrey included. And that's the end of the conversation. Understood?"

"Yes," Paige mumbled.

"Ok. Let's all head back to the condo and get ready for dinner," Rick lead the three kids on their way, leaving Meredith to hang back for a moment with Donna and Audrey. Though they may not have fully understood the complexities of their youngest daughter's relationship with her boss, it was clear to both of them that whatever Donna, Josh and Audrey's dynamic, it made them all happy. And after several torturous years of watching their child with Dr. Freeride, they weren't about to question it when Donna had clearly found an unconventional family that made her happy, healthy and successful.

"We'll be up in a minute," Donna waived her mother. "Thanks though."

Meredith gave Audrey a kiss on the cheek, resting her hand on the little girl's back before doing the same to Donna. "Take your time."
Donna sat down with Audrey on a bench along the walkway and pulled her close. "Audrey Joan, do you know how much I love you?"

"Yes," Audrey replied.

Donna smirked a bit. "You do? Because it's an awful lot," she told her in a cheerful tone. "And no matter what anyone ever says to you I want you to know I'll love you the same even if we have different last names, okay? None of that matters. Some kids have a Daddy and a Mommy…"

"…and I have a Daddy and a Donna and a Bubbe and Papa Leo and Uncle Sam and Uncle Toby and Aunt CJ," Audrey supplied. She'd heard the list a million times before.

"That's right," Donna confirmed, giving her a gentle squeeze. The two sat in silence for just a beat.

"Am I, Donna?" Audrey asked timidly.

"Are you what, Sweet Pea?"

"Your family?" Audrey looked up at Donna, somewhat distraught.

Donna found herself a little choked up as well. "Yes, Sweet Pea. You're still my family. You may not have grown inside my tummy but that doesn't matter. I still love you more than I ever thought possible."

"Daddy too?" Audrey asked innocently.

Donna relented for a fleeting moment, giving a soft smile. "Daddy, too," she confirmed.

And though Donna knew that Audrey's questions would become more frequent and more detailed as she aged, she was pleased that her answered seemed to suffice for the time being as she walked Audrey up to the condo for dinner. She'd sit Josh down whey they got home and they'd figure this out together. But before that, Donnatella Moss was going to give her sister a piece of her mind.

OoOoOoO

"I thought we were going shopping with my Grammy Moss," Audrey half whined as she lagged behind Donna, shuffling her feet as Donna held her hand and led her across the parking lot and into a Starbucks.

"We are, Sweet Pea. But we're on vacation so I'm going to buy myself a latte first."

They entered the coffee shop, Donna sliding her sunglasses to the top of her head and cherishing the fact that she wasn't in a rush.

Donna placed her order, adding a small milk for Audrey.

"And a cookie?" Audrey looked cautiously optimistic.

"No cookie. It's 9 in the morning, Audrey."

Audrey grumbled a bit, twisting the toe of her shoe, a sure sign that she was disappointed.

"Donna? Donna Moss?"
Donna turned at the sound of her name. "Mark Fuller!" She gave the man a warm greeting as he moved closer to her, giving her a hug hello.

"It's been what... ten years?"

Donna nodded in agreement. "At least that long. How are you?" She was honestly glad to run into an old friend.

"I'm great. How about you? You look fantastic." Mark casually lead them over to a set of chairs and took a seat as he caught Donna up on his successful dental practice and charity work in the community, mentioning several times that he wasn't seeing anyone.

Donna's name was called by the barista, and as soon as she stood to retrieve her order her cell phone rang. She dug around in her purse for a moment, glancing at the screen before handing it to Audrey.

"It's for you," Donna gave her a little smile, heading to the counter to grab their drinks.

"Daddy?" The little girls face lit up as she flipped the phone open.

Mark paid no attention to Audrey, instead focused on the way Donna looked in a small pair of shorts.

Donna made her way back, placing the straw into Audrey's box of milk and peeling her banana, taking the first bite before sitting the rest on a napkin. She could hear Audrey recalling every detail of their morning on the phone call, so she turned her attention back to Mark.

"Hey, do you ever see Megan Miller anymore? Doesn't she live here?"

"She married my brother, actually," Mark responded.

Donna continued some polite banter before her sixth sense kicked in and she tuned back into Audrey's conversation with Josh.

"...and we're going shopping with Grammy Moss later but right now we're at Starbucks. Donna wouldn't let me have a cookie for breakfast. But we're having a banana and she's talking to somebody."

There was a brief moment of silence as Audrey listened closely and considered whatever Josh was asking her. She turned her gaze to Mark and stared at him before responding to Josh. "I don't know his name, Daddy. He's one of Donna's Gomers."

"Audrey!" Donna couldn't believe it. She held her hand out and Audrey gave her the phone.

"Joshua, I will deal with you later," she said tersely into the speaker before flipping the phone closed. "Audrey, that is not nice! What has gotten into you?"

Audrey looked properly chastised, and somehow unaware that she'd made a faux pas. "I'm sorry," she whispered, the timid side of her coming out in full force as she slid out of her seat and walked over to Donna, who didn't waste any time pulling Audrey onto her lap. "Donna? I'm sorry," she repeated.

Donna nodded her understanding. "I know you are."

It was only a brief moment before Donna's cell phone rang again, Josh's caller ID on the screen. Donna silenced the call, intending to return it as soon as they were back in the car.
"Well, I've gotta head out," Mark stated. "Good to see you, Donna. And nice to meet you...."

"Audrey." Donna supplied.

"Audrey." Mark repeated. Donna could tell he was about to ask her to dinner. "I run into your brother from time to time. I didn't realize they'd had another," he spoke directly to Donna, referring to Audrey.

Donna's phone let out another screech from Josh. She glanced at it and bumped it to silent again. "Oh. No, they didn't. She's not my niece."

Donna's phone buzzed again and she handed it to Audrey who began to open it to say hello to Josh, who was currently losing his mind at the thought of Donna talking to a Wisconsin gomer instead of taking his call.

"She's... yours?"

Donna saw Audrey stop what she was doing and turn attentively to wait for her response from their earlier conversation, her big brown eyes giving her the same lost puppy expression that her father let slip on occasion.

"Yeah," Donna answered with a smile. "She's mine."

XxXxXxX

A/N: Wisconsin Pt. 2 to follow shortly!
"Almost done," Donna assured Audrey as she rubbed the sunscreen on her face.

"Where are we going?" Audrey squirmed a bit, looking around their room inside the cabin.

"We're going to pick blackberries," Donna reminded her.

"Why?"

"Because they're yummy," Donna smiled at Audrey's curiosity.

"Why don't we buy them from the store?"

Sometimes Donna forgot how vastly different her childhood was from Audrey's. "Well," she tried to explain, "because they're wild so they taste better. And this will be fun," she assured her.

And an hour later Audrey was having the time of her life, giggling and running around with Donna's nieces and nephews while the Moss family picked blackberries.

Donna watched Audrey zoom around playing tag with Maddie the older kids, stopping to pick a few berries and put them in her little bucket every few minutes. At the end of the morning everyone was exhausted and happy. And though Audrey's bucket only contained a small handful of berries, the little girl's purple stained face and fingers were proof enough that she'd enjoyed her morning.

The rest of the day was a whirlwind. They swam in the lake in the heat of the afternoon all of the uncles treated the kids to a popsicle on the dock. It was laughter and smiles all around.

After dinner everyone gathered by the water once again for the fishing tournament. Prizes went to the biggest fish, most fish caught and first fish caught.

It was only a few moments before Audrey yelled for Donna after she saw her bobber dip into the water. She'd won the first fish award on the little pink pole that Donna bought her the day before. Chris helped her reel it in and held the small sunfish up for her to see. Audrey made a disgusted face and pulled her hands away, retreating as much as she could into her life jacket.

Donna chuckled, knowing exactly where she developed her squeamish habits, and snapped a photo. Josh was going to get a kick out of this.

OoOoOoO

"Uncle Chris, I'm hungry."

"Good Morning, Kiddo," Chris greeted Audrey with a smile and pulled a tall chair to the counter where he was standing, lifting Audrey up so she could see what was going on. "We're making pancakes for breakfast."

"You are?" Audrey perked right up.

"Sure am," Chris smiled in confirmation. "Do you like pancakes?"

Audrey nodded enthusiastically. "I love pancakes. Donna makes them for me. That's how she got her secret name."
“Her secret name?” Chris furrowed his brow in confusion.

“Uh huh,” Audrey swung her feet gently and looked around the room, carrying on what she thought was a casual conversation. “From when my Daddy hurt his heart.”

Chris softened at the mention of the previous summer. He remembered vividly the conversations he’d had with Donna when she was clearly on the brink of falling apart at the sheer thought of what had happened to Josh. It had been his first real insight to the true nature of his little sister’s complex dynamic with her boss. He was extremely close with Donna and could easily tell that she had something special with Josh. And although he’d only met the man in question twice, he could clearly see that Donna’s feelings were anything but unrequited.

“Where is Donnatella?” Chris asked, scanning the area.

“Talking to Grammy Moss,” Audrey supplied with a giggle.

“What so funny?”
“Only Daddy calls her Donnatella!”

Chris smirked at the little girl’s reaction. “Okay,” he laughed, knowing that was true, “Then can I call her Pancake?”

“Nooo,” Audrey giggled. “Only my friends call her that.”

"Oh and I'm not your friend?"

She wrinkled her nose adorably. Chris swore she learned that particular facial expression from Donna. "You're my Uncle Chris! Only my friends that talk into their wrists call her Pancake.”

She put her little wrist to her mouth and imitated the Secret Service agent’s she’d become accustomed to during the previous summer. "Pitbull, Polliwog and Pancake are in for the night."

Chris laughed out loud. "Is your Daddy called Pitbull?"

"Yes."

"And who is Polliwog?” He teased, already knowing the answer to his question.

“I am! You’re silly Uncle Chris.”

“All names that start with a P,” Chris mumbled out loud. He knew a bit about the Secret Service and was mulling this information over in his mind.

“We have the same letter,” Audrey commented, “because we’re a family.”

Chris couldn’t help but smile. “Yes you are,” he agreed. “And don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

He helped her down from the stool and took her little hand. “Now, let’s see if we can find some chocolate chips to sneak into these pancakes.”

OoOoOoOo

"Okay, Audrey,” Donna bent down to her eye level. "You're up to bat."

They were dressed in matching Moss Family Reunion shirts with their names on the back taking part in the annual baseball game. Donna tightened the laces on Audrey's shoes as Audrey pushed a loose
curl from her face.

Rick grabbed a plastic bat and ball and walked in closer to Audrey as Meredith readied her camera. Playing in their first family game had been a rite of passage for all of her grandchildren and Audrey was no different.

"Okay, Sweet Pea. Grandpa is going to throw the ball. Swing the bat just like we practiced and if you get a hit, run to Uncle Chris." Donna pointed to her brother, who was playing first base, and helped Audrey position and hold the plastic bat.

Audrey concentrated as Rick gently tossed the ball. She swung with all she had and hit the ball. It was a standing rule in the game that if one of the kids got a hit on their first at bat, it was an automatic home run.

"Donna!" She hopped up and down, "Donna, I did it!"

Donna beamed at her. "Run to Uncle Chris!" She pointed towards first base.

Audrey dropped the bat and took off running as fast as her little legs would carry her.

Chris, who was cheering wildly at first base, crouched down to give her a high five and then sent her on to Donna's cousin Scott at 2nd base. Audrey was beaming as she rounded third to Mark's cheers and she kept going as she practically leaped into Donna's arms at home plate.

"Home run!" Donna shouted as Meredith snapped photos right and left. "You did it!"

"All by myself!" Audrey added proudly.

Donna and Audrey made their way back to the lawn chairs and blankets that housed the rest of the extended family as the next batter came to the plate.

"I wish Daddy could be here," Audrey stated after a few sips of lemonade. "Daddy likes baseball."

"He will be so proud of you," Donna smiled.

"Well, maybe he can join us next year," Meredith piped in with a knowing grin.

"Yeah," Rick added with a smirk from several yards away. "Tell Josh he's not getting out of this again. I need a third baseman!"

Leslie rolled her eyes, unable to believe that even her parents were encouraging Donna's ridiculous crush on her boss.

OoOoOoO

Donna sat on the porch swing outside the cabin where Audrey was napping. The chain links made a squeaking sound as she rocked back and forth.

"Hey," Leslie made her way up the three stairs and paused hesitantly a few feet away from Donna. "Is she okay?"

Donna nodded her head. "It's only a scraped knee," she stated flatly. "She was just over tired. She's napping now."

Leslie nodded her head in understanding. "I snagged a couple of drinks from Aunt Linda's stash," she offered her a bottle.
Leslie made her way over to the swing and sat down, taking a sip. The silence between the sisters was stifling.

"Look, Donna, I'm sorry."

"For what?" Donna's voice was cold. She knew what Leslie was referring to but she wasn't going to accept that kind of apology yet again. Leslie had been getting away with insincere lines like that one for decades.

"For, you know," Leslie struggled, "For upsetting Audrey. It was never my intention for Paige to hear or repeat any of that. I really felt bad when Dad told me what happened."

Donna rolled her eyes. "So you're sorry for upsetting Audrey. But not for actually thinking all of those things about her. And about me."

Leslie let out an exasperated sigh. "This is not why I came over here," she admitted with an edge of distress in her voice. "We've never been able to talk to each other, Donna. And so far that hasn't been any different as adults. But I was hoping we could work on that."

Donna glanced over at Leslie, still somewhat skeptical but willing to hear her out.

"You always do this."

"Do what?" Donna was automatically on the defense.

"You get a crush on someone totally inappropriate and then they take advantage of you. You supported what's-his-face all through his residency and he dumped you. And here you are, babysitting your bosses' daughter on a holiday weekend."

"Don't EVER suggest that Josh is taking advantage of me when it comes to Audrey. It was my idea to bring her to our family reunion because I love that little girl like she's my own. And that's never going to change. No matter what happens between me and Josh." Donna's tone left no room for argument. She'd take a lot of flack from her family- she was pretty good at it by now. But she wasn't going to stand by while Leslie spoke out of turn about Audrey and Josh.

The two glared at each other for a moment, Donna's jaw set in determination.

"I came over here to apologize," Leslie started again, considerably Less flustered this time, "for my preconceived notions about you and Audrey. You're really good with her, Donna. And anyone with eyes can see that she thinks you hung the moon."

"Thank you," Donna relaxed a bit, some of the tension seeping out of her muscles.

"And I know you love her too."

"I do. More than anything." Donna smiled softly and leaned back against the railing on the porch. She was willing to listen to try and mend fences with Leslie in a civil manner.

The two embraced the silence for a moment, staring off at the horizon.

"I worry about you." It was a simple statement, but it was the last thing Donna was expecting to hear.

"Why?"

"Because! You're a thousand miles away in a dangerous city. From what Mom says work nonstop
and it seems like you have no time for a social life. Donna, your boss was shot because he happened to be standing in the wrong place! Of course I worry! We may not be that close but God, Donna, I still love you."

Donna closed her eyes, swallowing hard at the causal mention of Rosslyn.

"I love my life in DC," she managed to choke out, checking her emotions. "I'm happy there. I do work a lot, but it's a normal part of the job. It's the most important work I'll ever do. As for the city, honestly, I work in the most secure building in the nation and when I travel for work I'm surrounded by secret service. You can't stop living your life out of fear. And as for my social life, well, I may work a lot but you really have no idea, Leslie. My best friends are some of the most important people in the federal government. And they've become family. I may not have time to meet up with the girls from high school every week for manicures and a glass of wine but I do have lunch with CJ Cregg every Wednesday."

"But Donna, it could end at any moment. You could be unemployed in a year and then where are you? Single and without a job in DC with a stain on your record from working for an administration that lied to the voters? Don't you want a husband? Some stability? A family?"

"I'm not even going to get into it with you about the MS, Leslie. But the President is a good man and I'd be honored to vote for him for a second term. And god forbid he lose the election, Josh is still a major player in the party. He gets job offers every week. We'd be fine."

"We?" Leslie shot her a questioning glance. "Is there something else going on there? Oh, God, Donna. Are you sleeping with your boss?"

"No!" Donna was enraged. "He's my best friend, Leslie. There's nothing inappropriate going on. I just- I know I can trust him. He won't just leave me in a lurch. That's all."

"And you've had this conversation? That he'll hire you as an assistant at his next job?" She looked skeptical.

Truth be told, they haven't. Donna hadn't really slowed down to think through the logistics of any of this but there was clearly no explaining the complexities of her life in DC or her relationship with Josh, so she squared her shoulders and blurred the truth.

"Yes. We have."

"And you're just going to follow him around for the rest of your life hoping something will eventually happen between you two?"

Whether she knew it or not, she'd struck a nerve. And Donna had a pretty good idea that her sister was aware that she was wading into dangerous waters.

"Where are you going?" Leslie was clearly not done with this conversation and wasn’t pleased when Donna stood.

"To check on Audrey and lay down," Donna stated through clenched teeth, turning to walk into the cabin.

"You've known him for four years, Donna. What kind of guy doesn't make a move in that amount of time? If he was really interested he would have pulled the trigger by now."

She flinched at Leslie's choice of idiom, stilling her stride and turning slightly to defend Josh. "But what you don't understand about Josh is-"
"Donna." Leslie looked at her intensely. "You're my sister. And I know we don't see eye to eye on things very often. But I'm trying to look out for you here. You're young and pretty. You can't wait forever for something that may never happen. You need to find someone who isn't afraid to kiss you goodnight. You deserve that."

OoOoOoO

Audrey, exhausted from all the fun, slept practically the entire way on the flight back to DC.

Donna, however, was restless. Her confrontation with Leslie the prior day played over in her head. As content as she felt with her place in Josh & Audrey's lives, she had considered the fact that it could all change at any time.

Maybe Leslie was right- maybe she should date more. She should find someone who cared for her and wasn't afraid to show it. She should think about starting her own family. After all, what if Josh met someone? What if he was married and Audrey had a new step mother? Where would that leave her?

As the aircraft taxied to a stop Donna gathered their belongings and picked up a still dozing Audrey. Stepping off the jetway her eyes immediately found Josh, deep in conversation on his cell phone in the waiting area, pacing back and forth in his rumpled suit. She paused briefly, shifting Audrey’s weight on her hip.

Josh saw her from the corner of his eye, quickly ending the call and walking swiftly towards them, a full dimpled grin on his face.

“Hey,” he stated softly, wrapping them both in a hug and placing his hand gently Audrey’s back. “There’s my girls. I missed you guys.”

Josh took Audrey from Donna, placing his hand on the small of her back and leading her out of the airport. He buckled a sleepy Audrey into her carseat and kissed her forehead before loading the suitcases into the trunk. Sliding into the drivers seat he turned his focus to Donna, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and giving her a shy smile. “I’m glad you’re home,” he admitted. “Four days felt like an eternity.”
“Were you here all night?” Josh glanced around the storage room, which was now in complete disarray, as Donna fluttered around in the mayhem.

“What time is it?” She took the coffee he was holding and took a large drink of it before handing it back to him without preamble.

“It’s 7:30. I already dropped Audrey off at school.”

She stopped dead in her tracks. “You didn’t let her wear that princes dress and rainbows again, did you?”

“No,” Josh looked away.

“Joshua! Do not mess with me this morning,” she stated somewhat spastically, pointing her finger at him.

“It was one time, Donna! She wanted to wear the dress. And it was raining. It’s not that bad.”

“This is why I’m in charge of shopping,” she muttered as she opened the top of another box.

“She’s in that outfit you bought her last month. The stirrup pants and that sweater with the hearts on it.”

“Shoes?”

“Pink tennies,” he said with all the confidence in the world. Really, he’d just remembered what Donna had put together the last time Audrey wore the shirt in question. “I’ve got it all under control, Donna.”

“Well that must be nice for you!” she rattled off, sounding perhaps more high strung than he’d ever seen her.

Josh stood idly by as Donna continued on a tirade about how he’d sucked her into a life of crime, mildly amused at her rambling, before stepping into the corridor.

“This is the woman I’m raising my child with,” he shook his head and muttered with a smile as he entered the hallway, almost bumping into Sam.

“Donna’s like, two, three days away from unspooling. It’s kinda funny to watch but I’ve got to make sure she gets some sleep before she hurts herself.”

“She's in a file room! How on earth is she going to get hurt?”

“I dunno, but it's Donna. It could happen. Audrey unspooled this morning over her lunch box being lost. There were tears, accusations, and one of us needed a time out.”

“Which one?”

Josh’s eyebrows shot up. “I’m, uh not going to dignify that with a response. But I finally found the lunchbox and then when that was finally over she tripped going out the door and skinned her knee and the tears started all over again.”
“You've completely lost me,” Sam admitted. “How does this relate to Donna?”

“Audrey came unraveled because she didn't get enough sleep last night and those two are cut from the same cloth. Sleep is important, Sam.”

“Good Morning, Gentlemen,” Ainsley greeted them as she rounded the corner. “Josh, I was looking for Donna. Might you know her location?”

“Store room,” Josh nodded to the doorway. “Prepare yourself, Ainsley. It’s every woman for herself in there.”

OoOoOoO

“This looks great, Josh,” President Bartlet removed his glasses after reading the memo Josh had presented him.

“Thank you, sir.”

“I just have one question,” The President continued.

“And what would that be, Mr. President?”

“What exactly is this supposed to be?” The President smirked and held up his memo, revealing a green and purple scribble drawing on the back, accompanied by a wide variety of princess stickers.

“Oh, God,” Josh moaned, mortified.

“The question is not rhetorical, Josh,” the President persisted, ever amused by the Deputy Chief of Staff’s antics.

Josh gulped. “That, uh, that appears to be a drawing of Donna’s roommate’s cat and some princess stickers… sir.”

President Bartlet looked at the paper once again. “Ah, yes. I see the tail and the ears now.”

Leo glanced at the President’s paper. “Sure. A cat. I can see that.” He then flipped his own memo over. “I think I have a car on mine.”

Josh’s eyebrow’s raised as he leaned over to look at the second piece of Audrey’s art.

“Ahhh,” Josh hesitated, “Actually, I think that’s a butterfly.”

Leo turned the paper upside down and stared at it for a moment before looking up to Josh again. “Well kid, I think it’s safe to say she gets her art skills from you.”

Josh let out a genuine chuckle at that.

“That’s alright,” President Bartlet continued, placing his memo on the Resolute Desk and rounding the corner to his chair. “I heard through the grapevine that she once talked Toby into having a tea party. No easy feat, I’m sure. Not to worry, Josh. She’s learning plenty of other fine traits from you.”

“Thank you, sir,” Josh replied honestly.

“And if you don’t mind,” President Bartlet continued with a smile, “I’ll be keeping the artwork for the fridge in the residence. It was, after all, a gift.”
“You wanted to talk to me about something before.”

Donna glanced at him. He looked so handsome in his tuxedo. Well, she really thought he looked handsome all the time. But she couldn’t think about that right now. She forced a weak smile.

“Yeah...Listen...I was fixed up on a blind date a few nights ago.

She suddenly had his full attention. He leaned against the doorframe next to her desk, his body language barely concealing his sense of unease and anger.

“When?” He was racking his brain, trying to figure out if he’d missed something obvious.

“A few nights ago...” She really didn’t want to get into the specifics of it.

Josh shifted his weight from side to side, looking increasingly uncomfortable as he tried to control himself amidst the rising internal hysteria. This isn’t how this was supposed to go. He was in love with her, didn’t she know that?!

“Ainsley fixed us up. He's a Republican lawyer working for Ways and Means but he was being transferred. And it turns out now... that he's on Government Oversight-“

“You can't see him anymore,” he stated firmly.

“know that.”

“You can’t see him anymore,” he stated again, an edge creeping into his voice.

“I know that.”

“It was just that night?” He asked before he thought it through. He didn’t want the details but he needed to know what had happened- if anything could become of this. In an effort to conceal his feelings and shield himself from hurt, he moved swiftly into political operative mode.

“Yeah,” she began. But she couldn’t lie to him. “No,” she sighed. “We got together the next night again. We shouldn’t have.

Josh couldn’t look at her. He’d lowered his eyes and channeled as much frustration as he could bear into finishing this conversation without making a scene in the bullpen. He fumbled angrily with the top button on his shirt, suddenly finding it hard to breathe. “Yeah.” He bit back everything else he was feeling.

Donna, for her part, was terrified. Terrified that she’d ruined everything. “Look, when we got together the first time...”

Josh finally managed to meet her gaze. Disappointment, betrayal and hurt coursed through his veins, infusing into his voice. How could she? “You just thought he was with Ways and Means who I was battling on the estate tax.”

“I’m sorry...” It wasn’t enough. It wasn’t even the beginning of the regret she felt.

“Did any reporters see you?” He was attempting to wall himself off.
“No.” He’d never walled her off like this. She was struggling to reach him.

“The second night?”

“No.”

Josh stared at her coldly. He’d never looked at her that way before. It almost broke her into pieces. “All right. You can go home.”

She vaguely remembers telling him something work related as her eyes clouded and she watched him walk away, leaving her there. She jumped when he slammed the door to his office, quickly gathering her things as her bottom lip quivered. She had to get out of there.

OoOoOoO

Josh’s mood only deteriorated as he played his conversation with Donna over and over in his mind. He’d left the office not long after he’d sent her home, cutting his meeting as short as possible and stalking home. He’d muttered a few words to his mother before she’d left and quietly checked in on Audrey, who was sleeping soundly, before returning to his brooding.

A date. She’d been on a date and he hadn’t even realized it. And with his political rival, nonetheless! He felt betrayed on so many levels. Josh hadn’t even realized he’d begun pacing, striding back and forth in his bedroom, running his hands aggressively through his hair as the panic rose inside of him. He was jealous, that was fairly obvious, but he redirected his feelings to anger. What kind of a stunt was she trying to pull- going out on a date with some gamer from Ways and Means? And why didn’t she just tell him when she- “Oh, God,” he muttered out loud, his face going completely blank as he slowly sunk to a seated position on the side of his bed. “Oh, God.” It finally hit him. Donna hadn’t come over after the date. Her nighttime ritual of sharing a dessert and life advice with Audrey was his never fail way of knowing she was safe and sound- and gomer-less. But it had failed him.

And that’s when it hit him. The date had gone well. It had gone so well, in fact, that she was too occupied to stop by. So well that she’d seen him again the next night. And she hadn’t stopped by with dessert that night either.

Josh swore he felt his heart breaking. There was a physical pain in his chest and his breathing went shallow, turning into ragged gulps. It was his worst nightmare. The scenario he refused to acknowledge. What if Donna met someone and he lost her for good?

He didn’t even know it was possible to mourn the loss of something he hadn’t had, but in that moment, Josh Lyman was grieving for the woman he loved.

OoOoOoO

Josh was wide awake when his alarm went off. He'd spent the night staring at his ceiling, trying to make sense of the heartbreak he felt. He didn't know he could mourn a relationship he'd never officially had, but here he was nonetheless. And if he were honest with himself, he would have acknowledged that he and Donna did have something- title or not. But he couldn't go down that road. It just hurt too much.

He blankly went through the motions of getting himself ready for the day, taking a deep breath and forcing a smile as he let himself in to Audrey's room to get her up and going for the day.

He sat softly on the side of her toddler bed and brushed her curls out of her eyes as she slept soundly.
"Time to wake up," he tried his best to wake her gently. "Audrey?"

She grumbled softly and kicked around a bit, pulling Walter the bunny a little closer but never waking up. Josh sighed. It was typical for her, and for him as well, but he just didn't have the energy to fight it today.

"Audrey, please wake up," he tried again a little louder.

Audrey blinked slowly and studied him closely under heavy lids before rubbing her eyes and moving groggily to crawl into his lap.

"Good morning," he kissed the top of her head. Spending time with Audrey could always better his mood, but this morning he was particularly comforted by her presence.

"What's wrong, Daddy?" She leaned her head against his chest.

"What do you mean?" He feigned ignorance, shielding her from his internal torment.

"You're sad, Daddy." She gently touched the side of his face.

He pulled her a little closer. "How could I be sad when I have you, Shortcake?" He made sure his voice was breezy as he stood up with her, walking to the kitchen and rooting around the cupboard. "Bagel or cereal?" He asked, still holding her.

"Donna makes me dippy eggs," Audrey stated with a pout. "I want dippy eggs."

Josh sighed. With the way he’d left things the night before, he was fairly certain that they wouldn’t be seeing Donna for their normal morning routine. He was terrified that suddenly everything had changed. But he didn’t have the heart to explain that to Audrey. "Well, let’s try something else this morning," Josh pulled out a box of cereal and was rooting around for a bowl when he heard a soft knock on his door.

She was there, on his front mat, with a timid look on her face. It was a far cry from letting herself in and taking over like she did every other morning, but it was something. He was beyond relieved to see her.

Audrey reached out to Donna, who took her as Josh opened the door to let her inside.

Donna’s eyes moved to the floor as the two stood in heavy silence.

“I’ve gotta get going,” Josh announced, clearing his throat a bit. “Senior Staff in thirty minutes.”

“Right,” Donna confirmed.

“Thanks for, uh, coming by to help with her this morning.”

Donna nodded her acknowledgment of his statement and licked her lips. It never even occurred to her to consider not showing up to take Audrey to school. “Of course,” she almost whispered, rubbing Audrey’s back. The long term effects of her actions and the seriousness of their conversation the night before were really starting to sink in.
“Question.” Sam stood in the doorway to Josh’s office, slipping his hands into his pocket.

“What’s going on?” Josh swiveled in his office chair to face Sam.

“Oh, the question isn’t for you,” Sam told him. “I need an expert to weigh in. Audrey? How much does a gum ball cost?”

Audrey looked up from her coloring. “A nickel. That's 5 cents. The middle size silver one. They have them at the mall. A whole bunch of them in pretty colors. I stop and look at them every time we go there. They have lots of flavors like root beer and raspberry. But I'm not allowed to have them. They're bad for your teeth. But I really like to look at them and imagine what they taste like. Why do you ask, Uncle Sammy?”

Sam looks at Josh who was looking at Audrey adoringly. "Where'd she learn to talk like that?"

But then he answered his own question at the same time as Josh. "Donna!"

“Daddy, is Donna back yet?”

“No,” Josh answered, glancing at the clock. He’d been hoping to see her walk through the door at any minute for the last half hour.

“When will she be back,” Audrey whined.

“Don’t whine,” Josh told her, shooting her a pointed look. “And I’m not sure. Soon, I hope.”

“Toby wants to go over something if you have a minute,” Sam continued and Josh rose to follow him into the communications bullpen, Audrey grabbing his hand and trailing behind with her coloring book, making herself comfortable in Sam’s visitor’s chair as Josh, Toby and Sam discussed a few issues in the next office.

With Audrey content where she was, Josh hung around for a while, trying to rid himself of any remaining nervous energy, and passing the time chatting with Sam.

“Donna thinks you’re still pissed at her,” Sam stated somewhat flatly.

Josh was immediately defensive and a bit panicked, glancing over to make sure that Audrey wasn’t listening at the moment. “I’m not. I wasn’t before. When did she tell you that?”

“Before she left.”

“You’ve heard from her?” He was hopeful that she was done, but part of him hesitated at the thought that she’d call Sam before him.

“No.”

“She should be done by now.” She should have been back already. He was beginning to feel a gnawing in the pit of his stomach.

OoOoOoO

She’s was terrified. There was no other word for it.
Donna moved quickly through the narrow halls, pale under her make-up, eyes wide and uneasy. As she encountered her co-workers everyone asked how she was doing and she gave a variation of the same answer. "Fine. It went fine. It was fine." She didn’t want to chit chat, she only wanted -needed- to get to Josh.

Rounding the corner into the bullpen she saw him there, at her desk. She stopped for a moment and just took him in. He looked so handsome, she thought, standing there in his casual Sunday clothes, rifling through her carefully organized filing system to read one of her messages as he waited for her. And her heart sank- she had to tell him that she’d let him down. Again.

On one hand there was no one she wanted to talk to more, there was no one else she could count on the way she counted on him, there was no one else she trusted more. On the other hand, there was no one she hated disappointing more than she hated disappointing him, how would he react to this? Would he hate her? Was this it? The final blow?

“How’d it go?” He remained cautiously optimistic.

“I really need to talk to you for a second.” She could feel the bile rising in her throat.

“What happened?” He studied her closely, concern for her evident on his face.

“I need to just... Can we go in your office?” Her eyes darted around the bullpen. She was a bundle of nerves.

“Audrey, go color at Donna’s desk,” Josh instructed her, ushering her out of the room.

“Audrey!” Audrey beamed, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“You can talk to Donna in a minute. Do as I say,” Josh instructed her firmly but without a harsh tone in his voice. Audrey did as she was told, knowing better than to disobey her father when she was allowed to accompany him to work.

“What happened?” Alarm bells were going off non stop in his head.

Out with it, she told herself. No reason to delay the inevitable. “I was asked if I kept a diary, and I said no, only I do keep a diary.”

“Why did you say you didn’t?” His heart rate increased.

“I don't know.” But she did know. She knew exactly why she’d denied it. To protect him. To protect Audrey.

“What do you mean you don't know?”

“Nothing in the diary is relevant. I'm the only one…”

“Is there anyone else in the witness list who knows you keep a diary?”

“Well, there's nobody who knows I keep a diary, except the thing is... Cliff saw it.”

Josh paused for a moment before responding. Because that pill wasn’t hard enough to swallow on it’s own, he had to be reminded of it in this moment. “What do you mean?”

“Cliff came to me after the deposition and told me he saw the diary when he was in my apartment.”

Josh walked around behind his desk and sat down. He knew they were in serious trouble, and he
was having a hard time reconciling that with the still new pang in his heart.

His silence was setting her even more on edge. “I swear it wasn't premeditated. Nothing in it was material. Nothing in it was…”

“You don't get to decide that! You don't get to decide what's material and what isn't, Donna!” He couldn’t help but to snap at her.

She bit back her emotion, summing all of her resolve and telling herself not to crumble at what she perceived to be not only his anger but his tremendous disappointment in her. “Please keep your voice down.”

“This is how it happens. They got nothing on the President with MS. They're trolling, then you go in and hand them a…”

“I know.” As if she hadn’t already beaten herself up over this, she had to listen to his detailed disappointment. It was crushing her.

“You were subpoenaed! You were under oath! You answer the damn question!”

“I screwed up.”

“YOU THINK?!”

Donna stood in shock, unable to respond. She could hear the sound of her own heart beating in her ears and in that moment all she wanted to do is turn and flee. To run and never come back. Because in her heart she knew that Josh wasn't just talking about the deposition. He was talking about Cliff and the fact that now there was no way for either of them to pretend she hadn't slept with him, and how nothing would be the same again. But her feet were frozen, and finally she managed to ask the question that she really needed an answer to-- "What should I do?"

"Do nothing. Do absolutely nothing." His tone left absolutely no room for discussion as Donna let herself out of the room. His mind was in overdrive. He had to fix this. It’s all he could focus on. He had to fix this for her.

But the look he gave her as he said it pierced her heart. Dismayed, Donna turned slowly closed the door behind her. She couldn't hardly believe it. She never even considered that he wouldn't help her. Tears pricked the back of her eyes as she tried to hold herself together. She couldn't breakdown here at the office.

Spotting Audrey at her desk, she leaned back against Josh's closed door and took a deep, shaky breath. Then walked as slowly as possible towards the little girl who meant the world to her.

A few moments later Josh emerged, his coat already on. “Audrey Joan,” he stated in a serious voice, “quickly gather your belongings and put on your jacket, please.”

As Audrey hurried off to do just that, Josh turned his attention back to Donna in a low whisper. “Get your things and go home. Leave now. Do not stop on the way. Stay there. Do not so much as touch the item question. Do not speak to anyone, do not answer your phone and do not open the door for anyone except me,” he pointed towards himself. “Do you understand me,” he practically growled.

“Yes, sir,” she replied meekly, picking up her bag and making her way out of the White House yet again.

OoOoOoO
Donna followed his instructions, walking home as quickly as possible and willing herself not to start crying until she got home. But the moment she closed the door behind her, the wave of terror washed over her and her legs gave out and she slid to the floor. The sobs completely racked her body and she struggled to breath, never feeling more alone, or more scared. She thought she had hit bottom when she left Wisconsin 3 years ago, but nothing compared to this.

When the tears finally stopped, she lay on the floor for another moment. She wished she felt numb, but the pain in her heart still throbbed. Still, she managed to get back to her feet, and staggered to the bathroom, where she washed her face. A quick glance in the mirror showed her it had done no good.

She jumped at the sudden pounding on the door, and finding herself scared to open it, even if it was Josh. 

Josh called Edith on the way home, asking her to come over quickly. He'd explained nothing other than the fact that he'd be back later and he needed her not to ask any questions upon his return. Then he had dropped Audrey off at the brownstone.

By the time he'd arrived at Donna's apartment it had already been over an hour. He impatiently pounded on the door. When Donna opened it he immediately noticed her puffy, red eyes. A huge part of him wanted to gather her in his arms and hold her and tell her he'd fix it all for her, but he couldn't at that moment. He had to keep his mind clear until the transaction was complete. And a small part of him still wanted to chastise her for sleeping with Cliff and getting them into this mess in the first place.

"Give it to me," he told her without preamble.

She knew immediately what he meant. She spun on her heel, walked quickly to her bedroom and retrieved the diary, and placed it on the counter next to where he stood. Josh didn't miss how much her hands were shaking, or the fact that as soon as she set the book down she took a step back and wrapped her arms around her tiny waist.

He knew she was barely holding it together, but his tone was still brisk. "Turn to the nights you spent with him, please."

Donna mechanically obeyed, now even more apprehensive than before. She didn't know where this was going.

But Josh didn't even glance at them. Instead he opened a kitchen drawer and pulled out a knife, then carefully removed the pages in question and placed them into a separate envelope before stuffing the diary in its entirety into his coat.

"Let's go," he told Donna, turning to exit and walking down the stairs towards the street.

She grabbed her purse and locked up before she followed behind him, too terrified to ask any questions. The rode in a heavy silence to a nearby park where Josh found a spot and pulled in, shutting the car off completely before he spoke, staring straight out the car window.

"Cliff will be here in five minutes. When he gets here I don't want you to speak to him. He's going to read your diary in the coffee shop behind us. He'll never be out of my line of vision but I'll keep the entries about him as an insurance policy. When he's done he will decide if he needs to subpoena it, and you, in the morning. If he does we will deal with that tomorrow. If he doesn't that's the end of it. Do you have any questions?"

"No, sir," she whispered in response. There was no point in asking questions. Even now, she trusted
him with her life. Even if it felt like her life might be over.

"Stop calling me, sir, Donna," he practically spat with irritation. "Do you have any questions?"

She blinked several times and swallowed hard before responding with a soft "No."

"Then let's go." As Josh exited the vehicle, the door slammed shut with an echoing bang. Donna gathered her courage, and followed him. But he strode several paces ahead of her toward the bench by the fountain.

They sat in silence as they waited, Donna retreating into herself. Josh mentally coached himself to stay in political operative mode, forcing himself to look straight into the distance rather than to Donna. In order for this to work he had to look calm and collected for Cliff, even though he was slightly panicked inside. The smallest blunder could send this entire deal up in smoke, resulting in serious ramifications for all involved parties - but especially for Donna. This is what he did, he reminded himself. This is why the President of the United States kept him on salary. He made the backdoor deals. He did what had to be done in order to push his agenda through. And tonight there was only one thing on his agenda - Keep Donna Safe. He repeated the mantra in his head, never losing focus of why he was there.

Donna, however, continued to sink into a darker place by the second while left to her own devices. She was almost a shell of a person by the time Josh rose to meet Cliff by the fountain.

As Josh confronted Cliff, he remained cool, calm and collected. This is why he hadn't stopped to comfort Donna. He needed to be 100% in control of all his emotions at this moment. This was a huge bluff. He had to make Cliff believe this was absolutely not a big deal. A slight misunderstanding, easily rectified.

But when Cliff said "What's October Fourth and Fifth?" Josh almost lost control of his façade.

"You." Was his only outward response, but inside he was screaming. How could Cliff forget what happened on October 4th and 5th? He slept with Donnatella Moss! Josh was sure that if he had ever had that opportunity, the timestamp would be burned into his memory forever.

As Cliff walked away, Josh paused for a moment, truly thinking over what he'd just done. And realizing that he'd handed over one of Donna's most intimate possessions to the opposition. As he returned to her, Josh slowed his stroll, taking her in. He'd been too hard on her over the past few hours, he'd decided. This had to be hell for her, and he didn't want her to feel alone for another minute. He wanted to go caveman and claim her. To love and protect her, but in that moment he knew he couldn't. She didn't choose him and he has to respect that.

But he could let her know that he respects her. That he loves her as a friend.

“It’s going to be fine,” he reassured her as he sat down. He just hoped to God it would be. He took the risk of placing his arm around her, softly rubbing her back. She flinched slightly at his touch, which only served to further his heartbreak.

In that moment Josh realized he had a very wounded Donna on his hands. He was a fixer by nature, he reminded himself, and as soon as the diary situation was fixed, he could start working on fixing Donna.

The next hour passed slower than Josh thought possible. As soon as he sees Cliff approaching at the end of the hour, Josh gets up and walks briskly towards him, wanting to keep Cliff as far away from Donna as possible.
Cliff offers Josh the diary. "You should read it." He suggests gruffly.

"No."

"You really should."

But Josh just stares him down, waiting for the verdict. Cliff shrugs his shoulders in defeat, and tries to peak around Josh to see Donna. Josh intentionally shifts his stance to once again obscure Cliff’s view. And continues to wait.

Finally, Cliff continues, "Look, I'm not going to subpoena it. As far as I'm concerned this ends now."

"Alright, then." Josh nods his head curtly, "See you around, Calley."

Cliff turns to go, shaking his head in slight admiration. Josh really does know how to play this game. At least he knows that Donna's in good hands. "Goodnight, Lyman."

OoOoOoO

Josh’s car pulled to a stop. Donna had yet to say a word to him, but found herself somewhat surprised when he'd driven her directly to his residence.

He placed the vehicle in park and turned to her. “He’s not going to subpoena it..” He handed the diary back to Donna.

“Are you going to read it?” Her voice was shaky at best.

“No, I’m not. I won’t invade your privacy like that. And I’m sorry if I made you feel vulnerable tonight.”

“You protected me,” she softly choked out. “You saved me.”

Josh said nothing to that, unsure how to respond. “If it’s okay with you, I’d like to keep this envelope as insurance that everything goes according to plan,” he continued. She nodded her consent and he pulled a pen out of his console and signing the seal before handing it to Donna to do the same.

“It’s over,” he told her. “Let’s go inside.”

He walked to Donna’s side of the vehicle and placed his hand on the small of her back, leading her up the stairs to his apartment. As soon as they stepped inside he gently helped her remove her coat.

“Donna!” Audrey came running as Edith followed behind.

Donna enveloped Audrey in a giant hug, pulling the child especially close.

Edith took one look at Donna and immediately knew that whatever they’d been up to that evening, it was serious. “I’ll make some tea,” Edith offered quietly.

Josh nodded his appreciation as she slipped into the kitchen to begin.

Josh turned to hang Donna’s coat on the rack and removed his jacket as well.

Audrey, realizing that something was off, pushed herself back ever so slightly and blinked a few times, tilting her head to look at Donna. “Don’t cry, Donna,” she softly requested, reaching out with her tiny hand to wipe Donna’s silent tears away the way that Donna had done for her so many times before.
Josh, as soon as he’d heard the words leave Audrey’s mouth, was on high alert. He sat up and moved closer. “Go help Bubbe,” he instructed Audrey, sending her into the kitchen as he moved to Donna towards his bedroom, pulling the door mostly closed behind them.

“Sit down,” he told her, opening his arms to her as he sat back and she made herself comfortable against him, during her face in his shirt for a few moments. “Why are you crying,” he asked her while softly stroking he hair.

Her shaky breaths were her only response.

Josh crushed her to his chest, holding her close again. “It’s all going to be okay, Donna. You have to believe me.”

Josh continued rubbing Donna’s back as she cried until Edith’s voice called through the door. “Donna, I’ve got some tea for you. Can I come in?”

Donna pushes herself away from Josh and nods, while wiping at her eyes.

”Yeah, Ma, come on in.” Josh responded, when it became clear that Donna was in no condition to give her answer out loud.

Edith took one look at Donna and decided it was time to mother. She’d grabbed a tissue from the box in the hall bathroom and handed it to Donna with the tea, taking care to make sure it didn’t spill in Donna’s shaky hands. “It’s hot,” she warned. “Sip slowly.”

Josh took the opportunity to slip into his bathroom to run a warm bath for her, pulling a fluffy towel from his linen closet. When he returned to his bedroom he found his mother still perched next to her, a gentle hand on her shoulder as she coaxed Donna to take another sip of tea.

“It’s ready when you are,” he stated softly. Donna looked at him for the first time in hours and nodded. Josh extended his hand to help her up as she made her way into the en suite. “We’ll talk more after you take a bath,” he assured.

“While you are in there,” Edith chimed in, “I want you to remember that no matter what happened today, you are a part of this family and we love you very much.”

“I’ll be right here if you need anything. Take your time,” he told her as he pulled the door to the bathroom closed behind her.

“I’ll leave you be,” Edith told Josh, standing to make her way back to the living room. As she opened the door Josh caught a glimpse of a wide eyed and somewhat fearful Audrey standing vigil outside the door.

“Come here,” he told her quietly, popping her onto his knee as soon as she was close. “Donna isn’t feeling good right now,” Josh tried to explain. “So we’re going to be quiet and play gently tonight, okay?”

Audrey nodded her understanding.

“Go pick out a move and we’ll watch it with you in a few minutes, okay?”

“Okay,” Audrey climbed down and skipped away with Walter to find a movie.

When she exited the bathroom, clad in a pair of her pajama pants that tended to reside in his top left drawer and his oversized Harvard sweatshirt she looked only marginally better. She wrung her hands
awkwardly, halfway waiting for him to tear into her again.

He stepped towards her and rubbed her arms softly, trying to figure out where to begin.

He tips her chin up so he can see her. "Donna, look at me, please." She reluctantly met his eyes and he saw, for the first time, just how terrified she was. The weight of his realization was crushing and suddenly all he can think about is how to fix it. "I'm sorry for the way I reacted this afternoon. It was brash and uncaring and- I never meant to speak to you that way. I was just scared, Donna. Scared of what could happen. But I'm not mad. You know that, right?"

Her eyes flicked away and he realized that she, in fact, didn’t know that. "God, Donna. I couldn't stay mad at you. And you're by no means in trouble. I just- it scared me, alright? But I'm not going to let anything happen to you. I promise you that much. I'll always do whatever I can to protect you and if it comes down to it, Donna, you know I'll stand in front of you." He leans in and gently kisses her forehead, wrapping her in a hug. And when he felt her begin to relax into him in response to his words he continued.

"You know, Cliff actually turned out to be a decent guy. For a republican. I'm not your father. I had no right to forbid you from seeing him. But please be careful, okay? I can’t stand the thought of you getting hurt. You really should keep it on the down low, especially until the hearing is over."

She couldn’t bring herself to speak, but she gave a slight nod in acknowledgment that Josh was trying to be kind.

When Audrey called him out of the room, Donna lay back on the bed and she swore she could actually feel her heart breaking. She doesn’t want Cliff. He really was pretty decent throughout this whole thing but it's been a truly horrible day. The one bright moment was when Josh told her it would all be fine and for a second she thought he cared. But he just compared himself to her father and gave her permission to date another man. It's pretty clear that he cares for her on some level, but never in the way she had hoped.

"DONNA!" Audrey bellowed so much like her father, it actually hurts. Donna wiped her face off and joined them in the living room to watch The Little Mermaid. Even though she felt like her dream had been shattered she’d put on a good face and be thankful that at least she still has some place in this family.

As she slid into her spot on the couch she coiled her legs up to her chest, feeling out of place for the first time in years. Josh raised an eyebrow at her body language and shifted a bit, lifting the blanket that was covering the spot next to him. They always sat head to toe, their legs usually finding their way to intertwine with each other throughout the course of the night. Audrey would be up and down a hundred times during the movie, eventually curling up with one of them before falling asleep.

Donna unsteadily moved to her normal position and Josh covered their legs with a warm blanket, tucking the ends under her feet and resting his hand on her calf. Edith took her place in the chair with the ottoman and Audrey, already in her pajamas, crawled onto Donna’s lap with a small blanket of her own.

Donna was comforted by the presence of all three members of the Lyman family and found herself calming down a bit from all the events of the day. Still, she felt like she’d completely ruined any chance she’d had with Josh. If nothing else, she was just grateful he hadn’t kept her away from Audrey.

Towards the end of the movie Audrey finally lost the battle with sleep and curled closer in to Donna as her breathing evened out.
“Well,” Edith offered, “It’s late and I think we could all use a bit of sleep. Come on, Donna, I’ll drive you home.” She stood, gathering the younger woman’s belongings and her own purse.

Josh moved to take Audrey from Donna, transferring the little girl into his arms without waking her.

“Get some sleep, Donna,” he whispered, kissing her softly on her cheek. “Tomorrow is a new day.”
"Daddy?" Audrey peeked around the corner from her bedroom and saw that Josh was concentrating deeply on the morning newspaper. A mischievous smile, identical to her father's, broke out on her face.

She moved silently down the hall until she was peering into the kitchen. "Daddy?" She asked softly using the indoor voice Donna had instructed her to use in the mornings.

Josh quickly turned to the second page for the rest of the article in The Post, muttering in concentration as he did so.

She stood next to him and tugged lightly on his shirt sleeve. "Daddy!"

Josh practically jumped out of his skin in surprise at her presence, dropping the paper in the process. He'd been lost in thought since he'd woken up that morning and was truly surprised to find Audrey standing at his side, blinking up at him with her big brown eyes.

"Hi, shortcake," he greeted her once he'd regained his composure. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good," Audrey responded, wiggling around a bit. "Is Donna here yet?"

"Donna's not coming over this week, remember?" He'd been over this with her several times, still, Audrey asked for Donna every morning.

She popped her bottom lip out in a pout.

Josh sighed, reaching into the pantry and pulling out a box of Cheerios. "Hold this," he told her, moving through the kitchen to gather bowls, spoons, milk and a banana.

"But why isn't Donna here?" Audrey emphasized the why and looked at him expectantly, clutching the box of cereal that was nearly as big as she was.

The simple answer, Josh thought, was that Donna was taking meetings with a different group of constituents every morning that week. "She has to be in the office to take care of some things for me," he muttered. But in his heart, he knew that there was more to it than that. They just hadn't recovered from the diary incident, and Josh wondered if they ever truly would. Still somewhat lost in thought, he didn't even realize that he kept muttering to himself quietly, wondering how he was going to fix this. ((Wondering how he was going to go through life knowing she was out there that night a few weeks ago with some other man, and a Republican no less, and he'd been hung up on her for all of these years. What if this was a sign that she'd truly moved on from them.))

"Daddy!" Audrey pulled him from his own mind as his mind wandered place he refused to acknowledge. "Look at my face."

Josh turned to peer at Audrey, caught completely off guard by her request. It was a line that he was familiar with, Donna having used in on Audrey herself many times when she wouldn't listen. He attempted to stifle his laughter at his daughter's adultlike personality.

Audrey, still clutching the large box of Cheerios close, peered up at him with a straight-faced intensity he wasn't sure he'd seen before. "Do you need to say sorry to her?"

"Do I need to say sorry to her," Josh repeated the question, barely able to believe that this
conversation was even taking place. He realized, though, that maybe they should talk about it. Maybe he should let her know that he truly wasn't mad at her. But he couldn't pour his soul out to his daughter, so Josh deflected. "Whos the adult around here anyway?" He cracked a joke and gave her a little smile, taking the box of cereal.

"Donna," she retorted without hesitation, making her way to the breakfast table.

OoOoOoO

Josh groaned in frustration as he continued to dictate the letter to Donna. "New paragraph. As always, your thoughtfulness is greatly appreciated. Also appreciated was the visit to the White House by some fifty of your constituents on board a bus that was chartered by your office. Their complaints were respectfully heard by my assistant and I regret that matters escalated to the point where she felt it necessary to call in the Park Police. You'll be happy to know that their bus has been refueled and that the seniors are on their way home, each having been allowed to keep their security tags as a souvenir."

"Look…"

"Signed…"

"I was just…"

"Do it."

"Excuse me," CJ peeked her head into Josh's office.

"Hey." Josh, though very much not in the mood for friendly conversation, was glad to have a distraction.

"You got a second?" CJ glanced around the room, the tension between Josh and Donna almost palpable.

"Type that," he ordered to Donna.

"Look, I was just…" she attempted to explain.

"Type it," he repeated himself.

"May I use your computer?"

"What's wrong with yours?" He was losing his patience.

"One of them poured Wheatena on the keyboard." She was attempting to keep her cool."

"Go ahead."

Josh and Donna attempted, with unmasked annoyance, to navigate his office and switch places with one another. It wasn't lost on either of them that, until a few weeks ago, they were perfectly in step with one another at all times.

CJ briefly pushed aside what she'd originally needed to ask Josh. "Are you two okay? You seem a bit… off."

"We're fine," Josh let out a breath as he spoke, looking off into the distance. He'd heard that same comment from seemingly everyone in the last few days. "We had a little problem earlier. What's up?"
But CJ wasn't going to let it go that easily. "It's just that you're usually so in sync with each other and for the last week or so it's been as if-

"CJ," He interrupted her, his patience wearing thin. "That's not what I meant. What did you need?"

"Hmm? Oh." She began to discuss the majority leader's answer to the question but she couldn't help but to study him as she did. Josh was her friend, and she could tell when he was off his game. And if there was something amiss between Josh and Donna, she thought, lord help them all.

OoOoOoOo

It was with a certain degree of dread that Josh had found himself in the WLC's office that morning. But he had to admit that his meeting with Amy Gardner had gone better than he'd expected it to.

So he was equally surprised when he found himself walking her back to her office that very same day. As a matter of fact, Josh had found himself rather… ensorcelled. She was the kind of woman that should be exactly his type, he thought. A well educated career woman and a power dater. A little voice in the back of his mind began to protest, telling him that's not what he wanted anymore, but Josh quickly silenced it.

And, Josh thought, the ballon animal thing was certainly a point in the plus column as well. That had to mean that she liked kids, right? But he was getting ahead of himself. For the time being he would keep Audrey far away from Amy and any arrangement he had with her.

He didn't need to plan their entire future out. In fact, the thought of doing so was making him sweat on a chilly winter night. No, no. He just wanted to keep things casual. But he was a man, and he had needs. Needs that Amy had seemed interested in satisfying. There was nothing wrong with that, he told himself. No commitments, no pressure.

Yes, this could work, he assured himself as he strolled down the street towards the office. Perhaps she was right- he did need to be hit over the head with it. And Amy Gardner seemed to be the exact opposite of Donna Moss in many ways. Perhaps that was just what he needed in order to move on.

OoOoOoOo

"Audrey, quit dilly dallying. Pick your book and get into bed or there will be no story at all tonight," Josh warned.

"But Daddy, I'm not tired." Audrey whined.

"No buts, Audrey Joan. It's well past your bedtime."

Audrey scrunched up her face in discontent before selecting The Kissing Hand, one of her favorites, and handing it to Josh, who clicked on the nightlight in the corner. Donna purchased the book for Audrey before she started school, and the first time Josh had read it to her he'd become quite choked up.

Josh pulled the covers back on her small bed and Audrey climbed in, dragging Walter the Bunny behind her.

Josh tucked the blankets in around her, making sure that she was comfortable before sitting next to her. "What was your favorite part of your day, Shortcake?" He asked her every night and was always delighted to hear her answer.

"Making pancakes for dinner!" Audrey exclaimed with a grin. "I helped you, Daddy!"
Josh couldn't help but to smile back at her. "Yes, you did. And you did a great job."

"Walter's favorite part was watching the news with you," she said seriously. She'd situated her trusty bunny on the couch next to Josh that evening so he'd have some company as he watched a political commentary show on CNN and she busied herself coloring.

"Ah, well I'm glad to hear he enjoyed that," Josh responded, biting back a smile. After all, Walter the Bunny was a highly regarded member of the Lyman family.

Josh began reading the book, telling the story of Chester Raccoon and his first day of school. As Chester realizes his fears of being away from his mother, Mama Raccoon kisses his hand and reminds him that if he's lonely all he needs to do is place his hand on his cheek and remember that he is loved. It had since become a staple of their mornings. Without fail, Josh would kiss her palm before he departed for senior staff.

Josh continued to read softly as Audrey's eyelids became heavy and her usually abundant energy slowed. Soon, she was asleep and Josh closed the book, listening to her steady breathing and watching her rest peacefully.

He brushed a stray curl out of her face and kissed her forehead. "Sweet Dreams," he whispered, "I love you, baby girl."

OoOoOoO

Josh's door buzzed, pulling him from his sleep only moments before his alarm was set to go off. He clicked the button to open the door, assuming Donna had left the house without her keys. Why she was so early today, he didn't know. But after a busy week of taking his early meetings at The White House they were all ready to get back to their normal schedule.

He was somewhat surprised to see Amy, but was too exhausted to show almost any emotion. They argued back and forth for a few moments, Josh slightly annoyed that she felt this conversation was appropriate at this time of day.

"Josh, you and I spent four nights with each other. I didn't break up with him for you. I'm not pathetic-stalking-woman who, you know... does things." Amy rolled her eyes

"We spent six nights with each other." It was early, but he was always up for a little playful back and forth. He was ensorcelled.

"What are you counting?"

"I'm counting them all.

"It was four."

"Daddy?" A tired little voice called out from down the hallway.

Amy froze and Josh cringed a bit. He somehow felt like he'd been caught. He fixed his face back into neutrality as he rounded the corner and crouched down to Audrey's level, smoothing her bed head.

"Hi, shortcake. What are you doing up?"

Audrey rubbed her eyes and clutched her trusty stuffed bunny. "I heard a noise," she yawned. "Is Donna here?"
"No, baby," Josh kissed her forehead. "Donna's not here yet. Why don't you go back to bed and I'll be in to check on you in a minute?"

Audrey stuck her lip out to pout and Josh shook his head, a little smile coming across his face. There was no question as to where she'd learned that little maneuver. She was the master's apprentice. "Back to bed," he told her, standing up.

Audrey looked up at him, blinking her big brown eyes and then ran by him with a giggle, heading directly towards Josh's king size bed to see if she could talk him into cartoons. She stopped dead in her tracks halfway through the living room and stared at Amy.

"Hello," the Amy drawled, unsure how to address the little girl in this somewhat awkward situation. Audrey looked over at Josh for reassurance before politely greeting Amy and pulling her bunny closer. She stood in the uncomfortable silence for a few more beats before padding into Josh's room and crawling under his comforter and falling quickly back to sleep.

"So," Amy began, staring at the door to Josh's bedroom, unsure of how to continue.

"That's Audrey," Josh stated the obvious.

"She's cute," Amy offered.

"Thanks."

"She's quiet, though," Amy supplemented. "She doesn't get that from you."

"She's shy around people she doesn't know."

"Does your assistant usually show up at your apartment in the middle of the night?" Amy directed her attention back to Josh, asking the question that was truly on her mind.

"She's little, Amy. She didn't check her watch before she came out here, she just thought it was time to wake up."

"And your assistant is usually here when she wakes up?"

"Donna takes her to school in the mornings so I can get to senior staff on time. Plus, I'm not very good at the whole fixing her hair thing."

"You're sure you're not dating her?"

"Amy-"

"I just want you to at least acknowledge that this arrangement that you have with her isn't normal, J."

"For some reason, I don't think I'm going to take advice from you on this today," He handed her her jacket and practically ushered her out the door. "I'll talk to you about the other thing in thirty seconds when you call me on your cell phone."

XxXxXxxX

A/N: First of all, thank you SO MUCH for the warm response to this fic. Your comments and reads mean so much to me. I am having such a blast playing in this universe and it's so much more fun to
know that you guys are enjoying it, too.

STOP READING NOW IF YOU DON'T WANT SOME MILD SPOILERS: I know the last few chapters have been a departure from the fluff that this story started out with. And I know that a lot of you guys were hoping that the Amy arc would be skipped altogether, but I think that Josh and Amy are important. To me, in the show, he sees through Amy that the type of woman he 'thinks' he should want is the type of woman he doesn't want at all. However, I do promise to keep this arc brief. That being said, this chapter signifies the end of cannon for our characters. There will be some re-working of ideas as well as a major plot twist or two. If you've read my other stories you know I typically throw something unexpected at you. But I will promise you this- In the world I've created, there is ALWAYS a happy ending.
“Audrey, what is wrong?” Josh was flummoxed. Totally and completely flummoxed.

His normally well behaved daughter had chosen tonight, of all nights, to throw her manners out the window and have a fit.

Things with Amy had been going, in his opinion, unexpectedly well. So, after she’d dropped hints for two days about having dinner with him, he’d relented. And Josh invited her over for an evening meal.

It wasn’t a problem, however, until Amy showed up at Josh’s door in a little black dress with more than dinner on her mind.

“Hi,” Josh threw open the door in a well worn pair of jeans and a tshirt, as Audrey scowled on his hip.

“Hello,” Amy tried not to show her surprise at the scene before her. “Hi there, Audrey. I'm Amy.”

“I know.” Audrey studied her closely.

“I like your bunny,” Amy offered, attempting to make conversation as she entered the apartment and Josh shut the door behind her.

Audrey clammed up and pulled the bunny closer as though she was afraid to lose it. “His name is Walter,” she told Amy seriously, leaning farther into Josh, who carried her into the kitchen.

“So,” Amy glanced around the apartment, which was even messier than usual after Audrey had spread her toys out and then started to work on a half finished craft project. “You were expecting me, right?” She halfway joked.

“Uh, yeah?” Her attempt at humor at his expense was lost on Josh, who had been up since 4am and had barely been able to be more than a foot away away from Audrey without her teetering on the edge of a meltdown after he’d come home for the evening.

“Okay…” She slowed her speech, still not clicking with Josh was saying. “What’s the plan for tonight?”

“Well,” Josh rummaged around for a juice box in the fridge and managed to undo the wrapper and poke the straw in with one hand before giving it to Audrey, still on his hip. “I thought you said you wanted to have dinner.”

“Yeah,” Amy leaned against the counter. “How about sushi?”

Josh laughed good naturedly, starting Audrey a bit, who squeezed the apple juice just a little too aggressively, causing it to squirt out onto Josh’s shirt.

“Sorry, Daddy,” she whispered.

“It’s okay, Shortcake,” he assured her, grabbing a towel and swiping at the stain.

“Seriously, Amy,” he asked as he sat Audrey down to return to her coloring at the kitchen table. “What did you have in mind?”
“I’m sure you could get your table at Morton’s,” she continued.

Josh stared at her like she’d grown a third head before it dawned on him. “I- Oh.” He scrubbed a hand over his face. “See, when you said you wanted to do dinner and have a normal night together, I thought you meant- you know- my normal.”

Amy tried not to make a face at the thought. “I really just meant see each other outside of a political fundraiser or late night bo-”

“Ahem,” Josh cleared his throat to stop her from continuing, motioning towards Audrey, who was listening intently just a few feet away.

“Right,” Amy drummed her fingers on the counter. “So, no sitter?”

“No.” Josh was uneasy about this entire situation to begin with, and now he was certainly having doubts.

Amy glanced over to Audrey. “Well, we could… all go out…?” It was easy to see that she wasn’t exactly sold on the idea herself.

“Well, I have a lasagna in the freezer that I was planning to have ready but the evening got away from me,” he began, immediately noticing her reaction to that suggestion, “we can find something else or we can just order takeout?”

“Ahkay.” Amy, though less than thrilled with the situation, understood that Josh was trying to be as accommodating as possible.

“I’ll just get something started for her,” he gestured towards Audrey, noticing the time was quickly approaching dinner.

He fumbled around in the freezer for a minute before pulling out a box of chicken nuggets and preheating his oven. He attempted to chat with Amy, who he thought was becoming more comfortable at the situation after the initial change of plans, until the phone rang.

“It’s not on the hook,” she remarked.

Josh leaned over to glance at the cradle. “Audrey, where did you put the phone after you said goodnight to Bubbe?”

“I don’t know,” she shrugged her shoulders and continued coloring.

Josh just shook his head. It wasn’t worth getting into at that exact moment. He’d find it later. “If the White House needs me, they’ll call my other number,” he told Amy, pointing to the cell phone laying on the counter.

But the message machine clicked on and Donna’s familiar voice came across the machine. “Hey, it’s me- Hi Sweet Pea!- I left an envelope on the counter this morning and my tickets for tonight are in it so I’m swinging by to get it. See you in a minute.”

“Donna!” Audrey exclaimed at the message. “Donna’s coming over!”

“Just for a minute, though,” Josh warned her. “She has plans and she’s in a hurry,” he tried to let Audrey know that there wouldn’t be an endless amount of time for Donna to play that evening. He glanced over to the breakfast table and saw the envelope in question, picking it up and placing it neatly on the counter before it too was decorated in crayon drawings. “Finish up what you’re doing
so you can get ready for dinner,” Josh told Audrey. “Your chicken nuggets will be ready in twenty minutes.”

Audrey’s head whipped up at Josh’s words. “Chicken nuggets?”

“Yeah.” Josh continued what he was doing in the kitchen. Frozen nuggets and fish sticks were his dinnertime safety net, although he had become a much better cook over the last few years, thanks largely to Donna’s instruction.

“No, Daddy,” she told him with a sniffle. “I don’t want that.”

“What?” Josh turned around to look at her, noticing that her eyes were welling with tears. “Audrey what are you talking about? You love nuggets.”

Audrey burst into tears at the table, letting out a loud wail and catching Josh completely off guard, to say nothing of Amy.

“Hey,” he scooped her up. “What's your issue today?”

“I don’t want nuggets! I want lasagna,” she cried, giant tears streaming down her face.

“Audrey, this is not how we act, is it?” He crouched down to her level but she continued to cry.

It was then that Donna knocked on Josh’s door and began to dig for her keys after hearing Audrey's cries. Amy, however, was grateful to have a chance to step away from the scene in front of her and opened the door to Donna.

“Hi Amy. I love your dress.” Donna could find something to be nice about at any moment. “What’s wrong?” She asked, sitting her purse on the entry bench and making her way quickly to Audrey.

Donna took her place next to Josh while Amy remained awkwardly in the entryway, trying not to be obvious as she looked onto the scene before her.

“Why are you upset,” Donna asked softly, wiping Audrey's tears.

Audrey just continued to cry, so Donna looked at Josh, who was clearly heartbroken by the distraught state of his little girl.

Josh reached out and felt Audrey’s forehead, trying to see if she was running a temperature.

“Nuggets,” Audrey eventually sobbed. “They make them with real chickens, Daddy!”

“Oh, baby,” Donna opened her arms, “did your class’ chicks hatch today?”

Audrey nodded in affirmation as she lunged into Donna's arms.

Josh rubbed her back until her cries slowed. “I'm sorry, Audrey. Why didn't you say anything?”

“I forgot,” Audrey told him as she rubbed her eyes.

“What did you name your chicken,” Donna asked, trying to get her to talk about something.

“Fred,” Audrey responded with a snuffle.

“Fred?” Donna mouthed the question to Josh who shrugged. He had no idea where that had come from.
“Well, Fred is a good name for a chicken,” Donna assured her as best as she could while Josh tucked her auburn curls behind her ear. “Let's go wash your face, okay?” Donna made her way to the kitchen sink, as Josh grabbed a lavender washcloth from the hall closet and a Kleenex from the bathroom.

Donna wordlessly took the tissue from Josh as he turned the water to the proper temperature and wet the washcloth.

“Well, Fred is a good name for a chicken,” Donna assured her as best as she could while Josh tucked her auburn curls behind her ear. “Let's go wash your face, okay?” Donna made her way to the kitchen sink, as Josh grabbed a lavender washcloth from the hall closet and a Kleenex from the bathroom.

“Blow,” Donna instructed Audrey as she wiped her nose, handing the dirty tissue to Josh, who exchanged it for a washcloth as Donna washed away Audrey's tear stains. Amy looked on, mouth somewhat agape and eyebrows raised. She could hardly believe what she was seeing. She couldn't hear what Donna was saying, but she didn't need to know as Josh watched on with the most gentle smile Amy had ever seen. It would occur to her only later that Josh had all but forgotten than she was even in the room. Donna hoisted Audrey onto her hip and walked towards the kitchen cabinets, reviewing some dinner options. “Mac and Cheese?” Donna offered.

“With peas,” Josh offered, trying to sweeten the deal. Typically he wouldn't cave to Audrey's every whim, especially when she threw a fit, but he knew his daughter had such a soft heart when it came to animals that he was sure that she was devastated by the thought of chicken nuggets. He just hoped she didn't figure out where hamburgers and fish sticks came from any time soon.

“Donna,” Josh glanced at the clock, moving his hand to barely touch the small of her back, “you're going to be late.”

“Hmm? Oh. Well, it's not the end of the world,” Donna stated nonchalantly. “But I should get going. Daddy's going to make you dinner,” Donna told Audrey. “I'll see you tomorrow, okay?” Reluctantly, Audrey gave Donna a kiss goodbye and Josh took her from Donna's arms.

“Make her some celery and peanut butter, please, so she gets a little protein tonight,” she asked Josh in an aside.

He nodded that he would. “Be careful tonight,” he reminded her. “Call me if you need anything.”

“Kay, I will. Goodnight,” she gave him a soft smile knowing that his offer was genuine, grabbed her tickets and said goodnight to Amy, who's mood had soured considerably after watching the evening's interaction.

There was a silent moment in the apartment after the door closed, broke quickly by Audrey. “Macaronis?” She asked, not wanting anyone to be distracted and change their mind about her mac and cheese dinner.

“Well, let's see what Miss Amy wants for dinner,” he suggested.

“Macaronis?” Audrey asked Amy.

Amy had to admit- she was a cute kid. “Sure. That sounds… fine.”

“How about we order delivery from Tony's,” Josh offered, trying to find a compromise and assuming that Amy hadn’t exactly been looking for a night of blue box and singing with a three year old when she’d slipped into that dress.
Everyone seemed to agree with that idea, and Josh grabbed the phone to call in the order. Audrey was still only content when Josh was holding her. He placed an order for baked ziti for him, macaroni with peas for Audrey, and turned to Amy, waiting expectantly for her order.

Chicken Pomodoro was her go to dish and it sounded pretty good to her know.

“Chick-” she began, stopping her words when Josh’s eyes went wide and he shot her a look that reminded her why he was Bartlet’s Bulldog.

“Really?” he almost snarled.

“Sorry,” Amy muttered, adding an eyeroll that Josh didn’t see. “Fettuccini Alfredo.”

Josh placed the order, glad they were over that hurdle without another meltdown. He was remembering why he had compartmentalized his life like this. His casual relationship with Amy worked best when it was just that- casual. She truly was an independent woman with no desire to play the wife and mother. It was what it was, and Josh decided that he was fine with that. After all, he received most of the emotional fulfilment he craved from the other people in his life.

“Can we watch Peter Pan,” Audrey asked hopefully.

“We can turn it on,” Josh informed her, walking her over to click on the TV. “You and Walter can sit on the couch and color while you watch. Miss Amy and I will be watching from the kitchen, okay?”

Audrey scrunched her nose up in uncertainty. “You can’t see from the kitchen.”

Josh sighed. “We can see just fine from the kitchen table,” he assured her, sitting her on the couch and returning to Amy when she was absorbed in her movie.

“Quite the interesting night you’re having around here,” Amy began.

“Yeah, look, I’m sorry. I thought that when you said you wanted to have dinner you meant that you wanted to have dinner with us,” he spoke softly. “She’s just tired and I’ve been working a lot this week, she’s not usually like this.”

“It’s fine, J. We’ll make up for it some other time when it’s just the two of us. But you could offer me a glass of wine or something.”

“Sure,” he gave her a smirk and pulled out two wine glasses before opening a bottle that had been sitting in the back of the cupboard. They quietly made smalltalk for the next thirty minutes, bickering about a wide variety of proposed legislation while Audrey watched her movie.

Dinner arrived twenty minutes after it was ordered and Josh situated Audrey at the table with a small portion of macaroni and a few tiny bites of celery and peanut butter per Donna’s request.

“Daddy, can I have a bite?” Audrey asked, eyeing the bread that accompanied Amy’s dish. Donna’s standard order also included garlic bread, and Audrey loved the first bite.

“Ah,” Josh quickly took the temperature at the table, “No, baby. Just have your macaroni and cheese right now. You don’t need garlic bread. You can have some of my breadstick,” he offered, handing her a chunk off of his. She seemed content with the compromise and went on with her life, swinging her little legs and humming happily as she ate her meal.

Conversation was forced between Josh and Amy, with Amy struggling to find appropriate topics.
Josh was more than a little surprised by this. Didn’t she say that she had nephews?

“So, Audrey,” Amy began, “You like Peter Pan?”

“Mhmmm,” Audrey nodded eagerly. “I like Wendy. She’s my favorite. And Nana. And Mr. Smee,” she giggled.

“Oh yeah?” Amy gave her a smile. “I like the crocodile who eats the clock.”

“Tick-Tock,” Audrey moved her head back and forth with a smile.

“I’ll be right back,” Josh quietly excused himself to use the restroom. It seemed like the two were getting along well enough.

“And why is Wendy your favorite character,” Amy continued.

“Because she’s nice,” Audrey explained, “Like Donna.”

“Oh,” Amy wasn’t sure what to say.

“Miss Amy? Why did Donna leave before we had dinner?”

“Well,” Amy began, trying to figure out what to say. “Tonight is Donna’s night off. She had plans.”

“Her night off?” Audrey questioned tilting her head in concentration as she listened to Amy’s words.

“Well, yes. Since she works for your Dad. Tonight was her night off.”

“Donna works for Daddy?” Audrey was slowly processing something she’d never really thought of before.

“Yes. She gets paid to help your Dad.” Amy tried to phrase it as plainly as possible.

Audrey’s mind went to work, trying to reconcile what she’d just learned. This was Donna’s job? Her eyes widened and her shoulders slumped as Amy went back to her dinner, still talking to Audrey about Peter Pan, a movie that her nephews enjoyed.

When Josh returned only a few moments later, however, he saw the sadness in Audrey’s face immediately. “What happened,” he asked Amy, as he smoothed Audrey’s curls, his eyes examining her closely.

“We were just talking about Peter Pan,” Amy was genuinely at a loss, realizing for the first time just how downtrodden Audrey suddenly looked. “I have no idea…” She was borderline horrified. She honestly hadn’t meant to upset Audrey.

Josh couldn’t figure out what the issue was. Audrey must have just been having an off night. “Do you not feel good,” he asked her softly. Audrey shook her head, “no,” speaking of the newfound sadness inside of her.

“I think you’re just tired, baby,” Josh hoisted her up. “Let’s get you to bed.”

Audrey wrapped her arms around Josh and rest her head on his shoulder.

“I’ll be right back,” he began speaking to Amy, “I’m just going to-”

“You know what?” She cut him off, “It’s okay. I should probably go.”
“Oh.” Josh had to admit, he was disappointed. He’d wanted this evening to go well. He’d tried not to compare every move Amy had made to Donna, but he was struggling not to. But Josh didn’t want to be alone forever. The fact that Donna wasn’t interested in him had never been more clear than the last weeks, so Josh wanted to put some work into his relationship with Amy.

“It’s fine, J,” she continued, gathering her things. “I’ll call you tomorrow. I hope you feel better, Audrey,” she added with sincerity.

“Can you say bye,” Josh asked Audrey.

“Bye, Miss Amy.” It came out as barely a whisper.

Not at all wanting to kiss Amy in front of Audrey, Josh bid her a goodnight and saw her out. That certainly had not gone as planned.

OoOoOoO

"You're heading out?" Donna leaned in his doorway.

"Yeah." Josh grabbed his bag and powered down his computer. It had been a hellaciously long few days but it looked like he’d through with another victory. Though somehow, this one seemed considerably less sweet. "You can go home."

"Are you going home?" She wore a look of worry as she approached him.

"I'm, uh…” he stopped and sighed. "Ya know."

"Yeah." And she did. She knew what he’d had to do to get this thing passed and how unsettling it was to him. "I'm sure everything will be fine," she tried for optimism, though she knew that probably wasn't the case.

"Mmm," he mumbled a non response. Everyone who knew him well at all had been attempting to console him, having an idea of just how hard he was on himself when things like this happened.

She watched him move, noticing how utterly exhausted he seemed. Josh rounded the corner of his desk to head out but she stopped him, gently cupping his face. "Try and get some sleep tonight, okay? And eat a decent dinner."

He gave her a sad smile. God, he misses her. This exchanged has been the most they've connected in weeks. And he's incredibly grateful that she'd cared enough to notice how the Amy thing is affecting him but he's actually more heavy hearted at how strained his relationship with Donna has become.

He walked Donna out, putting her into a cab before hailing one for himself and heading to Amy's. Audrey was out of town for the weekend with his mother, visiting his father's second cousin New Jersey and on top of everything, he'd had to deal with at work over the last few days, he'd missed her terribly. He'd give anything just to be able to read her a story that evening and feel the simple peacefulness of a few quiet moments with his daughter. She's the center of his universe, and he just feels off without her.

He takes a moment to admit to himself that it's not just Audrey who centers him. Over the past few years, on some of the worst days of his career and a few of the worst days of his life, he'd always had Audrey and Donna. Two people who were always there for him. Two people who wouldn't let him fall into a hole. They, in very different ways, were the reasons he worked to make the world a better
place. So why was he on his way to Amy's? Honestly, he's not sure. But for some reason he feels like he has to try to fix things.

From the moment he'd walked into Amy's apartment, the tension had been almost unbearable. And if he hadn't known if before, by the time they were halfway through their argument he'd known that coming here had been a bad idea. Still he made one more effort to salvage the evening.

"Let's not do this now." He'd just wanted to move on, eat dinner, blow off some steam and get a good night's sleep. But Amy couldn't read him the way Donna could. Amy just couldn't or wouldn't stop pressing his buttons.

She didn't want to back down, didn't want to move on, hell, she didn't even want to salvage the evening. She just kept going--

"Cash bonuses to moms on welfare who marry the child's father-- canceling out child support debt if the parents…"

Finally, he lost it, raising his voice to be heard over hers. "You know what? Every single study, every one shows that kids do better in two-parent houses."

"Kids are better off if they're raised by parents who love them. Your solution is loveless."

"It's not my solution!" God! Why couldn't she see that? Was she really so completely clueless about how this process worked? Sometimes you have to take the bad with the good. Sometimes you just have to do what you need to do to get the bill passed. "I mean, it's CLEARLY not MY solution, Amy."

"Do you really think a tax credit will fix your life, Josh?" She practically hissed at him.

And he stopped and stood stock-still. It really was kind of like looking into the eyes of a poisonous snake. He gave her a pointed look. "I would choose your next words very carefully if I were you, Amy."

But she didn't heed his warning, still trying to win at any cost.

"I'm asking you a question, Josh. Because based on what you've negotiated today, that's exactly what it seems like you think. So tell me, would your life be better if Audrey's mother would have stayed for a tax incentive? Or how 'bout she comes back and the two of you play house, would that be the best thing for your daughter?"

"No! Of course it's not what I think! And you know what, Amy? I don't know the true struggle of a single mother on welfare, nor do I claim to. But for another billion dollars in childcare I was willing to take the deal. It's progress!"

"I'm only going to tell you once, Amy. Leave Audrey out of this."

"Right, leave YOUR family out of this. This is just another line in the budget. An insignificant bargaining tool that doesn't apply to YOUR family? Well, it should! You're a single parent, Josh. If there was anything that you should stand firm on I would think it might be this."

"Don't pretend like you have any idea about MY family or the arrangements or sacrifices I've made for my daughter."

"You mean the arrangement you have for your assistant to raise her?"
"Amy." If she's had been listening to his tone she would have heard the warning in the way he said her name. But she didn't, still spitting venom and taking aim at everything dear to him.

"There's no tax incentive if you marry the de facto mother, Josh."

Part of him couldn't believe she'd gone there, and part of him wasn't surprised at all. "You're so far across the line, Amy, that . . ."

But before he could finish that thought she picked up her phone and called her office, ready to head to war with him over this topic.

So much for sleep, Josh thought, as he gathered his belongings and head out the door, cursing himself for ever having trusted her at all. With any part of his life.

OoOoOoO

Donna took Audrey's hand, throwing her small bag over her shoulder and leading her up the stairs to the apartment. Her day had taken an odd turn at the last minute, that was for sure. She’d spent most of her evening at Josh’s setting the scene so he could have a Tahitian evening with Amy. It was easy for Donna to see that the pair had been fighting for the better part of the last few weeks, but clearly Josh was trying to make some sort of amends. After all, he was a chronic fixer.

And though she may have been less than thrilled at the thought of Josh having a romantic night with Amy, but she had long ago promised Audrey a girl’s sleepover night and she was going to make sure she pulled out all the stops.

She unlocked the door and Audrey ran straight over to pet Donna’s roommate's cats, a piece of her personality she certainly didn’t inherit from her father.

They'd already been to the video store where Audrey spent twenty minutes selecting the perfect movie. Donna had supplemented her animated selection with Mary Poppins, which she couldn't believe Audrey had never seen. Donna quickly changed into comfortable clothes and put her things down, prepping the kitchen while the little girl entertained herself with the cats.

"Audrey, come over here and hang your coat up and wash your hands so we can make dinner."

Audrey skipped right over, excited to cook with Donna.

Donna popped Audrey up onto the counter and stood next to her, helping her knead some pizza dough and spread it out on a greased pan, giving her free reign on the cheese and toppings. Audrey talked non stop while she carefully placed the black olives and turkey pepperoni, telling Donna all about her week. After Donna slid the pizza into the oven, they moved onto Audrey's requested dish: cookies.

Donna helped Audrey measure out the ingredients and stir them all together. "Chocolate chips or M&M's?" Donna held both of the mix ins up for Audrey to choose.

Audrey scrunched up her face in concentration. "Chocolate chips. Daddy likes chocolate chips."

Donna smiled softly at the sweet reasoning behind Audrey's choice. "Okay. We can do both if you want M&M’s, too," she told her, Audrey's eyes widening in excitement.

They spooned drops onto a spare baking sheet, Audrey’s cookies varying greatly in size, but Donna was pleased to see that their little cooking project kept her attention for as long as it had.
Audrey went suspiciously quiet for a moment, deep in concentration. Donna simply watched her, able to tell she was thinking something through.

"Donna? Is my Daddy with Miss Amy tonight?" Audrey finally asked timidly.

Donna couldn't lie to the little girl. She nodded her head in confirmation. "Yes, he is."

Audrey seemed to weigh that information in her mind for a moment. "Miss Amy doesn't like me," she stated in a near whisper.

"Oh, honey. Why do you think that?" Donna swore her heart practically broke in half. How could anyone give this sweet little girl the impression that they didn't like her?

Audrey bit her lip, clearly hesitant to continue. "Her voice sounds funny when she talks to me. And she doesn't smile at me the same way you do. She just talks to Daddy and ignores me."

Donna was fairly sure that if she came across Amy Gardner in the next five minutes she would read her the riot act. What in the hell was she thinking? Did Josh know about this and let Audrey go on thinking this way?

"Donna? Can I tell you a secret?"

"Yes. Of course."

"I really wish you were the person who loved me and Daddy instead of Miss Amy."

Donna felt like she'd been doused with a glass of cold water. What could she possibly say to that? She did love Josh and Audrey, there was no denying that. She let out a breath, tucking Audrey's loose curl behind her ear. She'd always told Audrey that honesty was the best policy, so she figured she had to practice what she preached. "I do love you," Donna assured her.

Audrey's attention snapped up to Donna at that moment. "You do?"

"Of course I do. "You know that, Sweet Pea. Don't you?"

Audrey studied Donna's face for a long time. "But Miss Amy said that it's your job to spend time with us."

Donna's blood was near boiling. There were most certainly going to be words the next time she bumped into Amy Gardner.

"Audrey Joan, listen to me," Donna sat her spoon down and bent over until she was eye level with Audrey. "It's my job to help Daddy and Papa Leo in the office, that's true. But it's not my job to love you, or to be Daddy's friend, okay? I do that because I want to. When I spend time with you, that's not because it's my job, okay?"

Audrey nodded her head in slow comprehension.

"Do you understand," Donna asked softly, wanting to leave no room for discrepancy.

"Yes," Audrey held her arms out to Donna, who quickly wrapped her in a hug. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

Donna sat Audrey down and placed the dirty bowl into the dishwasher. She cleaned Audrey up, changing her into her jammies so they could kick off their girls night with dinner and a movie. She
was glad for a change of conversation, though their discussion wouldn't be far from her mind.

After two videos and a nail painting party Audrey was finally getting heavy eyelids.

"Okay, time for bed," Donna announced as the credits rolled on My Little Pony. "I'm just going to
lock up."

"Donna?" Audrey sounded borderline panicked from the other room, causing Donna to bolt over to
er her.

"Donna, I forgot Walter." The little girl's brown eyes were blinking quickly as she tried not to cry
over the realization that her favorite stuffed bunny wasn't in her little backpack.

Donna, who was well versed in the importance of Walter at bedtime, had to think fast. "Well, maybe
Walter is having a night with all of his friends while we have our girls night," she tried. "Do you
want to sleep with my bear?"

Audrey was momentarily distracted. "You have a bear?"

"I do," Donna nodded. "From when I was a little girl." She walked over to her closet and flipped on
the light, pulling down a small box of things from her parents house and unearthing a well worn
teddy bear.

Audrey eyed the bear skeptically. "What's his name."

"Patrick," she replied, pulling Audrey in close. "Do you think you can snuggle with Patrick for the
night? Keep him company for me?"

Audrey's little lip quivered slightly. "I miss Walter," she whispered. Donna could tell Audrey was
trying her hardest to be brave about this, but it was a losing battle.

"Go get your toothbrush, Sweet Pea," Donna told her, kissing the top of her head. "I'll see what I can
do."

As Audrey dug through her backpack Donna pulled her phone out and called Josh, stepping into the
other room for a bit of privacy. It went to his machine.

"Hi. I'm so sorry to interrupt your night…"

"Donna?" He picked up, obviously fumbling the phone in the process. "Is everything okay?"

"Um, Walter is at your place," she told him. "But yes, we're fine. I didn't mean to disturb…"

Josh laughed softly. "I forgot to pack Walter. I'd definitely say that constitutes an emergency."

"I shouldn't have called…"

"No," Josh interrupted quickly. "I'm glad you did. You can… you know, call me. I can have him
over there in 30 minutes. Will that work?"

"What? Josh, you can't interrupt your evening to bring a bunny over here," she whispered.

"Can. And will," Josh told her defiantly. "See you in a bit."

And with that the call was disconnected.
Thirty minutes later Donna answered the knock at her door.

"Special delivery," Josh announced, holding Walter out to Audrey, who was elated to see her bunny. "Go get your bag, kiddo."

Audrey froze, looking at her father. "But… I'm staying with Donna. We're having a slumber party. We have plans tomorrow, Daddy!"

Donna was confused too. Wasn't Amy at his house for a night of wild sex or something? "It's really fine, Josh," Donna assured him.

"You have plans?" This caught Josh off guard.

Audrey nodded earnestly. "Yes. We're doing brunch. With CJ and Carol."

Josh laughed at his daughter's panache.

"Audrey," Donna interjected, "why don't you go pick up the puzzle you were playing with so I can talk to your Dad?"

Audrey ran to the far corner of Donna's living room and Donna refocused her attention. "What happened with Amy?"

Josh shrugged his shoulders, watching Audrey move around the room picking up with her bunny under one arm, singing a little bit. "It's over," he stated somewhat absently.

"Josh…"

He flicked his gaze over to meet Donna's. "It's just… it didn’t work out," he told her. Amy hadn't really understood his need to pop out and deliver a stuffed bunny in the middle of their night together. And Josh, for his part, hadn't understood why, when he had a perfectly attractive woman in his apartment, his heart still skipped a beat when he heard Donna's voice on his machine.

"Wanna come in?" she nodded towards the couch, and Josh took his coat off. Donna whispered something to Audrey, who smiled brightly at her father and then took off towards the kitchen with Donna.

"I made you a cookie," Audrey proclaimed a moment later, offering the biggest one in the pile to Josh and standing watch while he tried it.

Donna looked on, listening to Josh praise his daughter over her baking, pulling her onto his lap. She knew she needed to talk to Josh about her conversation earlier with Audrey, but this wasn't the time or place. If she didn't know better, she would have thought her boss and friend was nursing a bit of a broken heart.

"You can stay here with Donna," she heard Josh tell Audrey, "if you promise to be on best behavior. Do you promise?"

Audrey nodded animatedly and Josh kissed her goodnight. "Go lay down, shortcake. I'll say goodbye before I leave."

"You're sure this is okay," he double checked with Donna.

"Of course," she confirmed. "And when was the last time you had a night off? You should call Sam and go out for a beer."
Josh shrugged his shoulders. "Nah."

"Oh. Well, in that case, there's beer and leftover pizza in my fridge and I'll get the stuff to make up the couch. We're having a slumber party, you know," Donna quipped. "You're welcome to stay."

Josh smiled genuinely for the first time in weeks. "Sounds absolutely perfect."
“You got a haircut.” Donna fell into step beside him.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, somewhat annoyed with her observation. “Ever the observant assistant.”

“Why?” She narrowed her gaze at him. It was much shorter than normal, and frankly she found his wild curls to be quite appealing.

“Gum,” he swallowed hard, still in a bit of a huff.

“You got gum in your hair?” She raised her eyebrows in muted amusement.

“Audrey.” He stated flatly.

“Audrey isn’t allowed to have gum,” Donna stated flatly.

“Donna, I think I know what she is and isn’t allowed to have.”

“But you seem to have missed the memo on gum.”

“Donna, she wanted a gumboil. I told her she could have one if she didn’t swallow it. I was just going to let her chew it for a minute.”

“It’s not actually the chewing that is the problem,” Donna began. “It’s that she tries to blow bubbles and just spits out the piece of gum.”

“Are you under the impression that you’re providing me with new information right now?” He stopped to look at her, gesturing towards his short hair.

She paused for a beat, making a face. It was all coming together now. Donna suppressed a laugh, though not very successfully. “No, I suppose not.” She fell back into step beside him. “But you’re late for Senior Staff and as soon as you’re done there you have a meeting on social security in the Roosevelt Room.”

“Kay,” he muttered, tossing his backpack into a visitor’s chair in his office and beginning to rummage through it. “Do me a favor,” he asked her, pulling out a children’s book. “Make sure the Italian ambassador gets that.”

“The Little Red Lighthouse and The Great Grey Bridge? This is Audrey’s?”

“No,” he explained, “she has a one, though. I took her to that children’s bookstore by my apartment last night and I saw they had a copy. He’d been looking for it.”

“You’re discussing children’s books with Alberto Fedrigotti?”

“It… came up. Will you just make sure he gets it?”

“Got it,” she told him, sticking the book under her arm to move on to the next piece of information she needed to provide him. “You have an 11:30 with Babbish, a 1:00 on the hill.”

“Great,” Josh muttered sarcastically.
“Your parent teacher conference is at 3:30, and you have to be back here to meet with Leo and State by 4:45. So, should I plan to pick her up while you’re in that?”

“We can just get her after our meeting and bring her back here while we finish up.”

“You want me to sit in on that with you?”

He raised his eyebrows, a somewhat vulnerable expression on his face. “That’s not obvious at this point?”

Donna smiled softly at him. “I’ll be ready to go.”

OoOoOoOoO

After a parent teacher conference that left Josh beaming with pride, the three returned to the White House to finish the day. Josh, or rather Donna, had scheduled him fairly lightly knowing that they’d have Audrey, but things still popped up.

Josh sat behind his desk reading a memo while Audrey was situated across from him in a visitors chair, snacking on some fruit and cheese and coloring.

“Daddy?”

“Hmm?”

“Are there more trees or birds in the world?”

“Trees,” he answered, not even having to pause his reading.

“Are there more trees or people in the world?”

“Trees.” Josh’s eyes flicked over to her. Audrey was still drawing intently with a purple crayon.

“Are there more flowers or trees in the world?”

“DONNA!”

“You bellowed?” She appeared in the doorway almost immediately.

“Audrey has some questions for you,” he told her. “And I have a meeting with Toby and the NEA.”

Josh stood and slipped on his suit jacket, leaning down to give Audrey a kiss on the forehead. “Stay with Donna. I won’t be too long and then we can go home, okay?”

Audrey turned nodded her consent before turning around in her chair and giving Donna a grin, hopping down and rushing over to take her hand. “Donna, how many fish are there in the sea?”

Josh shook his head and chuckled to himself, heading down the hallway for his meeting.

OoOoOoOoO

"Your 5:30 appointment is here," Carol couldn't control the smile she was trying to mask as CJ paused in front of her desk.

"My 5:30? I have a 5:30?” CJ searched her mind over twice but couldn't come up with who her
appointment could be as she peeked into her office.

"CJ!" Audrey jumped up and ran to the press secretary, giving her a grin and a huge hug.

"Hey, kiddo! What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for Daddy," Audrey offered, making her way back to Donna.

"Audrey has something to ask you," Donna tried to gently coax it out of the little girl, reflexively reaching down to smooth her hair.

Audrey looked at Donna and gave her a smile, turning her attention back to CJ.

"It's my turn for show and tell," Audrey jumped right in, her animated speaking style clearly an inherited trait from her father.

CJ sat down, a proud smile sneaking across her face. She thought she knew where this was going. She was the voice of the president, after all. It wouldn't be so out of left field for a little girl to want to take her to show and tell.

She caught the eye of Toby, Sam and Josh, who clearly needed to be in a meeting but had stopped to lean in her doorway and listen, shooting them a wink.

"...And I asked my teacher and she said..." Audrey's attention strayed from CJ as she looked over at Donna, already knowing who she was going to need to convince. "She said I could bring her," Audrey told her earnestly.

Donna nodded her head. "I know. Ask her," she encouraged Audrey to keep going.

CJ was beyond flattered.

"CJ?" Audrey stepped forward to the large desk. "Can I bring Gail to show and tell?"

The moment still would have been rather sweet if not for the hysterical laughter that erupted from the doorway. The three other senior staffers weren't able to contain themselves, practically doubling over as they cackled. It was the hardest Toby had laughed in years.

OoOoOoOoO

"Is she here yet?" Josh peeked into Donna’s cubicle.

“No. We just dropped her off at school not even two hours ago. You have to get some work done today, Josh! You’re both going to be miserable if you’re too busy to speak to her class."

“But you’ll let me know when they get here?"

“Yes,” she promised. “Though it’s hardly her first visit to the White House. Now go get some reading done,” she shooed him back into his office.

Twenty minutes later Donna peeked in to Josh’s office. “They’re here,” she announced.

Josh gave her a smile, his dimples popping out, and hopped up, walking with Donna to the lobby where they were met by 15 preschoolers, most of whom were fairly apathetic about their White House tour.
But midway down the line of children stood a very excited Audrey Lyman, bouncing on the balls of her feet, brimming with excitement and wearing a full dimpled grin that matched her father’s precisely.

“Good Morning,” Josh stepped through security to greet the class and the teachers, extending his hand to welcome the head of the preschool.

“Good Morning, Mr. Lyman. Nice to see you again.”

Josh welcomed the adult staff to the White House, giving them a quick rundown of how the morning would go, with some last minute changes due to scheduling conflicts.

Donna, who had been carrying an armful of visitor ID’s, made quick work of finding a place to temporarily store 15 tiny coats and then distributing the ID lanyards with Audrey’s help. Two children were assigned to each adult, the four teachers and three parent volunteers immediately on edge at the thought of a broken national relic. Donna and Josh accompanied Audrey and the three lead the way through the busy West Wing corridors.

Josh paused every so often to explain, in a level that the kids would understand, what happened in a certain room, or why a particular painting on the walls was important. He wasted very little time, though, as he knew that this particular part of the day wouldn’t hold the kids’ attention. Audrey took special consideration to introduce the class to Gail the Goldfish.

He ushered the class into the Roosevelt Room, taking a quick detour when he heard Toby yelling in the communications bullpen.

“Uh oh,” Audrey had remarked. "Uncle Toby is a grumpy bear today.”

The kids climbed into their seats around the table and stared blankly at Josh. “So,” he took the lead, shoving his hands into his pockets and bouncing a bit. “Like I said earlier, my name is Josh Lyman and I’m the Deputy Chief of Staff, which means I work here, in the White House, for President Bartlet. But most of you probably know me as Audrey’s Dad.”

Donna watched him beam with pride at that statement.

"Yeah?" He pointed to a little boy in what is apparently a very itchy a blue sweater, who already had a question. "Uhh..." he looked at Donna, unsure of the child’s name.

"James," Donna supplied.

“Yes, James?”

James put his hand down and stared at Josh. "My dad says you're all liars.”

"Your dad sounds like a real creative genius," Josh snarked, forgetting for a moment where he was.

"Joshua!” Donna whisper scolded.

"You can tell your father that everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but that I said his is wrong. And Todd, maybe you can buy him a thesaurus for a holiday gift because that's the third time I've heard that particular phrase this morning."


"Right," he jumped back into it. "As you've been learning there are 50 states, the District of
Columbia, and 6 territories in the United States. And the President of the United States was elected by the people as the leader of the entire United States. So, today you’re here to see where that all takes place. I think your teacher explained this to you?"

Ms. Melissa piped in as if on cue. “We’ve learned about a different state every day for the last two months. And we’ve colored a map that we’re going to give to...” Ms. Melissa looked to Audrey.

“My friend Charlie!” Audrey piped in.

Josh nodded. “The President’s body man. That’s a great thing to do. They’ll display it in the outer office.”

“Charlie. Okay,” Ms. Melissa continued. She was slightly overwhelmed to be standing where she was, and Donna had long wondered if she was secretly a member of Josh’s fan club. “So, we’ll give the drawing to Charlie. And we’ve made the tree ornaments that Ms. Moss requested.”

“Great,” Josh piped in. “They save space on the District of Columbia Tree in the Pathway of Peace. It’s the walkway surrounding the National Christmas Tree,” he explained to the teachers before turning his attention back to Audrey’s class. “There are 57 Christmas trees, one for each state, territory and DC. Each tree contains handmade ornaments from residents. So the ornaments you’ve made will be placed on the tree for DC. Any questions?”

A little boy, sitting on the far end of the table, shot his hand into the air, eager to be called on. “Yeah?” Josh pointed at the child, already apprehensive about what the “question” would be. “What’s your name?”

“James,” Donna supplied.

“I thought he was James,” Josh gestured to the boy in the itchy blue sweater.

“That’s James R.,” Audrey supplied, pointing to the boy in the sweater, as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “And that’s James B.,” she pointed at the boy with his hand raised.

“Don’t point, Audrey,” Donna reflexively chimed in, gently redirecting Audrey’s hand. “It’s not nice.”

“Okay, James B. What’s your question?”

“I’m bored.” He stated.

“James!” Ms. Melissa interjected. “We are using our best manners today.”

“It’s really okay,” Josh laughed. He was well aware of the attention span of kids this age. “Now that you’ve had your tour of the West Wing, we’re going to go into the Oval Office and meet President Bartlet. I think your teacher already told you how important it is that you NOT TOUCH ANYTHING.”

“Okay,” Ms. Melissa instructed, “Everyone find your partner and your teacher. We’re going to walk quietly and do just as Mr. Lyman instructed and not touch anything on the way, alright?”

Josh opened the door, Audrey and Donna in tow, and started out towards The Oval. Even after the repeated warnings not to touch anything, both James’ ran their hands along the walls as they walked, opening every possible drawer they could find and knocking over a stack of papers on Ed’s desk, which turned out to be a portion of the 2,000 page appropriations bills.

Upon the realization of what had just happened, Josh picked up the pace and lead the kids further
down the hallway before 15 preschoolers inadvertently learned some new four letter words. “That kid has to be a Republican... I can spot ’em a mile away,” Josh quietly snarked to Donna.

Rounding the corner to cut through communications, the troupe encountered Toby, pacing in front of his office, squeezing a racquetball in his hand. He was just beginning the mental outline of the State of the Union.

“Hi, Uncle Toby!” Audrey exclaimed. “Whatcha’ doin? Bangin’ around?” She looked up at him with wide eyed adoration. The two had a special bond, and Toby showed a level of kindness and protection to Audrey that was otherwise rarely displayed.

“I am,” he cleared his throat. “And just what are you doing?”

“Going to see the President,” Audrey supplied. “This is my class,” she stated, turning around to the 14 other preschoolers and the chaperones. “This is my Uncle Toby,” she announced. “He writes words and eats pie.”

“Communications Director,” Josh amended in an aside to the adults.

“They’re out of pie,” Toby muttered.

“Is that why you’re a grumpy bear?” Audrey asked.

Toby cleared his throat. “Perhaps.”

Seemingly out of the blue, Toby felt a swift kick to the shin. “Ow,” he stated in a monotone, glancing down to see a tiny scowl on a little boy in a red plaid button up. “And just what is your name,” he asked, swiftly going into protector mode and readying himself to make a mental note to never let Audrey associate with this particular child.

“Jeffrey,” the child retorted, sticking his tongue out when he was sure his teacher wasn’t looking.

“Jeffrey what?” Toby straightened his tie.

“Jeffrey Allister Haffley the 4th,” the child stated with an edge, almost daring Toby to react poorly.

"Of course,” Toby stated with a sarcastic chuckle. "Of course your name is Jeffrey Haffley the 4th. You would be the one that kicked me in the shin. Unprovoked, I might add.”

“Okay, well, let’s get moving,” Josh began ushering the group along once again.

“It’s okay,” Audrey assured Toby with a pat on the arm as they all filed out. “He bit me last week.”

Toby immediately swooped in and lifted Audrey into his arms. “You stay over here,” he instructed Jeffrey. “I will discuss the biting with your teacher and your father later.”

Upon their arrival in the outer office to The Oval, Audrey waved hello to Charlie, Toby letting her down only after Jeffrey was on the other side of the room. Charlie launched into his greeting, gratefully accepting the class’ drawing and introducing himself to the class.

Toby stood near Josh, lowering his voice. “Jeffrey bit Audrey last week.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s not the first time,” Josh was just as unamused with the situation.

“What are we going to do about this?”
“We?” Josh raised his eyebrows.

“It seems like there should be a, a, a punishment. Or a course of corrective action.”

“Donna and I met with his mom on Tuesday.”

“And?”

“And what? He’s three and a half years old. They’re working on it and the teachers are keeping Audrey separated from him.”

“Do you want me to get into it?”

“Do I want you to get into it? What in the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“With Haffley,” Toby began, staring at a point on the wall behind Josh. “I could have a word with him. It would keep it out of your office but still have a lasting impression.” Toby shifted his weight.

“NO, I don’t want you to GET INTO IT!”

The room turned to stare at the two men. “Sorry,” Josh muttered, motioning for Charlie to continue speaking. “Toby, listen to me. Let it go. I appreciate it but let’s not halt the President’s legislative agenda to ‘get into it’ about which kids aren’t getting along at preschool.”

Toby, clearly not pleased with that response, straightened his tie. “The offer is always on the table.”

“Thanks, Toby,” Josh clapped his shoulder appreciatively as Charlie opened the door to The Oval.

The class filed in and stood in a line towards the back wall of the room as the President rounded his desk to lean on the front, removing his glasses to address the kids. “Good Morning!” he greeted.

“Good Morning, Mr. President,” the class chorused in unison as they’d been instructed.

The President spoke briefly to the class about a very watered down version of his job as a few additional members of Senior Staff filed in to listen.

The connecting door to the Chief of Staff’s office opened quietly to reveal Leo and Edith, her camera at the ready.

“Now,” the President continued, “I’m sure that there are several of you in the room who have parents that work in the federal government in some capacity.” It was the nature of the beast when you attended preschool in Georgetown, they supposed. “But Miss Lyman’s father works for me, so that’s part of what we’re going to discuss today. Audrey, come on up here, please.”

Audrey didn’t waste any time making her way to stand next to President Bartlet, who popped her up to sit on the side of the Resolute Desk.

"Audrey’s father is my Deputy Chief of Staff,” the President continued. “But what does that mean, exactly?” President Bartlet was met with blank stares. “Audrey, do you know what it is that your father does here?”

She shrugs animatedly. She’d never really thought about it before, but she gave the most honest answer she could. "Whatever Donna tells him?"

That drew a hearty laugh from Sam and CJ, who were standing in the corner. Donna's smile widened and Josh just shook his head. He was never going to hear the end of that.
"Boy, I'll say," Leo remarked.

"Oh, Josh," President Bartlet chuckled. "I can't wait to tell Abbey about this."

"Yes, sir," Josh laughed too, his hand finding the small of Donna's back. But he had to admit, his daughter wasn't wrong about that.

“Well, while Audrey is right in a certain capacity,” the President continued. “His job is also to help create laws. He works hard to make sure that everyone in this country, especially those of your generation, can be whatever they want to be. That you all have access to schools, and doctors and food to eat.”

Most of the children turned their heads to stare at Josh again as the President paused briefly before resuming his speech, encouraging the preschool class to be involved in their communities.
“Decisions are made by those who show up,” he mused, more for the adults in the room. “And the 15 of you have already shown up, bringing along what I hear are finely crafted ornaments for our Christmas tree. The future is bright,” he told him with a smile. “Now, let’s get a photo.”

The class crowded around in front of the President and the White House photographer snapped a few photos before Charlie lead the class back into the outer office to don their winter gear and head out to the National Christmas Tree.

“Hold on, Audrey,” President Bartlet requested. “Let’s get one more photo while your classmates find their coats. Josh, Donna, Leo,” he gestured for the three to join them, President Bartlet sitting Audrey on his hip as Leo rest his hand proudly on the little girls back. Donna stood on the other side of the President as Josh wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. The camera flashed several times before the President handed Audrey over to Josh.

He kissed her goodbye, sending her to meet up with the rest of her class, who were going to be escorted to the District of Columbia tree and back to their small bus by an usher.

“Have fun out there,” Donna told Audrey, giving her a quick kiss.

“Bubbe will pick you up. I’ll see you at home,” Josh kissed her forehead. “Bye, Shortcake,” he sat her down and she hurried off to join her class, pausing briefly in the doorway and waving goodbye with a tiny smile.

“Alright,” the President’s voice commanded. “What’s next?”
"Josh Lyman's office." Donna hit the speakerphone button and continued to scribble a note from behind Josh's desk.

"Donna?"

"Edith?" Donna stood up, immediately tuned in to the sound of Audrey wailing in the background. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong, dear," the older woman offered quickly. "Audrey and I are just having a little... disagreement. We're at the Town Centre Mall, could you possibly come over here?"

Donna heard the borderline exasperation in Edith's voice as she attempted to calm Audrey down.

"But she's alright? You're sure? What happened?"

"She's fine, Donna. Really. I promised her she could get her ears pierced for Hanukkah and we were halfway through the process..."

"Say no more. I'll be right there," Donna told her.

As soon as Donna ended the call and glanced up she saw Josh, frozen in the doorway with his jaw set.

"Get your coat," she told him, needing him to get into gear rather than launch into the tirade she knew was coming. He could do that in the car. Donna grabbed her purse as Josh muttered something under his breath. Once inside the vehicle, Josh's mood didn't lighten.

"How long have you known about this," he snapped at Donna, making a sudden lane change and accelerating past several vehicles.

Donna raised her eyebrows and stared at him. "About thirty seconds longer than you have, Joshua."

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel and stared straight ahead at the roadway.

"What's wrong there, Rambo?"

"I just can't believe she would do this," he was growing more irate by the minute. "I mean, she didn't even ask us!"

"And you're vehemently opposed to pierced ears?" Donna was trying to pin down the source of the problem before their arrival at the mall caused a scene. He'd been unusually high strung, even for Josh, the last few days.

"Yes!" Josh blurted out. "Well, no," he then admitted, confusing even himself. "I don't know. That's not the point. The point is that she didn't say a word about it. She just made the decision and went out to have it done. What, did she think we wouldn't notice when we picked her up tonight?"

"I don't know about any of that. But she probably didn't think it would bother you like this," Donna offered.

"She's too young," Josh continued his rant. "She doesn't need to look like a teenager with, with... earrings! What if they get infected? What if she pulls them out!"
"Josh, plenty of little girls, even babies, have pierced ears. It's a rite of passage. And you know I'm not going to let anything get infected," she reached over and lightly touched his arm as they found a parking space. "Just try to stay calm, okay," Donna offered. "We're in a public place and your mother and Audrey are upset, too. You don't want to say anything you'll regret later."

As they made their way through the crowds of holiday shoppers, Jingle Bell Rock playing overhead, Josh and Donna found Edith and Audrey exactly where they'd been for the past 40 minutes. They were both relieved to see the tears had halted completely.

"Daddy!" Audrey shouted from where she sat on the bench.

"Hi, Shortcake," Josh crouched down in front of her. "What are you doing here?" Josh tried to keep his tone light and playful.

"Shopping with Bubbe," Audrey offered, swinging her feet a bit. "We got you new shoes," Audrey stated, unable to keep a secret regarding Edith's holiday gift purchases. "And a sweater for Donna. It's purple like my room."

Edith shook her head and chuckled quietly at the ruined surprises.

"Audrey Joan," Josh faked confusion, "what's on your ear?" He pointed to the tiny silver stud on her right ear.

"It's an earring, Daddy." Audrey was borderline exasperated that he even had to ask.

"An earring, huh?"

Audrey sat up tall and turned her head slightly so Josh could get a better look. "Don't I look pretty, Daddy?"

"Well, I think you looked pretty before, baby girl," Josh offered.

Donna stood next to him, watching her normally off the rails boss transform into the calm, stable presence in front of his daughter. She lightly placed her hand on his shoulder in quiet support.

"Okay," Josh reached forward to tuck Audrey's hair out of the way. "Time to take it out."

"Noooo," Audrey protested rather loudly, moving away from his touch. "Bubbe promised! She said I could have pretty earrings for Hanukkah! I'm a big girl!"

Josh leaned back a bit. "Well, if you want earrings you have to get the other one pierced."

"No, Daddy, it hurts!" Audrey protested.

Josh sighed. "Well, it has to be one or the other," he told her.

"Joshua," Edith began, "maybe we should just give her some time. She was quite upset earlier and..."

"Ma," Josh stood, "I really don't want to get into it right here. It's one or the other."

Donna sat down on the bench next to Audrey as Josh and Edith began a tense conversation in hushed tones.

"Hi, baby girl."
"Hi, Donna," Audrey gave her a huge smile. "Do you like my earring?"

"It's very fancy," Donna told her.

"It hurt," Audrey admitted to Donna. "Like a punch but worse."

"I know it did," Donna assured, smoothing her hair as Audrey leaned in to Donna's side. "But it only hurt for a minute or two, right? It's better now?"

Audrey thought about it for a moment, realizing that she was no longer in pain and nodding in agreement to Donna's assessment.

"That's right. I remember when I got my ears pierced," Donna offered.

Audrey looked up at her in awe. "You do?"

"Of course. I was in the third grade. It was a Christmas gift, just like yours is a Hanukkah gift."

"Were you scared?" Audrey asked.

"A little bit," Donna assured. "But I really wanted to wear my new earrings. And I knew I had to be brave or I couldn't wear my new earrings."

"Maybe I can try to be brave," Audrey told Donna.

"Do you want to go back inside and pick out a pair earrings while you think about it," Donna offered.

Audrey nodded her head in confirmation and took Donna's hand following her into the store, and catching Edith and Josh's attention.

Edith moved to follow them but Josh motioned for her to stay outside with him, looking on into the store as Audrey pointed out what she wanted to Donna, and then crawled onto Donna's lap and sat patiently as she let the attendant pierce her other ear.

Donna kissed her on the forehead and told her she'd done a great job, paying for the petite purple butterfly earrings Audrey had selected and returning to join Edith and Josh outside the store.

"All done," Donna announced. "Now, we've all had a rough afternoon, so why don't we all head over to find some ice cream?" She didn't leave any time for response. "Come on," she told them, looping her arm around Josh's and toting Audrey with them as she gave Edith a warm smile.

When they rounded the corner inside the mall near the ice cream shop, Donna continued to handle the situation. "Audrey and I will get the ice cream," she announced. "You two find a table."

Josh and Edith stood in silence for a few moments, Josh's foul mood very noticeable to Edith.

"Talk to me, son."

Josh glanced over to his mom but he gave his head a slight shake 'no,' and scowled. He was upset, and he was concerned about saying something in anger. Truthfully, he knows just how much his Mother does for him. He could never raise Audrey on his own. But still . . . she should have asked him.

"Joshua David…” Her tone of voice compels him to respond.
"You want to talk? Alright. Let's talk," he sat down with a huff. "That's my little girl. And believe me when I tell you, Mom, that I know couldn't raise her alone. And I really do appreciate all you do for us. But at the end of the day, there are some things that are up to me."

"And this was one of them?" Edith was truly amazed at Josh's reaction to this. She didn't think this was that big of a deal.

"YES! God, Mom, of course I want to be involved in things like this! She's growing up faster than I can comprehend anyway, I don't want to miss out on raising her. I'm not saying that I would have said no or fought you on it, just… run it by us next time."

"Wait a minute, Us?" His Mom gets an evil smile. "And who exactly is this 'us' I need to run it by next time? Hmmm?"

"Mom, I'm not getting into this right now."

"Avoidance, Joshua. You refuse to ever 'get into it.'"

"That's not true."

"Maybe you should start with admitting to yourself how you really feel."

"I'm not in denial, Mom. I just... can't. There's too much at risk."

"You really are blind."

"I'm not," Josh whispered harshly. "I'm not," he repeated, softening his tone as he watched Donna bend down and fix Audrey's hair. "I just... there's a lot going on right now. Things I can't tell you. Things I can't tell her. Things I can't tell anyone."

"Joshua, you don't have to take on the weight of the world."

His face wore a sad smile. "I may not have a choice."

But before Edith could continue to question him, Donna and Audrey returned with everyone's ice cream and Josh plastered on a bright smile.

"Alright," Donna narrated her actions as she passed out the ice cream scoops while Audrey climbed into a chair beside Josh. "Peppermint for me, sugar free butter pecan for Edith, birthday cake with sprinkles for Audrey and a hot fudge sundae with extra marshmallow and no nuts for Josh."

The four ate and chat, Audrey giving an over the top description of what she'd seen in the toy store window. Feelings were repaired with every passing minute. Somehow, Donna always knew exactly what they needed.

"Okay," Josh looked at his watch. "We better head out." He kissed his mother on the cheek and Audrey on the forehead. "I'll see you later, Shortcake. Be good for Bubbe."

He picked up his remaining portion of sundae and strolled leisurely towards the exit, Donna in perfect step beside him. As they reached the exit he took one last bite and moved to discard his small paper bowl.

"Wait!" Donna interjected, immediately blushing at her own outburst.

Josh wore a smug grin on his face. "Yeeessss?" He drawled. He knew what she wanted, but he was going to make her ask for it.
Donna reached towards him, but he pulled away, still grinning.

"Can I have it?"

Josh contorted his face as though he was confused.

"Jooosh…"

"Oh, would you like my cherry, Donnatella?" He was practically bouncing as he bantered with her. "Because I could, perhaps, be persuaded to share. For, say, a trade."

She gave him a playful pout. "You don't even like cherries."

"But you do. And I, therefore, have the upperhand. You see, Donna, that's an important tactic in politics."

Donna rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm being serious," he told her, acting intentionally pompous to get a rise out of her. "It's all about the upper hand when you negotiate. That and catching them off guard. I'm a master negotiator, Donna."

"What do you want?"

"Get me out of my 3:00 meeting with Bob Slattery early."

"Deal," she reached over and snatched his maraschino cherry, popping the entire thing into her mouth.

He raised one eyebrow as he watched her stand there, staring him down with a mischievous look on her face as her cheeks contorted for a quick moment before Donna produced the stem of the cherry, tied into a perfect knot.

Josh's jaw dropped. His mind went to places he tended not to let it.

Donna casually dropped the knotted stem back into the small plastic ice cream cup he was holding as she walked away, intentionally putting an extra sway into her hips, as she left Josh standing where he was, shell shocked.

"Come on, Joshua," she called over her shoulder. "You can teach me more in the car."

Josh gulped. God, he'd like to. If only she knew.

OoOoOoOoO

"He's going to be fine," Donna came up behind Josh and rest a hand on his shoulder, placing a warm mug in front of him. "It's Leo. He's built out of granite, Josh."

"I'll think of something," Josh muttered. "I have to think of something."

"What you have to do," Donna interrupted his thoughts, "is finish reading this memo so you can meet with the President in twenty minutes and then get to your Mom's house for dinner."

"Yeah." He scrubbed his hand over his face. He'd been consumed with finding a way to spare Leo from having to testify before the House, but he was currently at a loss. He had a few stall tactics in mind, but he wasn't sure they would be enough.
Donna remained where she was, her hands gently grazing across his shoulders and neck, back and forth, gently relieving the tension that currently resided inside of him. "You'll talk to me? When you're ready and if you can?" It was all she could offer him, but she wanted him to know that she was there for him. She always was. And she was tuned to him. She knew something was happening. Something about Leo's deposition had gotten under his skin and it was festering.

Josh reached up and gently clasp her hand where it rest, giving it a gentle squeeze. He couldn't currently find the words that he needed but he hoped his actions conveyed his emotions. "Always, Donnatella," he stated simply. "Thank you." Josh stood and grabbed the folder he'd need to brief the President, kissing her on the forehead. "You're coming to dinner?" he confirmed.

She nodded softly, her hand moving down from his shoulders and gently rubbing his back before he stepped away.

And in that moment, Donna was particularly glad that their relationship had recovered from the tumultuous events of the last 6 months. They'd moved on from Cliff and Amy. Neither had any place in their life. She and Josh were friends again, and if anything their friendship was even stronger. And she never felt more confident in her place in Audrey's life. Co-parenting with Josh fulfilled her in ways she'd never imagined. They'd weathered this storm. And if something else was brewing, well, she'd stand beside him through that, too.
Chapter 27

There were ways to get Gibson out of the room. He'd made a career out of this.

But Leo had insisted that Josh not intervene. "Nothing but a family thing," he'd muttered. Leo was hellbent on holding his own with the members of The House. The hearing was going on and the time was coming for Gibson to have his turn questioning.

Leo's instructions didn't stifle Josh's determination. He continued to do what he did best, just to be ready should something need to happen. After all, the President himself wanted to see Leo spared the embarrassment and he'd placed his trust in Josh.

Josh tried all the angles, but no one was available. It was eating him up on the inside, but finally, Josh had to make the call. "Leo," he'd stated firmly, "I couldn't make it happen." He wasn't going to ramble or try and explain his failure. He'd let Leo down, and no one would be harder on Josh than himself.

"Don't worry about it," Leo responded. And he meant it. He was ready for the fight.

But when the committee suddenly adjourned before Gibson's questioning began, Josh was filled with renewed determination. Maybe he wouldn't have to let the President down.

OoOoOoO

"Come in, Come in," CJ threw open her front door and ushered Josh, Donna and Audrey inside, immediately reaching down as Audrey gave her a hug.

"Happy New Year, Ceej," Donna offered, taking Audrey’s coat, hat and mittens from her as she shed them in the entryway before running into the party to give Charlie and Sam high fives.

Josh greeted CJ as well before excusing himself to say hello to Toby who was smoking a cigar on CJ’s balcony.

Donna helped CJ place the coats in her spare bedroom as the two caught up and CJ told Donna all about her trip to Ohio and the new digital camera she’d received for Christmas. They were interrupted by a little voice pressing her own political agenda without an ounce of hesitation.

"Daddy!" Audrey knocked aggressively on the window to the balcony. "Tell Uncle Toby smoking is bad for you!"

Both men looked like deer caught in headlights, staring at Audrey and then glancing at each other. Neither had any defense in this one as Toby held a lit cigar.

"Audrey, look!" Donna deflectd. "I packed a puzzle." She held up Audrey’s pink backpack and distracted her, Toby mouthing an uncomfortable ‘thank you,’ from where he stood.

Friends and colleagues came and went through the course of the night, and everyone was in a wonderful mood, enjoying the food, drinks, and company. Donna had just finished a long overdue conversation with Charlie’s sister Deanna, who stopped in to say hello for a few moments.

"Donna, I’m thirsty,” Audrey tugged at the hem of Donna’s shirt.

“I brought you some apple juice,” Donna guided her into CJ’s kitchen and opened the fridge before
pulling a glass from the cabinet.

“I want a fancy cup like you and Daddy,” Audrey pointed to the champagne flutes on CJ’s counter.

“Well of course you do,” CJ interjected with love. “It’s a special occasion and you’re a special girl.” She handed Donna a flute to fill with apple juice.

“Okay,” Donna poured hesitantly, reading the writing on the walls for this little idea, “but be very careful,” she told Audrey. “I’ll carry it.”

“It’s fine,” CJ waived Donna off. “What’s the worst that could happen? She breaks it? I’ll buy a new one. Let her have a little fun tonight. She’s stuck hanging out with all of us.”

Donna shook her head in amusement. “Walk slowly,” she told Audrey, glad she’d only filled it about a third of the way up.

Audrey started towards the living room at a snail's pace, both hands on the flute and a look of concentration on her face, her tongue sticking out slightly.

CJ began to chit chat with Donna about this and that, filling her in on Carol’s big date that evening. Their giggling was quickly interrupted by Josh bellowing from the next room. “Donna!”

Donna and CJ both peeked into the living room where Audrey stood next to her father, a scowl on her face and her arms crossed in protest as Josh held the flute of apple juice. “Someone gave her a champagne flute. And it’s good crystal,” he added.

“It’s alright, Mi Amor,” CJ assured Josh. “I gave it to her. I wanted her to use it.”

Josh’s eyebrows shot up in surprise as he handed it back to Audrey.

“Come on, Audrey,” Sam chimed in from the other side of the living room, “Uncle Toby and I will teach you how to deliver a proper toast.”

Audrey socialized a bit, putting together a puzzle and coloring on and off as the night went by. She started to get sleepy around bedtime, but tried to fight it as long as she could.

“I want to see the magic ball,” she pouted.

“It’s not magic,” Donna smiled, picking her up and kissing her forehead. “It’s just glittery. How about this,” Donna offered. “Let’s put your jammies on and you can take a little nap, and then I’ll wake you up to ring in the New Year?”

“Okay,” Audrey yawned her consent, resting her head on Donna’s shoulder.

Three hours later, Audrey sleepily stumbled back out to the party, her wild curls sticking up in every direction as she rubbed her eyes as she wandered over to crawl into Josh’s lap. “Is it next year yet,” she asked sleepily.

“No, not yet,” Josh assured her, smoothing her hair.

“Are you sure,” she asked, resting against him, her eyes fluttering closed once more.

“I’m sure,” he whispered, enjoying the simple moment with her.

The party went on around them and Donna eventually wandered over and joined them on the couch, gently rubbing Audrey’s back as the three sat in content silence. Something had been off with Josh
for the last week. She knew he’d been beating himself up because he wasn’t able to get Gibson out of the room in Leo’s testimony. And he hadn’t given up on his mission.

“Three minutes!” CJ announced, and Audrey struggled to pull herself from her near slumber, reaching for a purple foil noisemaker she’d kept a close eye on all evening.

Josh stood and Donna grabbed a glass of champagne to toast in the New Year as the friends began the countdown, Audrey perking up a bit more with every passing moment.

“Happy New Year!” They all cheered. Audrey blew a noise maker as the Bartlet senior staff joined in with small horns and bells for her amusement.

Sam kissed CJ on the cheek as they heard fireworks begin all over the city.

“Happy New Year,” Josh beamed at Donna.

“Happy New Year,” She returned his sentiment, their gaze remaining locked for longer than normal.

The moment was broken when Audrey took a deep breath and blew the noisemaker horn between them. Donna let out a genuine laugh.

CJ circled around to them. “Say Happy New Year,” she raised a camera to snap a quick photo.

“Happy New Year, Aunt CJ,” Audrey grinned, as Josh and Donna both leaned in and kissed her cheeks.

CJ snapped a photo and looked down at the digital screen on her camera. “Oh,” she swooned, placing her hand on her heart. “You guys are my favorite little family,” she gushed before moving over to speak to Charlie.

Josh smirked at Donna. “How much champagne has she had,” he asked, amused, standing Audrey on the floor to run over and celebrate with the other guests.

Donna raised an eyebrow and laughed. “I don’t know but maybe we should figure it out for the next time you announce a secret plan to fight-“

“Yeah, yeah,” she interrupted, knowing what was coming. “You’re just a mouth full of wiseass today, aren’t you?”

“Daddy!” Audrey shrieked as she came up behind him. “You said a bad word!”

“Sorry,” Josh apologized. “You’re right. That’s a bad word and I shouldn’t have said it.”

“Time out?” Audrey directed her attention to Donna.

“No time out for Daddy,” Josh interjected. “Go get your things so we can head home. It’s WAY past your bedtime as it is. I’m sure Donna will punish me tomorrow,” he added, knowing he wouldn’t soon hear the end of it.

“Yeah, you wish,” CJ muttered softly as she breezed by.

Josh’s mouth fell open in borderline shock and Donna, though she tried, couldn’t help but to laugh outright.

“Seriously,” Josh told Donna, smiling himself and not denying anything, “we’ve got to get her to drink more champagne.”
Donna bit her bottom lip, feeling immediately conflicted. She wasn’t even comfortable speaking to Cliff on the phone, she certainly wasn’t going to go behind Josh’s back and secretly meet with him. She flipped her phone open and clicked her first speed dial number.

Josh, pouring over a memo at his kitchen table, answered his phone on the first ring.

“Yeah?” He didn’t even look away from the memo.

“Josh?” She was somewhat hesitant from the get go.

“Hey,” he tried to keep his voice welcoming, reassuring her that if she needed something, she could talk to him.

“Cliff Calley called me. He wants me to meet him in the Georgetown Law library to discuss something.”

He was immediately on full alert. “Donna, where are you?”

“I’m in your office,” she told him.

“Come over here,” Josh instructed her, leaving no room for argument in his voice. “Tell no one what is happening. Come straight here. Right now.”

“Okay,” she agreed, ending the call and grabbing her coat, making a beeline to a cab and heading straight to Josh’s brownstone.

He was ready and waiting when she arrived. “You stay here with Audrey,” he told her. “I’m going to meet him.”

She nodded her head in nervous agreement and he could see her worry. “You did the right thing when you called me,” he reassured her with a light touch, brushing a stray strand of hair from her face. “I’ll be back as soon as possible,” he told her, slipping out the door and hailing a cab.

Donna perched herself on the edge of his couch, where she sat for the next hour. She couldn’t bring herself to relax. When she heard his key in the lock just past midnight she was immediately to her feet, a look of abject worry written all over her face.

“It’s really coming down out there,” he noted, removing his scarf and brushing the snow out of his hair.

She simply watched him, unsure of what was to come next.

“It’s fine, Donna,” he told her, though she didn’t believe him. Something had shifted inside him and she could see it, though it certainly wasn’t his usual man on a mission mentality peaking through.

She stared at him curiously.

“What did he say,” she asked with a certain degree of hesitancy in her voice. She knew better than to ask Josh a simple question such as that, but this seemed somehow different.

“Nothing,” he shook his head, though his usual political mask didn’t cover everything his face was giving away. “But, hey, it’s late and it’s getting slick out there. You should just stay here.”

She paused a moment and blinked a few times.
“It was an offer, Donna. He made an offer and I made a counter offer. He’s going to take it back to his leadership, I’m going to handle it on our side. It’s not something… I don’t want to get into it. I can’t get into it.”

That appeased her only slightly as she nodded her head. “Alright,” she agreed to drop the subject, for the time being, following Josh down the hallway and stealing a pair of his flannel pants and an old sweatshirt.

She may not have been able to pinpoint what was on Josh’s mind, which was certainly working in overtime, but she could lay next to him for a few hours. And that was exactly what she’d do.

OoOoOoO

Josh had barely been able to think about anything other than his meeting with Cliff Calley since he left the Georgetown Law Library in the middle of the night. The reality of the offer was only beginning to sink in, and Josh could only hope that he’d figure something else out.

“Josh. Hold on a minute,” President Bartlet requested as the rest of senior staff was filing out of the Oval. Congress would return from recess the following day and Josh knew exactly what the President wanted to discuss.

President Bartlet flipped through a few pages of a memo and looked at Josh over the top of his glasses. “Your deal. Is it still on the table?”

“Yes, Sir,” Josh swallowed.

“Are you going to be able to tell me what it is?”

“With all due respect, Mr. President, I think I need to keep you as far away from this as possible. And I certainly need to keep it out of The Oval.”

“The repercussions are that serious?”

“Yes, Sir.”

President Bartlet stared at Josh intently. His Deputy Chief of Staff was the best in the business, there was no doubt about that. If there was a deal to be made in DC, Josh Lyman would do whatever it took to make it happen.

President Bartlet nodded firmly to his Deputy. It was time. “Pull the ripcord, Josh.”

“Yes, sir.”
Donna woke slowly from her sleep, taking a moment to process what was happening. Why was she awake? Was there a noise? She couldn’t be sure. She rolled over and rubbed the sleep from her eyes, blinking a few times and glancing at the clock on her nightstand. 3:52am. Just then, her phone rang.

"Mmmpfh," she groaned, not even bothering to look at the caller ID. There was only one person calling at this time of day.

"What do you want, Joshua? I have to get up in an hour anyway," she whined.

"Open your door, Donna."

She sat upright in bed. "Huh? You're here?"

"Yes, I'm right outside," he told her, holding the phone with his shoulder as he shifted a still sleeping Audrey to his other hip.

"And you're not bellowing," Donna teased. It may be the middle of the night but she could still banter with him.

"Audrey's asleep," he told her, not a hint of humor in his voice. "Just open the door."

She was out of bed in a flash, throwing the locks open and letting Josh and Audrey inside, forgetting for a moment that she was sporting only a pair of panties and an oversized tshirt. A tshirt that she'd stolen from him at some point, actually. "What's wrong," she asked immediately, locking up behind them and quickly moving closer to him, reaching out to gently rub Audrey's back.

"She's fine," Josh assured her, placing a large briefcase on the counter and glancing down at Audrey. The little girl's eyes fluttered opened and found Donna, who gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Go back to sleep, sweet pea," Donna told her.

"Can I lay her down in your bedroom so we can talk?" He was all business this morning.

Donna nodded her head to Josh, wondering what could have possibly brought him over at this time of day. He looked awful- tired, worried, you name it. Whatever it was, Donna was sure it was important and she likely wouldn't be going back to bed any time soon. She shuffled to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee.

Josh eventually emerged, leaning on the counter to Donna's kitchen, lost in thought. The coffee maker beeped lightly and Donna stretched on her tip toes to reach the mugs on her top shelf, her shirt riding up and exposing her long, lean legs and the very bottom of her butt. Josh looked away, trying for restraint. He couldn't go there right now.

"Donna?" He squeaked, "Want to put on some… ya know… pants?"

"Hmm?" She questioned, looking over at him, and then glancing down and turning a bright shade of pink. She sat the mugs on the counter and dashed into her room, quickly pulling on a pair of pajama shorts and a zip up sweatshirt before returning to the living room to take a seat and see what was eating Josh.

He followed her wordlessly, perching on the edge of the sofa, his elbows resting on his knees as he
hung his head. He sat silently and very still, which set Donna on alert immediately. Josh was many things, but still was not typically one of them.

He took a deep breath, obviously trying to determine where to begin.

"Donna, I…" he trailed off, unsure of how to begin. He scrubbed his hands over his face and cleared his throat. "God, I don't know where to start," he admitted, leaning back into the cushions.

She placed her hand gently on his forearm. "Josh, talk to me," she encouraged. "What's wrong?"

He closed his eyes and remained silent.

"Is your Mom okay," she asked, trying to figure out what had him so flummoxed.

"She's fine," he almost whispered, not adding anything else.

She studied his face a moment- he looked exhausted. He was so beat down. She could tell that something had been bothering him for the better part of a week, but given the state of affairs in the White House she also knew that there was much he couldn't discuss with her.

"Joshua, you're scaring me," she told him.

"Donna, I trust you. Do you trust me?"

"Of course," she told him, furrowing her brow in confusion. What in the hell was he talking about?

"Okay. Well, I need you to trust me today. You know that I tell you as much as I can- but sometimes I just can't tell you everything." He stared at her, the political mask completely off, his vulnerability apparent.

She nodded her head slowly. "I know."

He stared at her, moving to position himself on the couch so that they were facing each other. "Donna, I need you to take Audrey and get out of DC for a little while," he stated evenly, trying his best to remain calm, but the look in his eyes portrayed the urgency of his request. "My car is parked in front of your building and everything you'll need is packed."

"What?!" She couldn't hide her shock.

"Donna, I can't get into it. I explained things to Audrey the best that I could before we came over, so she won't be blindsided." The look he gave her spoke volumes- he just couldn't tell her what was going on. "I need you to pack a suitcase and get on the road as soon as possible, okay? Take her to my Mom's condo in Florida. I doubt anyone will look for you there." In his current emotional state, he couldn't help but to reach out and touch her, gently tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear, pausing for a moment to cup her face.

"And they'll be… looking for us? Who? Oh, God, Josh, are you in danger?" She took his hand as he began to pull away from her, not wanting to lose contact with him.

"No, I'm not in danger," he told her quickly. "And you certainly aren't. I'm talking about the media. I just- I can't explain, Donna. I know I'm asking a lot, but I just need you to... blindly trust me on this one." His eyes pleaded with her.

She nodded her head slowly. "Okay." She paused for a moment to make sure he understood her willingness to do as he asked without hesitation. “And you're sure you don't need me in the office?”
He shook his head. "I just need you to drive straight to my mother's condo. And I need you to be on the road within the hour, okay? Don't call anyone at the White House, that's... taken care of. And promise me you'll only answer your phone if it's Leo or my mother, okay? Nobody else, nobody, until Leo gives you the go ahead."

"Josh..." she didn't know what to say, but the fear in her voice spoke volumes.

His face softened. "I'm not going to let anything happen to you," he assured her.

Something shifted inside of her at his words. He was being so genuine. He was, in that moment, so open, so gentle, so... vulnerable.

"I'm sorry, but I can't stay," he told her. "I'm just going to say goodbye to her," he told Donna, standing and walking back to Audrey.

Donna remained sitting on the couch as Josh said goodbye to Audrey. She still had about a thousand questions but she knew she couldn't ask. She had to just trust him.

He emerged a few minutes later, his eyes red and watery, and that's when Donna really became concerned. He walked back over towards her in the kitchen, his shoulders slumped, a defeated look in his eyes.

She pulled him close, wrapping her arms around him. Unsure of what else to do, she simply held him tight. Eventually he pulled back just enough to kiss her on the forehead, his lips slowly moving to leave feather light touches on her eyelids, a kiss on the nose, and her cheek, where he lingered, his face brushing against hers, and then gently on the corner of her mouth. It was though he was completely entranced by her, and she by him. For a few moments, they were spellbound.

"Josh," she whispered, wanting more- wanting everything. Her hands ran up his chest to wrap around his neck, her fingers finally able to find their way into his curls.

But Josh knew he couldn't go any further. He'd already gone too far. He wouldn't do that to her- not now. Instead, he buried his face in her shoulder taking a deep, shaky breath and absorbing as much of her as he possibly could. He committed every detail to memory.

"God, Donna." The words, shaky and raw, finally escaped his lips as almost an admission. It was, Donna thought, almost as though he was apologizing for something.

"Josh, you're scaring the hell out of me," she admitted softly, holding onto him tightly.

"Don't be afraid. Please, don't ever be afraid of me." he whispered before slowly, hesitantly, pulling away and standing up straight.

"Bye, Donna," he cleared his throat and told her as if he was suddenly completely removed from the current situation, as though he was bidding her farewell in the same way that he did when she popped over to the mess to pick up his lunch.

She studied his face curiously, taken aback by the entire situation. "Bye, Josh," she told him, squeezing his hand. "Be careful."

And with that he gave her a small nod, slipping out her front door.

Donna remained frozen to her spot in the kitchen, staring at the closed door for several minutes, before she shook her head, snapping herself out of it. Whatever it was, she trusted him, so she had things to do.
Taking a very quick shower, she pulled on some comfortable clothes for driving and packed a small bag for herself. She bit her lip, looking around the dimly lit apartment, and, in true Donna Moss fashion, tossed a few more items in her duffel- just in case.

She threw the bag over her shoulder before reaching to pick up a still sleeping Audrey. The little girl stirred at the movement, blinking slowly at Donna.

"Hi there," Donna spoke softly, pulling her closer.

Audrey rubbed her eyes, still groggy.

"We're going to get back in the car now, okay? Did Daddy tell you that you're going on a trip with me?"

Audrey hesitantly shook her head yes, tightening her grip on Donna.

"Go back to sleep," Donna told her, dropping her things into Josh’s already full trunk. Donna buckled Audrey into her carseat and placed Walter the Bunny in her arms, kissing her on top of her curly mop of hair.

Donna slid into the driver’s seat and locked the car doors, an uneasiness settling over her as she took a deep breath and started out into the night, taking the interstate out of town. Exiting the city in the silent car, Donna felt a chill as she watched the sun rise. She had a bad feeling about this.

They’d been driving for several hours, Donna completely lost in thought. As Josh had requested, she’d remained out of contact with the world, most of which was just waking up.

She began to fill the tank with gas, pulling Audrey out of the vehicle for a quick bathroom break and a bite of breakfast. As the two split a banana and a granola bar, Donna tried her best to put on a cheery façade for Audrey's sake, but even a child could sense when something was wrong. She made it through breakfast, and was becoming a bit anxious. Her cell hadn't made a peep all morning- no call from Leo. As though she could sense exactly what was needed, Audrey's little voice piped up just as Donna was exiting the back seat.

"Donna?" Audrey asked somewhat hesitantly.

"Hmmm?"

Audrey gave her the sweetest little smile. "Love you," she told her.

Donna beamed, leaning in to kiss her on the forehead. "Love you too, sweet pea."

Returning to the interstate, Donna briefly engaged Audrey in some light conversation before she dozed off again as the car sped southbound. Needing something to keep her mind off of miles in front of her, Donna flipped on the radio, the nationally syndicated news channel already preprogrammed into Josh's radio. Turning the volume to a level that wouldn't disturb Audrey, Donna sat back to listen, her heart pounding in her chest as she heard the announcer's voice come over the speakers.

“…and if you’re just joining us, breaking news this morning out of the nation’s capital where Deputy Chief of Staff Josh Lyman has surrendered himself into federal custody for crimes relating to the cover up of President Bartlet’s MS diagnosis…”
Donna’s heart was practically beating out of her chest. She had to have heard that wrong. Glancing into the rear view mirror to make sure Audrey was still sleeping, she turned to volume up to listen to the news.

She’d heard it all correctly.

The bile rose in her throat as her mind raced. Jail? Indictment? She knew better than to call the White House. The odds that Leo was even available with something like this going on were slim to none. Josh said Leo would call, so he would. He’d call, she told herself, and tell her that this was all a mistake… right?

She continued to listen, a reporter from WPBF Channel 25, coming on the air and discussing the day’s unfolding events with the anchor. “Reporting Live from West Palm Beach,” the anchor signed off.

West Palm Beach? “Oh my God,” Donna muttered. They were standing in front of Edith’s condo, weren’t they? They were waiting for a comment.

Donna quickly turned on her signal, safely maneuvering through two lanes of vehicles to take the next exit on the freeway and turn around. She couldn’t possibly walk Audrey directly into the maelstrom.

“Mmmph,” Audrey stirred briefly and Donna immediately cut the sound to the radio. She’d get the facts from Leo later. She couldn’t risk the possibility of Audrey hearing something on the news and talk station.

Donna had always been quick on her feet, formulating a plan and altering her route. She glanced in the rear view mirror and watched Audrey sleep peacefully. She didn’t have time to think about anything but Audrey. Josh had entrusted her with the most important part of his life, and she wasn’t going to let either of them down.

Only a few moments into their altered course, Donna’s cell phone began to ring. She glanced at the scree, seeing an unfamiliar number, and silenced the phone. She would wait for Leo’s call, just as she’d instructed.

Her anxiety grew by the second as her mind wandered in the quiet vehicle. What was his plan? How did this end? Why would he do this?

Her phone rang once again, the Chief of Staff’s direct line flashing across as the caller ID.

“Leo?” She was eager to speak with someone who had more information. “Leo, what’s happening?”

“Donna.” Leo, normally cool and collected under pressure, sounded as flustered as she’d ever heard him. “Are you alright? Where’s the baby?”

“We’re both okay. I have her and we’re in the car. Leo, what’s happening? Tell me you’re in the room.”

Leo sighed. “I’m not. I had no idea about any of this until he’d gone through with it. Donna, you have to know that I’d never ask him to do this. And neither would the president.”
Donna was stunned into silence. She couldn’t understand how things had apparently spiraled out of control without the knowledge of the White House Senior Staff.

“Where is he, Leo?”

“He’s already in custody, Donna,” Leo stated as calmly as he could manage. He didn’t want to upset Donna even more.

“And what’s going to happen to him?” She felt the tears pool in her eyes, glancing back once again to make sure Audrey was still asleep.

“I don’t know yet. I’m working on it- we all are. But Donna, I just don’t know yet.”

Donna swallowed hard, listening to Leo try to recount all of the information he’d gathered that morning.

“He was charged with one count of Contempt of Congress and one count of making false statements,” Leo explained.

“But he didn’t-“ Donna was beginning to panic.

“I know he didn’t, Donna.” Leo assured her. “From what I can tell they also brought one count of Lying to Congress, but he made a deal to have it dropped. He said he’d take the fall for the other two in exchange for the House to drop the investigation of the President’s MS disclosure.”

“Why would be do that?” Donna’s voice was beginning to break.

“He made a deal for thirty days, Donna. He was going to go away for thirty days and then it would all be over.”

“Leo…” she could hear it in his voice. Something wasn’t right. She just knew it.

“He went in this morning;” Leo steeled himself. He didn’t want to have to say it out loud. He didn’t want it to be real. And he didn’t want to break Donna’s heart. “He made arrangements to surrender himself to federal custody. When they read the charges he plead nolo contendere, Donna. Do you know what that is?”

“Yes.” Her face brightened for a moment. He’d plead no contest! Of course he had. He hadn’t actually done anything wrong!

Leo sighed. “When he entered the plea for nolo contendere instead of guilty it pissed them off, Donna. They wanted someone to pin this on and they wanted it to be Josh. So instead of the agreed upon thirty days, they threw the book at him.”

“Wha- What does that mean?” She tightened her grip on the steering wheel, bracing herself for what was to come.

“Twenty four months, Donna. They’re sending him to prison.”

Donna couldn’t breathe. There were a thousand things racing through her mind. This was a waking nightmare.

“Leo, no!” She took in a shaky breath. “Leo,” she pleaded. “Please. Help him. Please.” She was desperate.

“I’m doing everything I can,” he assured her in a tone that reminded Donna that this was probably
breaking Leo’s heart too. “If anything changes I’ll call you, alright? And if you need anything you call me. Margaret will put you right through. Sam, Toby and CJ will probably check in at some point. We’re all going to find a way to get him through this, kid.”

“Thanks, Leo. I know you’re- Wait. Wait.” Donna’s mind began to race, the gears clicking to place. “Leo, I have to go. I’ll call you back.”

“Donna?” The Chief of Staff was startled by her abrupt change in demeanor.

“I have to make a call, Leo. I think I know what to do.”

“You're inside on this?” His surprise was obvious.

Donna swallowed, sitting up a little taller in the driver's seat. “Well, no. But I think I may know who is.”

There was a brief moment of silence on the phone.

“Make the call, Donna,” Leo commanded without the slightest bit of hesitancy in his voice. If Josh trusted her, Leo did too.

“Yes, sir.” Donna closed her phone and took the next exit, pulling into the parking lot of a store that hadn’t yet opened. She was in a well lit, open area where she felt safe, but could stand outside of the car and had a conversation she certainly didn’t want Audrey or the general public to hear.

Her heart thumped in her chest as she stood outside of the chicken in the cold winter morning and she dialed the number, but the phone picked up on the first ring.

“Donna,” he began with urgency. “I hoped you’d call. I’m so sorry.”

“How could you?” She willed herself not to break. “How could you let this happen, Cliff?”

“Donna listen to me,” he spoke in a whisper. “It wasn’t supposed to be this way. I had no idea that they’d disregard the agreement. Things are out of control but I’m trying to… look, I can’t get into it yet. But I’m trying to help him.”

“Why should I believe you?” There was venom in her voice. “If you wanted someone to take the fall you should have come to me with the subpoena last November! It should have been me!”

“Donna, it’s not about that. It has nothing to do with that, I assure you.”

“And why should I believe you?”

“Because you have no other choice right now,” Cliff reminded her. “And while I don’t agree with the Bartlet administration on much, I don’t think this was the right thing to do either.”

“He has a little girl, Cliff?” Her tone softened as she stared through the window at Audrey, who was clearly growing more apprehensive of her current situation as she sensed Donna’s stress level rise, holding onto her bunny for dear life.

“I know, Donna. And he has you, too.”

“What?”

“Donna- we both know… I read it… Look, it doesn’t matter. We’re on the same side today. But the clock is ticking. I’ll call you later. Stay by your phone. And be careful out there.”
“Thanks,” she muttered, ending the call and getting back on the road. She felt so helpless. She wanted to fix this for him. To make it all go away. But Donna knew the best thing she could do was make sure the people he loved were safe.

She picked up her phone once again and called Edith, who was understandably terrified for Josh. Knowing full well that the older woman didn’t always thrive in stressful situations, Donna took control once again. “There are reporters outside of your building,” she stated calmly. “We need to get you out of there. I need you to pack a weeks worth of clothing and head to the airport. Don’t tell a soul where you’re headed, alright? Book the next flight for Chicago. My brother Chris, the one you met last spring, will pick you up from the airport. Edith, don’t speak to or leave with anyone but Chris. Audrey and I will meet you at his place tonight and we’ll go from there tomorrow. I have a plan, Edith. You’re going to have to trust me.”

Edith agreed, seemingly relieved that she could simply follow Donna’s instructions. She trusted Donna with her life, and with Josh and Audrey, and she didn’t question Donna’s plan, assuring her simply that she’d see her that evening.

Donna accelerated a bit, mindful of driving safely but knowing they needed to cover a long distance today, and they’d have to make several stops for Audrey to get out of the car, and potentially for Donna to speak with Cliff and Leo. She checked the ringer on her cell phone, making sure she wouldn’t miss a call.

"Donna?” Audrey rubbed her sleepy eyes and looked around the vehicle. She was already squirming around in her car seat. “How much longer until we get to Bubbe’s?”

"Well, Sweet Pea, we had to make a little change in plans."

"NO! Donna, I wanna see Bubbe! I want Daddy!! I wanna go hooome!"

Donna wasn’t surprised at the meltdown, she was only surprised that Audrey lasted as long as she did. She used the rear view mirror to look at the little girl in the back seat.

"Audrey, look at me."

"Oh, sweetie. I know you're confused right now. But just remember. I'm here. I love you and I'm going to take care of you. Now. . . here's what we're going to do. We're going to count yellow cars until we get to the next town. Then we are going to get out and stretch our legs and find a little snack. Instead of us going to Bubbe's, she's going to meet us. But I can't tell you where yet because it's a mystery. We are on a little adventure Audrey. You and me, we're going to stick together and we are going to be just fine. Okay?"

Audrey hiccuped, her cheeks tearstained, and looked at Donna intently before nodding her head slowly.

"Okay, Donna. You n me."
Chapter 30

Donna slowed the vehicle in the heavy Chicago traffic. Though it was late at night, the hustle and bustle of the city hadn’t yet slowed. She double checked the address she’d jotted down against the numbers on the buildings, creeping along for another block.

They’d driven all day. Aside from Audrey’s one meltdown, they’d done pretty well. Donna had pulled over as much as reasonably possible on their tight schedule and the small breaks seemed to do wonders for Audrey. They’d stopped at a big box store in Pennsylvania where Donna had grabbed an assortment of small books and puzzles while Audrey ate a soft pretzel in the cart. The treats help to pass the time as boredom rose on the interstate.

Eyeing a parking spot, Donna carefully pulled the car into the space, gathering a few of their most important belongings.

“Put the hood up on your jacket, Sweet Pea,” Donna instructed her. She wasn’t willing to take any risks on being spotted.

Audrey did as she was told and Donna opened the back door, pulling Audrey close and walking swiftly to her brother’s building. Chris buzzed them up immediately, waiting for Donna with his front door open on the third floor.

“Hey there, Polliwog,” Chris tried to humor the little girl. “Boy, am I glad to see you!”

Audrey tightened her arms around Donna, staring silently at Chris. He didn’t take it personally. He couldn’t even imagine how Donna and Audrey felt at this particular time. He’d been glued to the TV all day, monitoring the situation in DC, and he’d called to check on Donna several times during their drive.

“Hey, baby sister,” he kissed Donna’s cheek, taking her oversized purse and a heavy briefcase from her hand. He knew better than to ask her anything of substance in front of Audrey. Though he knew Donna probably needed to let it all out at this point, she certainly wouldn’t do it in front of Audrey.

Chris grabbed Donna’s keys and unloaded their bags from car before heading out to meet Edith at the airport. She’d booked a flight to Chicago after Donna’s instructions, but had been delayed several hours due to weather in the southeast portion of the country.

Donna assumed that Audrey would be full of energy after a day in the car, but she was completely on the other end of the spectrum. After so many changes and new places, Audrey was irritable and exhausted.

Donna gave Audrey a quick bath and changed her into her pajamas, toting the little girl and Walter the Bunny into Chris’ kitchen to try and find some dinner. Making do with what was on hand, Donna boiled a pot of water for macaroni and found an animated movie on tv for Audrey, who was fighting to keep her eyes open. When Donna was sure that Audrey was ready to fall asleep, she gathered her up and walked her in to settle her into bed. Donna lay down beside her for a moment, softly whispering to her before she fell asleep.

“You were such a brave girl today, Audrey. I’m so proud of you.” Donna gently pushed Audrey’s curls from her face. “Go to sleep, tomorrow morning we’re going to have pancakes for breakfast.”

Donna pulled Audrey a little closer and thanked her lucky stars that she went to sleep without a fight.
“Your Daddy loves you, Audrey Joan.” Donna kissed the top of her head. “And so do I.”

She tiptoed out of the room but left the door cracked, making sure there was enough light to illuminate the room in case Audrey woke up in unfamiliar surroundings.

Donna let out a deep sigh, realizing for the first time just how tired she really was. She quietly cleaned up Chris’ kitchen, washing the macaroni pot and taking a few bites of the remaining noodles in Audrey’s bowl before loading it into the dishwasher. She wasn’t particularly hungry and she told herself that would suffice for dinner.

She glanced at the clock, knowing she had another hour before Chris and Edith returned from the airport, and she had a few things she needed to get done. She pulled the heavy briefcase that Josh had handed her that morning from their stack of things in the corner and sat on the couch.

Donna examined the weathered briefcase closely. Oddly enough, she hadn’t seen it before. Josh carried his backpack everywhere he went, but as she ran her hands over the broken in leather, she could immediately tell this wasn’t a graduation gift that had been stashed away. This case had seen storms, long commutes and late nights at the office. That’s when she noticed the initials NL stamped into the corner near the well worn locks. Now it was all making sense.

She opened the case and carefully examined the contents. Folders of documents, a large, bulky manila envelope and on top, a carefully folded piece of paper with her name carefully written in bold ink. That, she supposed, was as good a place as any to begin.

She unfolded the letter and began to read, the emotions she’d suppressed all day beginning to overflow inside of her.

He’d vaguely outlined what he’d intended to happen, alluding to a 30 day jail sentence for crimes he didn’t commit, but never spelling it out due to the potential legal ramifications if the letter ever fell into the wrong hands. He’d assured her that everything was going to be okay, though she wasn’t sure how, and that there was no one else in the world that he’d entrust with Audrey.

The letter was placed gently on top of the photo she knew used to sit on the desk in his study. Josh, Donna and Audrey on the first day of school, smiling brightly at the camera, looking grateful at the thought that the worst had been over. She bit her lip as the tears welled in her eyes. It physically pained her to think of what was happening to him right now. Only once in her life had she felt so distraught, but this time there was something she could do for him. She could take care of Audrey. She could see too it that Edith was alright. And more than that, she could work the backchannels the way he had taught her, to make sure Josh saw the best outcome she could negotiate.

She flipped through the folders, scanning the documents filed purposefully inside. Of course, she’d seen the Power of Attorney before, and the existing forms granting her guardianship rights for Audrey. Thank god she hadn’t needed them since Rosslyn, but she kept her own copy in her personal folder of important documents.

A business card for Josh’s attorney at Debevoise & Plimpton was paperclipped to the top of the stack. She pulled it off and tucked it securely into her billfold. She hoped that she wouldn’t need to contact him, or really need to use any of this any time soon. But obviously, Josh wanted her to be prepared, so she would do whatever she could to be ready for whatever came next.

Finally, she picked up the bulkiest envelope at the bottom of the case, opening the tack that held the flap shut. Her eyes widened when she peered inside, looking at the five stacks of hundred dollar bills banded together with a bank label identifying each as $1,000.
“What did you do, Joshua,” she whispered to herself a little brokenly. “Why did you go?” She knew that there was a reason he gave her this briefcase. She knew that he must have had a plan. It wasn’t obvious to her, but she would figure it out eventually.

Donna emotionally walled herself off once again. She couldn’t break down right now. She would have time to find the answers to those questions after she’d had a bit of sleep, but she knew that her primary function tonight had to be staying strong for Audrey and acting as the voice of reason for Edith, who would be arriving shortly.

She carefully packed the briefcase once again, comforted by the knowledge even though he seemed to have gotten himself into a jam, he’d managed to take care of them.

Sitting back down on the couch, she checked her cell phone once again for missed calls from familiar numbers. There were a few that she knew she wouldn’t return, but the White House hadn’t called in hours. She’d been in close contact with Leo throughout the day, though they hadn’t made much headway. But Donna had formulated a plan in the meantime.

Tomorrow morning they’d wake up and drive to her parent’s house in Wisconsin. She knew they could stay there as long as they’d need to, and once she was sure of what would happen to Josh she’d decide on the next step. But they’d all be safe and they’d all be together. It was all that she could ask for right now.

It was only a few moments before Edith’s arrival, barely enough time for Donna to catch her breath.

“We’re here!” Chris announced, opening the door and carrying Edith’s bag inside.

“Shhhh,” Donna hushed him. “You’ll wake Audrey.”

“Sorry,” Chris whispered, locking up behind him and making his way into the kitchen.

Donna wrapped Edie in a warm hug, and though they hadn’t so much as exchanged greetings, they both jumped right in. “Is he going to be alright? What do we do?” Edie asked.

“We’re working on it. All of us,” Donna assured. “Leo and the President, CJ and Toby, Sam and I- everyone. But the best thing we dan do for him right now is to lay low and take care of Audrey and each other.”

Edith had always found Donna to be wise beyond her years, and (today) hadn’t taken exception to that. She’d admittedly been something of a mess all day, her heart breaking for her son and granddaughter as soon as she’d heard the news. She’d had so many questions and felt so many emotions, and she couldn't have been more grateful to have Donna to somewhat rein her in.

Donna led her to the couch, trying to keep the conversation light for the time being. She’d asked about her flight, and the last time she’d eaten, her responses prompting Donna to warm up a cup of tea.

“We need to talk about what’s going to happen now, Edith,” Donna began. “Tomorrow we’re going to head to Wisconsin. My parents have enough room for all of us and they live in a condo with a guard gate, so even if the press tracked us down, we’d still be protected.”

“Oh.” It was the only response Edith could muster. She was teetering on the brink of a meltdown and Donna could sense it.

“Why don’t you get some sleep?” Donna suggested. “It’s been a long day. Audrey’s already asleep. You can take the guest room. I think Chris already put your luggage in there,” Donna gestured to the
door to the left of the entryway. “I’ll take Chris’ room with Audrey and he’s going to crash on the couch...”

“Do we need to get a lawyer? Does he need a lawyer?” Edith suddenly piped in, clearly tuning out Donna’s effort to get them all to bed.

“Not at this point,” Donna told her softly, placing her hand on Edie’s to comfort him.

“Because we can call his father’s old firm. Someone there can help him.”

“Edith,” Donna began gently. “It’s done. Leo and Oliver Babbish are both doing everything they can.”

“They were saying,” Edith continued, “on the news. That it could be twenty four months.”

“We can’t think that way,” Donna stopped that train of thought in its tracks. She knew that neither of them would be able to comprehend the reality of two years without Josh.

But Donna’s positive reassurances simply weren’t enough. Edith let out a terrible sob, that Donna could only assume she’d been holding in for the duration of the 4 hour flight. Donna did they only thing she could, and wrapped her arms around the older woman who had become a second mother to her.

“It’s gonna be okay, Edie.” She offered as she rubbed her back in a vain attempt to quiet the older woman’s crying.

“Donna?” Audrey’s frightened little voice cried out from down the hall only a second later.

Donna glanced at Edith, who was clearly too upset herself to be of any comfort to Audrey.

“DONNA?” Audrey’s voice became more frantic.

Donna practically bolted down the hallway to get to her. “I’m right here, Sweet Pea,” she sat down on the side of the bed and Audrey crawled into her arms and held onto her for dear life as she cried.

“You’re okay,” Donna soothed, gently rubbing her back as she sobbed. “Shhhhh... It’s okay.”

Audrey’s distraught wails were marred with hiccups as she clutched tightly to Donna, slowly calming with Donna’s reassurances.

Once Audrey’s breathing began to level out, Donna tried a different approach. “Guess what?” she pulled her face just barely away from Audrey’s to look at her.

Audrey blinked twice, her big brown eyes staring at Donna as though she held the answers to the universe.

“Bubbe is here,” Donna smiled as she wiped Audrey’s tears, trying desperately to conjure a response from Audrey. “Should we go see her?”

Donna stood, Audrey still holding onto her. “Come on,” she headed towards the living room. “It’s all going to be okay, Sweet Pea. Somehow.”
Donna lay awake in the dark room, staring at Audrey who was sleeping peacefully beside her. They’d arrived in Wisconsin the day prior, but with all of the changes and commotion in such a short amount of time, Audrey wasn’t sleeping well. She’d awoken the two nights prior, scared and unsure of her surroundings, and had refused to take a nap that day. She was growing more and more irritable and with that, she clung closer to Donna.

Donna heard the buzz of her cell phone on the nightstand, tilting it forward to check the number. She climbed gently out of bed and stepped into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind her.

“Leo?”

“Donna. Hi.”

“What’s going on?” She tried to keep her voice down but her stress level was immediately elevated with the sound of dejection in Leo’s voice.

“I’ve got a little update. Are you in a place where you’re able to talk to me right now?”

“Yes, of course. I just put Audrey down.” Donna took a few steps away from the bedroom doors, sitting out of the way on the steps to the main floor in hopes of a few moments privacy.

“Donna…” Leo sighed, unsure of how he should go about this.

Donna swallowed hard. “It’s not good, is it?” Her voice was small and fearful.

“No, it’s not. Due to…” he trailed off. He wasn’t going to drag this out. “The sentence will stand, Donna. 24 months. They’re going to transfer him to a federal facility by the end of the week.”

Donna let out a sob, not caring to compose herself in front of Leo. She couldn’t have cared less about protocol at this point. She leaned forward, her face coming to rest on her knees as she rocked herself back and forward for a moment. She felt as though she was living in a nightmare.

“I know,” Leo tried to soothe. His heart was breaking for the man he considered a surrogate son, and thinking of Donna’s grief and Audrey’s fear only compounded Leo’s pain. “I’m just-” Leo couldn’t come up with the words. “We’re all absolutely beside ourselves, Donna.”

Donna managed to pull herself together enough to finish the conversation with Leo. She had to start thinking clearly and figure out where to go from here.

“Where are they sending him?” She was barely able to choke out the question.

“Well, there are two potential facilities. Danbury, Connecticut or Englewood Correctional Facility in Littleton, Colorado. It sounds like they’ll send him to Danbury. That’s a quick shuttle from DC, Donna. Maybe it won’t feel like he’s so far?” Leo knew he was grasping at straws.

“Littleton, Colorado?” Donna questioned, her mind already on its own path.

“Yes,” Leo confirmed. “But you really don’t have to worry about that. I think it’s safe to say-”

“No, I have to call you back.” The tone in Donna’s voice was urgent.

“Donna? Is everything alright?” Leo sat forward in his chair, worried about the endless possibilities
of what else could go wrong right now for the people he loved so dearly.

“I- Yes. I just, I’ll call you back in thirty minutes. Bye.” She ended the call and quickly dialed another number.

“Donna?” The voice seemed somewhat surprised to receive her call.

“Cliff. I need your help.”

“Donna, the sentencing is final. There’s not anything I can do at this point.”

“I know,” she told him in a hurry. “I mean, I’m not going to stop fighting it, but that’s not why I called. I need you to have Josh moved to Littleton, Colorado.”

“They’re sending him to Danbury. I thought you’d be relieved to have him closer to DC.” Cliff was confused as to why she’d want Josh sent halfway across the country.

“I just- I need you to do this for me, Cliff.” Donna wasn’t going to explain anything more than she had to. “You can sell it to your party as a win. He’ll be less accessible to the administration and further removed from DC.”

“Well, that’s true but-”

“Damnit, Cliff!” Donna was losing control of her emotions. “He trusted you! And now he’s losing his whole career, and two years of his life with his daughter! You can take care of this and look like a hero to your party as well as the White House insiders who will keep it to themselves but remember what you did, or you can do nothing and I’ll call someone else! I have the Deputy Chief of Staff’s rolodex programmed into my phone and the full weight and force of the White House behind me. Do you think I’m going to let him go down without a fight?” Her breathing had grown heavy, angry tears welling in her eyes.

“Okay.” Cliff was clearly startled by Donna’s outburst. “I’ll make the calls. I’ll touch base with you tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you,” she composed herself a bit more, sitting up a little straighter where she was perched on the steps. “Have a good night.”

Once the call had ended, she let out a deep breath. She had to pray this would work. It was the only things she could think of to even begin to remedy this situation.

She called Leo back, as promised, and caught him up to speed.

“So, you want him sent to Englewood?” Leo wasn’t following.

“Yes.” Donna was resolute in her answer. “Leo, we aren’t coming back to DC.”

“What? Donna, your job is still here. We would never terminate your employment. You’re an integral part of this administration.”

“Thank you, Leo,” a sad smile graced her face. “But I can’t. You’ll have my letter of resignation this week. I’ll fax it to Margaret.”

“Is there something we can do to change your mind?”

“No, Leo. But that’s sweet of you. There are... many reasons... we can’t come back.”
“You can’t stand the thought of continuing without him?” Leo ventured a guess. He wasn’t blind to what had developed between Josh and Donna over the years. And though he’d warned Josh about getting involved with his assistant at the beginning of the administration, he had watched their love grow over the years. This wasn’t just a sordid affair that would land them in a gossip column. This was the real thing.

“That,” Donna admitted. “And I don’t think it’s a good idea for Audrey to be in DC right now. There have been… things. On the internet.”

“What kind of things?” Leo was immediately on full alert. “We can conference in Ron Butterfield and—”

“Nothing like that,” Donna supplied. “Just some fans of Josh’s with overly active imaginations that think they can raise Audrey while he’s gone.”

“Donna…” Leo wasn’t convinced that this was nothing.

“She will never be able to have a normal life in DC,” Donna told him. “Not where her last name is the source of every news headline right now. I can’t put her through that.”

“So, you’re going to stay in Wisconsin?” Leo wasn’t following Donna’s logic on having Josh transferred to Colorado.

“No…” she hedged. “But I’m working on something.”

Though she couldn’t see it, Leo nodded his head in confidence. He knew Donna would make the best decisions for Audrey. There was no doubt in his mind. “Alright. Well, you’ll let us know if you need anything?”

“Of course. Thanks, Leo.”

“Anytime, kid. I’ll touch base again soon. Kiss the baby for me.”

“Absolutely. Goodnight.”

She flipped her phone closed and climbed up the stairs to her childhood bedroom, crawling back under the covers and opening her arms as Audrey unconsciously snuggled in closer to her. She’d begin to put her plan into place the next morning. She could only hope that she’d made the right decision.

OoOoOoOoO

“Donna, look at me!” Audrey exclaimed happily from where she stood on a stepstool in the kitchen. “I’m helping!”

“I see that,” Donna grinned brightly as she rounded the corner with her now empty coffee mug. She’d been on the phone in her father’s study, locked away for the better part of a few hours.

“And what is it that you’re making, Sweet Pea?” Donna stood behind Audrey and gently kissed the top of her head.

“Sauce,” Audrey stated, pulling a few leaves of basil off the stem and adding them to her small pile.

“Well it smells amazing,” Donna told her. She loved her mother’s homemade pasta and sauce, and she was looking forward to their family gathering that evening. It had been a long time since she’d
been home for Sunday dinner.

“It really does, Meredith,” Edie chimed in from across the kitchen island, where she was peeling garlic.

Donna had been relieved, but not surprised, that Edith had been able to somewhat confide in Meredith. The two had always gotten along swimmingly on Meredith’s visits to DC, but they hadn’t spent a substantial amount of time together until now. Donna knew that Edith wasn’t able to talk to any of her own friends about what was going on with Josh, but she’d been able to find another mother to trust upon their arrival in Wisconsin.

“So, what’s the plan for this afternoon,” Donna questioned, rinsing her mug and staring out the kitchen window at the falling snow.

“Well, Mark called while you were on the phone. He and Jenny are going to take the kids sledding on the hill by the High School before dinner. They wanted to see if you and Audrey wanted to join.”

“Oh, please, Donna!” Audrey bounced up and down, eyes wide at the prospect. “Pleeeeeease.”

Donna raised her eyebrows at her mother for mentioning the activity in front of Audrey, but Meredith only smirked, knowing exactly what she’d done.

“It wouldn’t kill you to leave the house, Donnatella,” she continued. “Nothing’s going to happen to you two at the sledding hill.”

“How cold is it?” Donna glanced outside. “I don’t think we have much besides her coat and mittens.”

“It’s not so bad yet. The blizzard isn’t going to hit until early morning. Better let her go out and play while she still can. Besides, I have your little snowsuit in a box in the basement. I bet it will fit her.”

“Fine,” Donna agreed, “We’ll go.”

Audrey cheered at the announcement.

“But,” Donna continued in a warning voice. “You’re going to lay down for a little while so you’re not tired when you’re playing.”

“Oh-kay,” Audrey relented, knowing better than to test Donna.

After washing her hands, Donna followed her upstairs, allowing Audrey to select a book from the stack in the playroom so she could slowly wind down. Donna began to read Harry the Dirty Dog and Audrey’s eyelids slowly became heavier as she fought off sleep. By the end of the story, her breathing was deep and steady, but Donna stayed where she was, running her hands over Audrey’s wild curls for a few minutes. Eventually, she tucked a blanket in a little tighter and placed Walter in her arms before tiptoeing out of the room and making her way back down the stairs. Meredith and Edie were just finishing the clean up from the sauce preparations.

“She’s asleep,” Donna announced.

“Let’s head down to the basement and find that snowsuit while she’s out. Your father will listen for her to wake up.” Meredith dried her hands on a dishtowel. “Come on, Edie, you’re going to love this.”

Donna chuckled but followed her mother into the basement of the townhome and helped move
boxes until she unearthed a large plastic tote marked Donnatella- Clothing in permanent marker. As Donna began to sort through to find the pink snowsuit she remembered wearing as a child, Meredith combed through for another box.

“Ah ha!” Meredith opened the top flaps and pulled out a photo album. “I knew it was in here somewhere,” she muttered, flipping through the pages before stopping abruptly, a large smile on her face. “Now who does that look like to you,” Meredith beamed, handing the album to Edith.

Edie let out a genuine laugh, her fingers covering her mouth after her outburst. “Donna, the resemblance is unbelievable,” she grinned. “Audrey has Joshua’s features, sure, and I’ve always been able to see Joan in her, but this- Look at her facial expression!” Edie laughed again, causing Donna’s curiosity to peak.

She stood from where she was kneeling next to the box of clothing and peeked at the photo that was bringing so much joy to the two older women.

She recognized a 4 year old version of herself, standing beside a pool in her bathing suit and holding an ice cream cone, the ice cream portion of which was clearly dropped on the ground beside her. But for the blonde hair and blue eyes, it could have been a photo of Audrey. Donna’s normally well tamed hair was curling wildly in the humidity of a Wisconsin summer and she wore a pout that Audrey had clearly adopted from her.

“Could I get a copy of this,” Edith asked. “Joshua will just love it.”

“Of course,” Meredith agreed happily as the two continued to flip through the book.

The simple act of hearing Josh’s name brought a pang of sadness through Donna. Edie was right, he would have loved it. But Donna wished he would have been there, with them. Laughing over photos of Donna with a mouth full of braces holding a spelling bee ribbon, or bundling up with them to take Audrey sledding. She would have given anything to feel his arms around her at that precise moment, bantering with her about Meredith’s packrat tendencies.

Donna finally unearthed the snowsuit, holding it up and shaking it out. “It’s a little big for her, but it’ll work,” Donna announced. “Just needs to air out a bit.”

“It’ll be fine for today. And she’ll grow into it,” Meredith assured, waving away Donna’s concerns. “She has a coat, mittens and a hat?”

“Yes. They’re upstairs in the entryway.”

“Alright. Jenny said she’d bring a pair of snowboots for her that the kids have outgrown, so I think she’s all set.” Meredith sat down next to Donna, perching on top of a box marked Baseball Trophies-Christopher.

“You saved all of this?” Donna was slightly stunned as she picked up a few well preserved articles of clothing from her childhood.

“Of course I did,” Meredith thought it would have been obvious. “I thought perhaps you’d want them if you had a little girl one day. And well, you do.”

“I remember this one,” she smiled, holding up a dress about Audrey’s size. “I loved this one.”

“She’s awake,” Donna’s father called down the stairs, drawing their attention from the box.

“I’ll go get her,” Edith offered quickly. “You two stay here.”
Donna and Meredith sat in silence for a moment, both of them picking up and examining several pieces of clothing.

“Oh, she will look as cute as a button in this one,” Meredith gushed, holding up a blue corduroy jumper, embellished with a few embroidered flowers.

“Where are all the baby clothes,” Donna asked, seeing only items that began around a 4T size.

“Well, when you were born you mostly wore hand me downs from Christopher.”

“What?” Donna laughed.

“You were a tiny baby and it was a very snowy winter that year. We hardly went anywhere. That, and we lost a few boxes a couple of years ago when the basement flooded,” Meredith continued. “That’s why we switched to the plastic totes.”

“Oh.” It was beginning to make sense now.

“Why did you think I hadn’t sent any of this earlier?” Donna shrugged her shoulders. She hadn’t really known it existed, and therefore she hadn’t especially missed it. But she was certainly glad to have it now.

“You’re doing a great job with her, you know,” Meredith continued softly. “I’m very proud of you.” Donna beamed with pride at her mother’s praise.

“I don’t think I can even begin to understand what you’re going through right now,” Meredith continued, “and I know you may not want to talk to me about it, but if you do, well, I’m here, alright?” She placed her hand softly on Donna’s shoulder.

“It’s just hard,” Donna admitted, turning to hug her mother. “I wish I could fix it. I want to make it all go away, and I don’t know how.” she admitted.

“I know you do,” Meredith soothed. “But Donna, you’re doing everything that you can for him. You’re taking care of Audrey and to Josh, that’s all that matters.”

“I just already miss him so much,” Donna cried.

Meredith softly rubbed her daughter’s back. Donna had been so strong for Edie and Audrey, but she hadn’t allowed herself time to come to terms with how she felt about Josh’s absence.

“Somebody’s awake,” Edith reported from the top of the stairs.

“Donna?” Audrey called, a bit unsure of herself.

Donna moved back a bit from her mother, wiping her eyes as she answered. “I’m down here. Come on. Hold onto the railing.”

Audrey took the steps slowly and groggily wandered over to Donna once she reached the basement, climbing into her lap.

“Hi, babycakes,” Donna kissed her forehead. “How’d you sleep?”

Audrey rest her head against Donna, simply blinking a few times. “Is it time to play in the snow?” Donna laughed at Audrey’s response. “Almost. We’ll have a little snack and then get dressed and it
will be time to go.”

“What’s that?” Audrey questioned, pointing to the jumper still laid out on top of the box of clothing.

“That’s a dress that was mine when I was a little girl,” Donna told her. “It was?” Audrey stared at her, wide eyed with adoration.

“Sure was,” Donna nodded, smoothing Audrey’s wild bed head. “Would you like to wear it sometime?”

Audrey gave full dimpled grin. “Yes.”

“Alright,” Donna grinned back, “Well now it belongs to you.”

OoOoOoOoO

Donna lugged a small sled up the hill behind her former high school for what felt like the hundredth time. Audrey ran along infront of her giggling and occasionally tossing snow into the air with Maddie and Tyler.

“Is this why Dad always tried to talk us out of sledding?” Donna asked, huffing and puffing.

“Probably,” Mark smirked. “Only he had to pull 4 sleds instead of one.”

“That’s fair,” Donna laughed. “Can’t say I blame him.”

“Me either,” Mark agreed.

Donna sat the sled down at the top of the hill and Audrey climbed on board again. “Last time,” Donna told Audrey.

“But… but… “ Audrey’s eyes widened as she began to protest.

“No but’s, Audrey Joan. It’s getting colder and it’s snowing harder. We need to get back to Grammy’s before you catch a cold or the roads get bad.”

Audrey popped her lip out in a pout, causing Mark to laugh outright.

“Talk about a taste of your own medicine,” Mark muttered, shaking his head in amusement.

“How about this…” Jenny piped in. “Instead of going down this hill one more time, how about we go over to the big hill?” She pointed to the large, steep decline where the older kids were zipping through the snow.

Tyler and Maddie cheered, and Audrey joined in with her excitement.

“Let’s go,” Donna took Audrey’s hand and pulled the sled along as the 6 of them made their way to the large hill. Audrey squealed with glee as she practically flew down the hill on Donna’s lap, the two coming to a stop as the hill leveled out near the elementary school’s parking lot.

“Alright,” Donna hopped up to begin to climb back up the giant hill and return to the car. “Come on.”

Audrey reached for Donna, wanting to be carried up the hill. “No, Sweet Pea,” she began. “You have to walk. I don’t want to slip and fall and hurt you.”
Audreys’ shoulders drooped and Donna was certainly glad she’d mandated that Audrey take a nap that afternoon.

“I’ll hold your hand,” Donna offered and Audrey smiled, placing her mitten into Donna’s.

They’d made their way back to the car, Mark loading the sled into the back of his truck and promising to be over to their parents house in time for dinner.

“Donna? Donna, is that you?” Donna’s head swiveled around when she heard her name called.

“Oh! Steph! Hi! What are you doing here?”

“I’m sledding with my nephews,” she reported.

“Hello, Audrey,” she greeted with a smile.

“Say, hi,” Donna instructed. “You remember Steph. Same came to see us last year and we all had breakfast at Daddy’s favorite diner.”

Audrey waived her mitten at Steph.

“Listen, I wanted to call but I didn’t know where you would be or what was going on.” Steph trailed off. “I was so sorry to hear what happened.”

“What happened,” Audrey asked, tugging at Donna’s arm.

“Let’s get you in the car, sweetie,” Donna deflected, opening the back seat and removing Audrey’s damp mittens and coat before buckling her in to the booster seat.

“Sorry,” Stephanie cringed at her misstep.

Donna reached in and started Josh’s Audi, cranking the heat up to try and warm the car for Audrey before closing the door so she could speak to her friend with privacy.

“It’s okay. I just haven’t really had the talk with her yet,” Donna bit her lip. “I think she’s half expecting Josh to turn up to tuck her into bed any day now. She knows he’s going to be gone for a little while, but we had no idea…” she trailed off, clearing her throat after a second or two.

“Anyway.”

“How long are you in town?” Steph questioned. “We should grab dinner or something.”

“Yeah,” Donna hedged with a fake smile. “Maybe. Things are just kind of hectic right now.”

“Well, call me if you have the time.”

“Sure. Of course. It was great to see you.”

“You too, Donna.”

“Oh, and Steph. If we could just keep this between us. I mean, the fact that I’m in town. I don’t want all of Madison to know…”

“I understand,” Steph nodded. “See you later Donna.”

Donna nodded her thanks before climbing back into the car and heading towards her parents townhouse, Audrey singing to herself in the backseat. Once they were both changed into dry clothes,
they made their way back to the kitchen to find Edie and Meredith sitting at the island with mugs of coffee playing cards.

“Perfect timing,” Meredith stated as Donna popped Audrey onto the barstool next to Edith. “Cookies and cocoa are ready for the sledders. She handed Audrey a small mug of cocoa that wasn’t too hot and slid a plate of warm chocolate chip cookies onto the counter.

“Yummy!” Audrey exclaimed, leaning forward, climbing onto her knees on the stool and leaning across the counter to reach for a cookie. Her hand hovered over the treat until she quickly retracted it back, glancing over to Donna. “I didn’t eat my dinner yet,” Audrey reported as though perhaps Donna had forgotten. The little girl knew the rules and she certainly didn’t want to disappoint Donna.

“It’s okay,” Donna chuckled. “Just this once.”

Audrey carefully picked a cookie and sat back in her chair to enjoy her treat.

“Mom, can you watch her for a sec while Edie and I step into the other room.”

“Of course,” Meredith replied, looking between the other two women.

Edith followed Donna into her father’s study.

“What’s going on?” Edith was immediately worried.

“I talked to Leo last night,” Donna began, taking a seat on the couch next to Edie.

“And? Did they figure something out?”

“No,” Donna stated dejectedly. “They’re going to transfer him into federal custody by the end of the week.”

“Oh my God.” Edith was clearly beside herself.

Donna reached out to squeeze her hand in comfort. “We’re not going to stop fighting for him, Edith. And in the meantime I’m going to do everything I possibly can to make this better for everyone. I’ve spoken to some friends who are inside on this one and they think they can get him transferred to Englewood Correctional Facility in Littleton, Colorado.”

“Colorado?” Edith was becoming even more panicked.

“I think it would be best for us to stay away from Washington for a while, don’t you?” Donna offered the suggestion lightly. If Edie wanted to return to DC she’d certainly hear her out.

“Well, I- I don’t know. I suppose. But where are we going to go? Florida?”

“I think it may be time for a fresh start.” Donna tread lightly. “And I’d like to be closer to him.”

“Yes, I would tend to agree.” Edith shifted in her seat.

“A few years ago Josh listed me on the trusts,” Donna began, unsure of how much Edith already knew. “And he sent all of the paperwork with me last week.”

“Alright…” Edith still wasn’t following.

“The assets are frozen while he’s gone,” Donna explained. “But we still have access to other things.
Noah left him a cabin. Do you remember this? A hunting property outside of Breckenridge.”

“Oh. Yes. I seem to remember something about that.” Edith was concentrating. “It was a type of bonus when he made partner.”

“Right. Well, Josh has kept it up for the last several years as an investment property. I called Debevoise & Plimpton and they’ll forward the details on the property to us. I can arrange to have the utilities turned on and someone there to meet us with the keys…”

“So, you’re saying you want to move to Colorado?”

“Yes,” Donna nodded. “I think that’s the best option.”

“Well,” Edith paused for a moment. “Joshua trusts you. And so do I. I guess we can give it a try.”

“Alright,” Donna nodded resolutely. “We’ll talk to Audrey about it tomorrow and head out as soon as the weather clears.”
“Donna, are we almost there yet?” Audrey squirmed around in her car seat.

“Not too much longer, Sweet Pea. Color one more picture.”

They’d been on the road for two days, stopping at a midway point in a small town in Nebraska to get some rest. And now, as the car slowly climbed the mountains, they were almost to their new home.

“It should be the next turn off, dear,” Edith noted, glancing at the map. “And then another… mile or so?”

Donna took the turn slowly, unsure of the ice conditions as the sun set. She was relieved they were almost there. She’d checked the road conditions almost neurotically on the drive, grateful that Josh’s Audi was all wheel drive. A few minutes later she could breathe again as she pulled into the hotel parking lot.

“This seems like a nice place,” she noted, taking the keys from the ignition and exiting the car, popping the trunk to grab two suitcases and the briefcase, Edie following with another bag and Audrey.

Once they’d checked in and made their way to the room, Donna knew she needed a plan to burn off Audrey’s excess energy if any of them were going to sleep that night.

“Guess what, Sweet Pea.”

“What?” Audrey climbed onto one of the queen beds and bounced around a little bit.

“This hotel has an indoor pool!” Donna mustered all the enthusiasm she had left after 9 hours of driving.

Audrey’s eyes widened. “Wow…” she whispered.

“So since you’ve been so good today, let’s put on your swimsuit and we can go play in the pool before dinner.”

Audrey scrambled off the bed and over towards her suitcase, bouncing on the balls of her feet with elation as Donna pulled out her swimwear.

“Ask Bubbe to help you get changed,” Donna instructed as she grabbed her own swimsuit and slipped into the bathroom.

“Edith? Are you going to join us?” Donna grabbed a couple of towels and gave Edith a welcoming smile.

“Come on, Bubbe!” Audrey bounced around with excitement.

“No, dears. I think I’ll just stay here and rest. You two have fun.”

“Allright. We’ll be back in 45 minutes or so and then we’ll order some dinner. I’ll pick up some delivery menus from the front desk.”

Donna and Audrey made their way to the hotel pool, which was completely empty, much to Donna’s relief.
Donna stood in the shallow end as Audrey jumped in and out of the pool, thoroughly enjoying herself.

“Donna, watch,” she’d request before jumping in and splashing around, laughing and clinging to Donna as they bobbed around in the warm water.

“Do you remember when we went swimming at Bubbe’s house?” Audrey questioned. “Daddy likes to swim.”

“I know he does,” Donna agreed. “And he especially likes to swim with you.”

“Donna?”

“Yes, Sweet Pea?”

“How many hours until Daddy comes home?”

Donna froze. She knew that Audrey would have more questions on this topic at some point, but that didn’t change the fact that it broke her heart.

“Audrey, do you remember what Bubbe and I talked to you about in Wisconsin? That Daddy will be gone for a while?”

“Yes,” Audrey nodded her head. “But why?”

“Well, Sweetie,” Donna moved them towards the pool steps, sitting down and turning Audrey to face her. “Daddy is… He’s…”

“Helping the President?” Audrey offered, her big brown eyes softly blinking in wonder as she waited for an answer from Donna.

“Well, yes. I suppose so.” Donna couldn’t come up with a better way to explain the situation without instilling fear in Audrey, so she ran with it.

“Is Papa Leo with him?”

“Well, no, Papa Leo isn’t there this time.”

“What about Uncle Toby?”

“No. This time it’s just Daddy.”

“Oh.” Audrey considered this for a moment. “He’s all alone?”

“Well… yes. For right now.”

Audrey’s chin started to quiver. “Is Daddy sad?”

“Oh, Sweet Pea. Don’t cry.”

Donna pulled Audrey close, holding her tight as she stood and walked up the steps of the pool and over to their chairs, wrapping Audrey in a warm towel.

“Sometimes you’re going to be able to talk to him on the phone. And we’re going to write him letters every day so he can hear about all of the new things you’ve learned.”
Audrey considered this for a moment, but didn’t cheer up. Then again, Donna hadn’t expected her to. How could she ask Audrey to comprehend something that even she hadn’t wrapped her mind around.

“Audrey, it’s ok to miss him. I miss him too. But we’re going to stick together and keep going.” At this point Donna was giving herself a pep talk as much as she was Audrey.

Audrey stares at her tiny left hand, uncurling her fingers to look at her palm, the one that Josh kissed every morning so she could take his love with her to school. Slowly, she looked up, placing her hand to Donna’s cheek as she’d learned to do in The Kissing Hand.

“Daddy loves you,” Audrey stated softly.

Donna tried not to fall apart at Audrey’s soft sentiment, but she couldn’t help herself. She pulled Audrey close and kissed the top of her head. Having a small piece of him with her in Audrey made it feel as though she just might find a way to make it through the next two years. And having Audrey in her life was certainly giving her a reason to keep going.

“Come on, baby girl,” Donna balanced Audrey in her hip and a small cloth bag of their belongings on her shoulder. “Let’s find you some dinner.”

OoOoOoO

The front door let out a chime noise as Donna stepped into the small real estate office at the address she’d been provided by Debevoise & Plimpton.

“May I help you?” An older woman with short, grey hair stepped out of the back room.

“I’m Donna Moss,” she explained. “I’m here to pick up a key.”

“Of course you are. Well, aren’t you lovely?” The woman’s smile warmed as she pulled open the top drawer and sorting through a small stack for an envelope with Donna’s name and placing it on the counter.

“I’m Barbara,” the woman introduced herself. My husband, Merle, he’s taken care of the place for the past few years. You know, the maintenance on the house and the upkeep of the property.”

“Oh, of course,” Donna smiled in appreciation as though she knew the ins and outs of Josh’s arrangement with his groundskeeper. Her years in DC had taught her well, she thought.

“Mr. Lyman… is he here?” Barbara stared out the front door towards the car, craning her neck to see.

“No, he’s not here today,” Donna tried to sound casual.

“Well, he’s always been very good to Merle. Pays by the year, too. Check just cleared 5 days ago,” she informed Donna. “So Merle, he heard you were coming to town and he was over there early this morning and plowed the driveway. Is that your car?” Barbara didn’t miss a beat.

“Um, yes.” Donna glanced at Josh’s Audi in the parking lot.

“Well, it’ll do for now,” Barbara dismissed. “But you’ll want to get some snow tires as soon as you can or you’ll be stuck in that cabin for the duration.”

“Right. Snow tires.” Donna nodded once.
“There’s a shop two blocks over,” Barbara continued, jotting down the information on a post it. “Ask for Tom. Tell him you’re a friend of Merle’s.”

“Thank you,” Donna smiled sincerely.

“There’s a map to the property inside the envelope,” Barbara’s didn’t miss a beat. “So you shouldn’t have any trouble finding the place. Water and electricity are already on. That fancy lawyer of yours called ahead and had it all set up for you.”

“It’s sounds like we’re all set.” Donna began to gather her things, but Barbara continued to speak. “I told Merle, I said ‘what are a couple of kids from New York City doing moving into a house out here.’”

“Oh just a change of scenery for a little while.” Donna certainly didn’t correct the woman on where they were from, letting her live under the assumption that because Josh’s attorneys and money were out of New York that they, too, lived in Manhattan.

“And then of course that Josh Lyman from the news. Well, he’s all you hear about lately. And I said well what are the odds of that Merle, you work for a man named Josh Lyman.”

Donna was now on high alert. “Right…” she kind of mumbled. “Well, I better be off,” she smiled, grabbing her purse and quickly making her way to the door. “Thanks again, Barbara. Have a lovely day.”

And with that she was out the door and back in the car.

OoOoOoO

“Is this it?” Donna slowed the vehicle to a stop in the middle of a side road. They hadn’t seen another car in at least five minutes.

She glanced at the map before confirming that the path beginning at the space in the perimeter fencing was indeed their driveway. It was freshly plowed, just as Barbara had indicated, but Donna took it as slowly as she could. Snow tires would be on the top of her list of things to do.

Donna’s eyes widened when she began to get a good look at their new home. The residence that Josh has written off as a hunting cabin was in fact a beautiful home nestled in near a grove of pine trees with a second small building, likely a caretakers quarters from what Donna could tell, off to the side.

It wasn’t lavish by any standards, but it seemed cozy and inviting, and certainly large enough for the three of them. Holding Audrey’s hand in case of any ice patches, Donna stepped onto the wrap around porch and dug the key out of her pocket, placing it into the lock and swinging the front door open as the three stepped inside.

The main floor, an open room with a living, kitchen and dining room, maintained the rustic charm of exposed beams and a large, wood burning fireplace.

Donna stepped further inside, Audrey clinging close to her in the unfamiliar environment. Crossing the living room, Donna peered into the master bedroom, sharing the distressed brick wall with the peer through fireplace. It was sizable, with a large window that looked into the forest and an en suite with a claw foot tub. Donna thought it would be perfect for Edith, and was glad to see it was on the first floor as she knew Edie’s knees gave her trouble occasionally.
“What’s up there?” Audrey pointed to the stairwell with the wooden banister that appeared to lead to a loft space.

“I don’t know,” Donna told her, acting excited, “let’s go see.”

Audrey lead the way, pausing only briefly when the bottom step let out a creak, to a small landing with doors on either side. On the left, a small bedroom with a window and a connecting door to the Jack and Jill bathroom, and on the right, a second, larger bedroom. Audrey stepped inside and paused.

“Wow,” she whispered, looking around in awe. Her eyes went immediately to a skylight, filling the room with natural rays, seeping in even through the dusting of snow on the roof. Donna, for her part, was particularly endeared to the small dormer window in the corner.

“This one is pretty special, huh?” Donna smiled at Audrey.

There was no question. Donna would take the smaller room across the hall and Audrey would live in here.

“Come on, let’s go find Bubbe,” Donna herded Audrey back downstairs.

“There’s a window in the roof!” Audrey exclaimed to Edith halfway down the flight of stairs.

“Oh my!” Edith laughed at her granddaughters excitement.

“What’s in there, Donna?” Audrey pointed towards the door across from the master bedroom one they’d returned to the living area.

“Open it up,” Donna encouraged Audrey, standing right behind her.

All three women were pleasantly surprised to see a spacious sunroom overlooking the property. The backyard stretched out for what Donna imagined was at least a hundred feet before slowly sloping down and widening to an expansive view of a sweeping meadow and snowy peaks in the distance.

They were all enchanted by the scenery, standing quietly for a few moments before Donna leaned over and hoisted Audrey onto her hip.

“Well, Sweet Pea? What do you think? Do you want to live here?”

“While we wait for Daddy?” Audrey tilted her head to wait for Donna’s response.

“Yes,” Donna tucked a loose curl behind Audrey's ear. “While we wait for Daddy.”

“You’re going to stay here with me too?”

“Of course I will. I’m not going anywhere, Audrey.”

Audrey thought a moment before agreeing. “Yes,” she rest her head on Donna’s shoulder. “I like it here.”

“Okay,” Donna stated softly, kissing the top of Audrey’s head. “Then I guess we’re home.”

OoOoOoOoO

Donna sat cross legged on the hotel bed, her phone balanced between her ear and her shoulder, pen and pad off to the side, as she peeled a small tangerine for Audrey, who was bouncing in place while
she waited for her snack, watching an animated movie out of one eye.

They’d returned to the hotel after touring the cabin the day before as they didn’t have any furniture, and Donna had immediately set herself to work on what seemed to be an endless list. Keeping in mind their limited budget, she knew they couldn’t stay in a hotel for very long, but Edith insisted they remain there for the time being. She hadn’t even hesitated when she’d put her credit card down to cover the room. Donna felt as though she could breathe a little bit, knowing that Edith was there and covering the costs, but she knew they had to find a more permanent solution, too.

She’d been on the phone practically the entire morning, trying to make arrangements in DC as well as she could. She’d booked herself a flight to Washington at the end of the week, and reserved a moving truck to bring their belongings back to Colorado. Her father and Chris had volunteered to drive the truck to meet her in Colorado, enabling her to fly back as soon as the belongings were loaded. Though it had been pointed out to her a few times that she could have easily hired a moving company, she wasn’t willing to delegate the possession of Josh’s personal possessions to strangers. The political climate was too rough right now. She needed to pack and transport his belongings, and specifically the contents of his office, herself.

She’d called the newspaper first thing that morning and run an ad to sublet her apartment. She’d sorted through the briefcase full of paperwork for a second time, pouring over the documents relating to Josh’s condo. She breathed a sigh of relief when she realized it was paid off. It may be a juggling act, but she could handle this, she told herself. She could do it. She had to.

OoOoOoOoO

“Where are you going,” Audrey questioned softly when Donna emerged in a pair of old jeans and a well worn sweatshirt.

“I’m going to our new house. Do you remember it from yesterday?”

“Yes,” Audrey nodded.

“I’m going to clean it so it will be nice and shiny when we move our things in.”

Audrey hopped up from where she was sitting on the bed, quickly shoving her coloring book and Walter into her tiny backpack, a frantic look on her face as she sat down and tried to pull her shoes on as quickly as possible.

“Whoa,” Donna laughed, “slow down, Sweet Pea. You’re going to stay with Bubbe this afternoon so you can watch a movie and play.”

“But I want to go with you.” The look of abject panic on Audrey’s face wasn’t lost on Donna.

“Sweetie,” Donna kneeled down, “I’m only going to be gone for a few hours. I’m going to go over and clean it and come right back in time for us to all eat dinner together, okay?”

“No,” Audrey began to cry. “I want to go with you.”

“Audrey…” Donna began to gently warn.

“Please, Donna. Please.” The little girl’s watery eyed desperation practically broke Donna’s heart.

“Maybe it would be better for her to get out of the room. She’s been cooped up,” Edith chimed in. “I could use the rest, too.”
Donna bit her lip and considered the possibility. She’d get substantially less done in the house today, and she was somewhat concerned for Audrey to be running around an area she wasn’t familiar with, but she didn’t want just to leave Audrey, especially mid meltdown. Edith seemed like she could use a few hours alone anyway, Donna rationalized as she helped Audrey into her coat and they made their way to the car.

After stopping at the store for a large bag of cleaning supplies and two boxed lunches, Audrey and Donna made their way to the cabin. Donna had to smile, thinking of Josh’s hasty description of the home they’d be inhabiting. He’d clearly never visited the property, writing it off as a hunting cabin when it was what Donna would describe as a normal sized family home.

After situating Audrey with a coloring book and a magnetic block board, Donna got to work scrubbing the house. It didn’t take her long, given the fact that the place had been well maintained and empty over the years, but she still wanted to make sure everything was sparkling clean when they moved in.

The floors, which were covered in rich hardwoods, shined nicely in the early evening sun and Donna began to feel hopeful that the house would become a cozy retreat for their nontraditional family.

“Let’s go, Audrey,” Donna called, locking up for the afternoon. They’d stop at the hardware store on the way home and pick a few new paint colors to warm up the rooms and grab dinner on the way back to the hotel.

With a few more days effort they’d be ready to settle in.

OoOoOoOoO

“Hello?” Donna didn’t recognize the number, but answered nonetheless. With all of the inquiry calls she’d made that morning she’d assumed she was about to receive a follow up on an inquiry to shut off cable.

“Hi.” His voice, quiet and hesitant, washed over her with a familiar warmth.

“Josh.”

“Donna, I’m sorry,” Josh’s voice came through the phone. She was certain she’d never heard him as unsure of himself as he sounded now. “I’m so sorry.”

“Shhh,” she softly soothed, attempting to let him know he had nothing to apologize to her about, and that she didn’t want him to worry about them. “Are you okay? Where… where are you?”

“I’m in Maryland right now. I don’t know if you’ve heard but they’re transferring me to Colorado tomorrow. I don’t know…” he let out a frustrated puff of air. “I don’t anything actually know anything.”

It sounded to Donna like he was admitting defeat. It was the last thing she’d expected to hear.

“I had you transfered,” she stated, hoping that this revelation wouldn’t upset him more.

“You… what?” He was completely thrown off.

“I had you transfered, Josh. I worked the back channels, I put spin on it, just like you taught me to.”

“But… why?”
“We’re in Colorado, Josh. We’re here. We’re waiting for you.” She continued before he had the chance to interrupt, thankful for the brief moment of privacy while Edith and Audrey were down the hall at the ice machine. “I wanted… I felt it would be best to get out of DC so we’re moving into the hunting cabin you inherited from your father. Except it’s, well, not so much a hunting cabin as a home. Is that… Is that okay?”

He was silent for a moment, taking in what she said.

“Yes. Okay.” His voice didn’t falter. “I trust you.”

“What do I do now,” she asked. “I can get a lawyer and-”

“Do nothing,” he told her immediately. “Do absolutely nothing.”

“What?”

“Stay where you are. It was a smart move, Donna. Lay low, keep Audrey safe, keep yourself safe. You’re in charge now, Donna.”

“But…”

“Donna. Listen to me. I need you to assure you me you won’t pursue this. Alright?”

“Josh! I can’t just leave you there! I won’t do it! You belong here. With us.” Donna let out a stifled sob, beginning to lose control of her emotions.

“I know,” Josh’s voice began to crack on his end of the phone as his true desperation began to seep through. “God, Donna, I know.”

“Please don’t give up,” she practically begged him.

“I’m not,” he whispered, feeling more alone than he had all week. It had only been a few days but he ached to hold her, hating himself for all of the events that had transpired and what they were doing to her. He wanted to be back in her apartment in the early morning hours, holding her, drinking her in. Before all of this. Before what he feared may have ruined everything. “I’m not going to give up on you.” He hoped he sounded reassuring, but he wasn’t so sure. “But I need you to trust me, Donna. And I need you to take care of Audrey.”

“Of course.” She began to pull herself together at his mention of Audrey, knowing this was the time for her to be strong for the people she loved so dearly.

“I need you to get me 5 minutes with Leo,” he continued. “On the phone. I can’t just call him. Can you help me?”

“Of course. I’ll be in DC at the end of the week. Thursday to Sunday. I’ll make sure he carries my phone. I’m going to need a new number anyway.”

“Okay.” Though she couldn’t see it, he nodded his head slowly on the other end of the line.


“It’s… You don’t need to thank me. It’s what we do, right?”

“You’re my angel, Donnatella,” he told her, meaning it with every fiber of his being.

Donna heard the keycard slide into the door as Audrey turned the knob and skipped inside to find
Donna perched on the edge of the bed, head in her hand, still on the phone. Donna was sure her eyes were still red rimmed from her tears but she was grateful for Audrey’s sake that she hadn’t been crying when she walked into the room.

“Josh, I-“ Donna had plenty more to say to him but she realized now wasn’t the time.

“Joshua?” Edith’s head turned quickly towards Donna at the sound of her son’s name.

“Daddy?” Audrey immediately moved to stand beside Donna, gently tugging on her sleeve and giving a pleading look as she waited as patiently as she could for her turn on the phone with her Daddy.

“I’m sure you only have a few minutes and there’s someone else who wants to say hello, too.” Donna offered.

“Yeah.” Josh cleared his throat, trying to sound as chipper as possible. “Put me on speaker.”

“Daddy?” Audrey called out as soon as Donna handed her the open cell phone.

“Hey there,” Josh greeted with fake cheer.

"Daddy, where are you? I miss you."

"I miss you too, shortcake. I wish I was with you. I'm doing something really important for the President and Papa Leo. I promise I'm trying as hard as I get to get done as fast as I can so I can be with you and Donna. Okay?” Josh's voice was desperate and starting to break and Audrey's little forehead furrowed in confusion, looking so much like her father it practically took Donna’s breath away.

“But when?” Audrey asked Josh but looked to Donna for an answer. An answer she didn’t currently have.

Donna realized that she needed to intervene and try to make sure that the conversation between them ends on a happier note.

"Audrey, tell Daddy about where we stopped for breakfast on our road trip."

“There was a big dinosaur,” Audrey explained with excitement, her eyes widening at just thought as she began to gesticulate wildly.

"Bigger than the building, wasn’t it?” Donna encouraged Audrey to keep going.

“Uh-huh. And we ate pancakes with candies in them,” she practically squealed.

“You… What?” Josh chuckled.

“They had M&Ms inside, Daddy!”

Josh laughed genuinely. “Three days, Donna,” he chuckled. “It took her three days and she broke you. Candy filled pancakes for breakfast.”

“Actually, that was a me,” Edith chimed in. “Hello, Son.”

“I should have known,” Josh responded. “Hi, Ma.”
“Daddy! We’re going to live in a new house now!” Audrey recaptured the conversation. “And my room has a window in the ceiling and Donna said I can have a pink wall.” She turned her attention to Donna. “What’s that word again?”

“Soirée,” Donna gently reminded. “The paint color is called coral soirée.”

“That means a party,” Audrey informed Josh.

“Very good,” Josh commended her.

The three heard a noise in the background before Josh informed them he had to go. His time was up.

“I love you guys,” he told them quickly.

“We love you, too,” Donna called out, the only one quick enough to respond before the call cut out.

The silence on the line brought them back to reality, the still of the now quiet hotel room hanging over them as they felt the loss of his presence once again.

Donna pulled Audrey onto her lap, holding her close. She’d respect Josh’s wishes and do as he instructed, but she wouldn’t give up hope.
Chapter 33

As soon as her flight touched down at National, Donna was on full alert. She had a lot to accomplish in the next few days and she didn’t want to be the subject of media scrutiny in the process. She’d hailed a cab and headed for her apartment, she wanted to get through boxing her up her minimal belongings as quickly as possible. She could sort through it all later, she assured herself. She just had to pack and go. She thanked her lucky stars she’d formed a friendship with her landlady, who had left her a stack of assorted moving supplies inside the apartment.

Once she was inside, she surveyed the situation. She’d already had several calls on her advertisement to sublease the 1 bedroom furnished apartment. In fact she had an appointment in just a few hours. All she needed to do was pack up her clothes and personal belongings. She made quick work of it, not giving herself any time to think. She did really have that many clothes but made up for it by owning more shoes than she practically needed, but they all went into a box too. All her pictures and mementos quickly followed. Her small bathroom took no time at all.

Once she’d finished packing, in record time, she sat her boxes to the side. Her father and Chris would be in town the next day and they would carry the boxes. The first appointment was right on time. The applicant had provided the requested security deposit and first month’s rent, and had quickly signed the lease. Donna assured her that a professional would come in to clean over the weekend and the place would be hers on Monday.

Glad to have that out of the way, Donna hailed a cab and made her way to Georgetown. She took a deep breath and steeled herself before entering Josh’s building. Somehow she’d summoned the strength to slip the key into the lock and let herself inside, closing the door to the completely still apartment behind her.

It wasn’t that Donna hadn’t processed all that had happened over the prior weeks, but rather that she hadn’t been faced with the reality that Josh wasn’t in Washington. It was easy to displace her emotions when she was out of town and busy caring for Audrey, but now, in the empty apartment, there was nowhere to hide.

Typically, when she entered the Lyman home, the three bedroom condo was bustling with life. Audrey’s laughter and Josh’s bright greeting were instantly missed. She half expected to hear him ranting about tax incentives for corporations as he chased Audrey around with a small periwinkle cardigan in his hand, trying to convince his little girl that she needed to put on her sweater.

She felt the memory, which seemed so close but completely out of reach, simultaneously tug her lips into a tiny smile and break her rapidly beating heart.

As much as she hoped that she’d wake up from this nightmare or at least that her semi frequent conversations with Leo would resolve some of the dread she’d been feeling, she had to move forward as if this could be a long-term arrangement. Josh was sentenced to two years. She knew the appeals process wouldn’t be fast, especially given his plea. And from what she’d pieced together, there probably wouldn’t even be an appeal, just a vague hope of a political solution. She needed furniture for the cabin. Audrey needed her clothes. She had to try to make a life for them, even if there was a gaping Josh Lyman sized hole in her heart.

She tried her best to emotionally remove herself from the situation, she needed to be practical right now. She began moving about the living room with a pad of brightly colored post it notes, marking the pieces that would need to go into the van with a yellow sticky. Honestly, they needed most of this stuff. She was relieved that Josh had paid the condo off early and she wouldn’t need to sublet it.
She could take what she needed and leave the rest. She was able to move efficiently through the living room, marking the couch, end tables and a few lamps, as well as the dining room table. She boxed up a few stacks of books, personal items and photographs before moving onto Audrey’s movies, which sat stacked under the television.

In the kitchen, she quickly tagged all of the small appliances. They’d need those, as well as all the dishes, glasses and flatware, but she’d pack them later. She might as well take all of the food in the cupboards too. She opened the refrigerator, glad that she had gotten rid of anything that would spoil before she left town. There wasn’t much to get rid of in there, but she should empty the freezer, she supposed.

Once she’d made her way to Audrey’s room, Donna was immediately glad that she’d recently changed over the closet, ridding it of items that had become too small or were out of season. Donna quickly packed up several boxes of toys and linens. She’d already decided to move all of Audrey’s bedroom set to Colorado in an effort to ease the transition to new surroundings.

Thinking of Audrey, Donna glanced at her watch and decided that this would be a good time to call her. She’d promised that she’d call her every day, and she certainly wasn’t going to break that promise. Audrey should be up and finished with breakfast by this time. Now that she’d accomplished some things and wasn’t feeling quite as overwhelmed, she could put on a cheerful voice for her little girl.

“Hello? This is Audrey speaking.”

“Very good, Audrey. I like your manners.”

“Donna!! Bubbe it's Donna!”

Donna could hear Edith laugh softly in the background, knowing full well who was calling before she let Audrey answer.

“I’m so glad you called! Bubbe and I are having fun but I miss you!”

“I miss you too, Sweet Pea. But guess what I’m getting ready to pack right now.”

Audrey thought for only a moment. “My kitchen?”

“Yes! Your play kitchen.”

“Don’t forget all my dishes, and all my plastic food. And I need my chef’s hat and apron. ... And Walter’s hat and apron too. You won’t forget it, Donna, will you?”

“No, I won’t forget it. I promise. Can you put Bubbe on the phone now?”

As soon as she finished reassuring Edith that everything was going smoothly and that she’d be back soon, Donna ended the call and moved on to the office. She worked diligently to box up all of Josh’s paperwork. She didn’t bother to sort anything, because she knew that the best course of action would be to move the entire contents of his study to Colorado. Though Josh wouldn’t have left anything sensitive laying around, Donna still didn’t want to risk the chance of his personal documents falling into the wrong hands. If his belongings were with her, she’d know they were secure.

Pulling open the middle drawer of his desk she stopped, blinking the rapidly welling tears in her eyes. She’d been avoiding her emotions all morning, and for the better part of the last weeks, but she’d reached her tipping point.
Donna slowly pulled out a neat stack of items stored carefully in the drawer. He’d saved many keepsakes from Audrey over the years, but Donna held a particular subsection of those items in her hand. Photos of the three of them, cards with heartfelt messages signed with love from Audrey and Donna and drawings depicting the three of them as a family.

She curled up in Josh’s desk chair and took her time looking through each of the memories. There were simple moments, most that she remembered fondly, and a few that she was certain she hadn’t seen before. Photos of Audrey’s class visit to the White House, snapshots of holidays and birthdays for all three of them, and simple, quiet moments. Donna couldn’t help but to smile at an old snapshot of a tiny Audrey sleeping peacefully on her chest as she dozed in a chair at the Lyman’s old Westport home. Donna flipped the photo over, hoping to find a date. Audrey couldn’t have been more than a few months old. She immediately found Josh’s handwritten timestamp on the back of the picture.

**My Girls**  
**July ’98**

She blinked back the heavy tears welling in her eyes for a brief moment before deciding to allow herself the emotional purge she’d been fighting off for weeks. She wasn’t sure how long she’d cried, the sobs shaking her entire body as she felt the loss of his presence all over again. The physical pain in her chest felt as though it belonged there as she wondered how one person could feel so suddenly empty inside.

She wanted, more than anything, to be near him. To feel his arms around her once again, reassuring her that they’d make it through this together. But he wasn’t there, and Donna had never felt more alone in her life.

When her tears were interrupted by a strong knock on the front door, Donna wiped her eyes and attempted to control her breathing as she made her way to the foyer. She didn’t bother to check her appearance in the hallway mirror. She was certain she’d be alarmed at what she saw, but she was well past caring. Whomever was in the hallway would just have to deal with it. She could only be strong for so many people.

Opening the front door, she felt her chin begin to quiver again when she spotted Sam standing on the other side, a distraught look on his face.

“I know,” Sam immediately soothed, stepping inside and wrapping Donna in his arms. “I know.”

Donna closed her eyes for a moment, resting her tear stained cheek against Sam, finally able to seek comfort in a friend.

“We’re all going to get through this,” he assured her, though his voice sounded less than confident. “We’re going to get him through this. He’s going to be okay.”

Donna felt a few silent tears slip as Sam squeezed her tight. She didn’t bother to move from his friendly embrace, slowly opening her eyes only when she heard another noise. Toby stood a foot away from her, a sad smile on his face, his hand clutched to his heart.


“Of course.” He nodded slowly, shoving his hands into his pockets where he stood. “That’s what family does.”

OoOoOoO
Donna sat outside Leo’s office, halfway listening to Margaret’s chatter, but unable to completely tune out the conversation between the Chief of Staff and Sam that was bleeding through the door.

Toby and Sam had made a pot of coffee and then driven Donna to the White House for a meeting that morning.

She’d packed her belongings from her desk and gathered Josh’s personal effects from the DCoS office quickly and efficiently, determined to keep her head held high no matter how difficult. When she’d returned to her desk, she found Margaret, who greeted her with a warm hug and walked her to Leo’s outer office.

“How… HOW can you sit here and tell me that when Donna is in the next room? I told him I’d watch out for her and now you want me to just sit here while you tell her you’re… giving up?”

“I’m not giving up!” Leo’s voice boomed back leaving no room for misinterpretation. “That man is a son to me, Sam. So I’d appreciate it if you’d stop acting as if I’ve thrown in the towel. You don’t think I’d walk over to the Speaker’s office and let him cuff me and take me to jail if I thought it would save Josh? Do you think I wanted this? Do you honestly think I had ANY idea he’d pull something like this?”

“Gentlemen.” Even on the other side of the door Donna could tell immediately that President Bartlet had just taken control of the room. “No one was more surprised by Josh’s actions than I. And though I’m afraid I bear most of the blame for the final outcome believe me when I tell you I’d never have willingly asked him to fall on the sword. I’m also certain that the last thing he’d want is for us to spend valuable time fighting amongst ourselves while he carries the weight of my burden. It’s not what I want but it’s the way that it is. And might I remind you that there’s nobody in Washington better at political strategy than he is. So, Leo, Sam, whatever it is that Josh does, you’re going to let him do it.”

“Yes, sir,” she heard them both reply only a moment before the office door opened.

“Donnatella.” President Bartlet stood in the doorway.

“Mr. President.” Donna hopped to her feet.

“I’m genuinely sorry for the circumstances, but it is wonderful to see you.”

He motioned her inside, where Toby nodded a silent hello and Sam faced the outside widow, his arms crossed in front of his chest in frustration.

“Hey there, kid.” Leo offered the most genuine smile he could conjure, crossing the room to embrace Donna. He led her gently to the couch in his office, unbuttoning his suit jacket as he sat down in the chair nearest her. “How are you holding up?”

Leo’s concern was genuine. He knew everything that was currently on Donna’s plate and sincerely wished he could do more for her.

Donna made a bit of small talk, but all that she really wanted was to get down to business. She was at the White House for a reason, and there was nothing more important to her than being an advocate for Josh and Audrey.

President Bartlet chimed in with a few follow up questions about the Colorado house and asked after Audrey and Edith, but he certainly wasn’t his usual talkative self. Donna could easily see he was holding back. She just couldn’t figure out why.
Though she was typically one for protocol, her emotions had taken over and she was well past the point of sitting quietly while Senior Staff and the President handled the situation. This wasn’t a foreign spending negotiation or finding leverage to pass a budget. This was Josh’s well being. This was personal.

“Sir?” Donna swallowed, summoning the nerve to jump right in to the conversation.

“Yes?” President Bartlet had always been such a kind and understanding man, treating his senior staff as though they were his family. Donna could see the emotion on his face and knew that this was no different.

“Why… Why can’t you just pardon him?”

Donna felt the tension immediately flood back into the room.

“I want to, Donna.” The grief stricken look on the President’s face reminded Donna that perhaps they were still all in this together. “But I have to trust the guy in the room on this one.”

Donna shook her head slightly, trying to determine what exactly that meant, but before she had time to overanalyze the situation, the cell phone on Leo’s table rang and he answered it immediately. They’d been more or less expecting the call and Leo quickly put Josh on speakerphone for the entire room to hear.

“Josh? You there?” Leo leaned forward and stared intently at the phone. “You’re on speaker.”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

Knowing they had only a limited amount of time, President Bartlet jumped right in.

“Josh. Have you thought any more about my offer?”

“Good afternoon, sir. I haven’t changed my stance on our prior discussion.”

Donna bit her lip at the sound of his voice. She could always tell when he was putting on a front for Leo and the President. He was struggling to come to terms with everything that had happened, she knew that, but on the phone he sounded like his normal, confident self to the untrained ear. His stoicism broke her heart.

“Josh, hear me out,” President Bartlet continued, a hint of despair peeking through in his voice.

“No.” Josh stopped the conversation before it had a chance to truly begin. “No pardon, no way.”

Donna was unable to stop a lone, muffled sob from escaping her lips at his words. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand and wrapped the other arm around her waist, trying to keep everything from spilling out in present company.

“Donna?” Josh’s voice softened. It was immediately clear to everyone that he hadn’t been fully aware that she was in the room. “Donna, is that you?”

Sam, who had been lingering in the corner of the office, was next to her in a heartbeat.

“She’s here, Josh,” Sam offered, placing a gentle arm around Donna.

“Donna, I need you to listen to me.” Josh paused for a brief moment. He’d always tried to keep his complex personal life out of Leo’s office but at this point, he was well beyond caring about the optics of his relationship with Donna. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that you have to hear this and I’m sorry that you
have to be the one that picks up the pieces from all of this. But I can’t take a Presidential pardon.” He stopped, listening intently for any signs of a response from her.

When the room remained completely quiet, he continued in a gentle voice.

“I know this is hard to hear, but if I take a pardon, then all of this will be for nothing. The damage to my reputation is already done. If I take a pardon it will negate the deal that I made and launch a whole new round of inquiry. We’d be in more difficult position than when all of this started. Do you understand?”

“I do. And I trust you. But I’m not going to give up, either. Just please tell me you’re still looking for another way out of there.”

“Well, I’m not digging my way out with a spoon!” He forced a laugh that succeed it making her roll her eyes.

“Josh...“ Donna hesitated not sure what to say in the crowded room. Josh broke in, his voice stronger this time.

“Leo knows what to do. He’ll give it a couple weeks, then work the back channels. Show them you don’t need me but that you’re willing to consider some concessions so long as parole and early release remain on the table.”

The five heard a muffled voice in the background before Josh sighed deeply. “Listen, I’ve got to go. Give Audrey a kiss for me. Take care of her. Love you Guys.”

And then the line went dead.

OoOoOoO

Donna stood at the counter in Josh’s kitchen, carefully wrapping dishes in newspaper before handing them to CJ to pack into a box. The day had been draining at best, but Donna was grateful when CJ had shown up on Josh’s doorstep with a bag of carryout and a bottle of wine.

After the two had enjoyed dinner, CJ rolled up her sleeves and jumped right in to help Donna with the packing.

“I think I have a lead on a job,” Donna offered, handing CJ a plate. “A couple of them, actually. The problem is, I’m not quite sure who to list as a reference. I mean, I don’t really want to draw any more attention to the three of us than strictly necessary so listing my time at the White House doesn’t exactly seem like the best move.”

“If you need to borrow some money, I can-”

“No.” Donna didn’t even let CJ finish her thought. “It’s not that. I mean, it is that, I suppose, to a degree. But we’re not in a pinch. Josh left us some cash and the Colorado house is paid for but... “

“But what?” CJ stilled her motions and waited patiently for Donna continue.

“I just...” Donna rang her hands. “This sounds like it’s going to be a more permanent situation than I originally thought. It’s time for me to start acting like it and to get a long term plan into place. We can’t live forever on Josh’s savings and I think it’s going to be hard for him to find work when he gets out. I mean, I know he can do anything but everyone in the party is acting like he’s some kind of pariah and he shouldn’t have to take a job that he’s not happy in and Audrey needs health insurance and...”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Slow down.” CJ moved closer to Donna, placing her hands on Donna’s shoulders.

Donna put her hand over her mouth, determined not to break down again that day.

“Donna, I know that you and Josh have something special. And I’d never discount that, or tried to imagine how hard it is to watch Audrey be separated from her father. But Josh is like a brother to me. And to Toby and Sam. He’s a surrogate son to Leo and the President. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Donna nodded her head slowly, still unable to really speak.

“Donna, I give you my word. We won’t let his sacrifice be for nothing.”

Donna bit her lip and gave CJ a sad smile.

“Look,” CJ sighed. “I’m not always in the room on this one, and for good reason. It’s a delicate situation at best. But Leo always makes it a point to fill me in when he can, and he knows, and I hope you know, that I’ll use any power that I have to help Josh. They’re working on it around the clock and if there was any way to walk it back, they would. But Donna, aside from all of that, you need to remember that as much as we all love Josh, we all love you, too. And doing what we can for Josh in this situation means seeing to it that you and Audrey are cared for as well. You can call me, Donna. Just to talk. It doesn’t have to be substantial or to fill me in on Josh, it can just be to blow off steam after a long day or tell me about Audrey. We’re friends Donna. That hasn’t changed.”

Donna gave CJ a genuine smile; her first in quite some time. “I know. Thanks, Ceej.”

“And as far as the job reference goes, just list me as Claudia. I doubt anyone will put it together. But hey, it’s getting late. I’ll be back in the morning with Charlie, Sam and Toby to help your Dad and Chris load the truck. You sure you’re okay alone tonight.”

“I’m fine. Really.” Donna assured CJ the best that she could before seeing her friend out and locking up the apartment. It had been an exhausting day and the next was sure to be the same.

Donna wandered slowly to Josh’s room, opening the door hesitantly. She’d been avoiding this specific portion of the condo all day. Practically speaking, she’d determined that she’d pack the contents in the morning before they loaded all of his furniture into the moving truck. Tonight, she needed sleep.

But the practicality of moving Josh’s bedroom wasn’t Donna had been working to avoid. It was the emptiness of the room. His room. A room where they’d shared a myriad of intimate, though unspoken moments throughout the years. Donna couldn’t deny it any longer- she was nothing short of heart sick.

She changed quickly into pajamas, pilfering a shirt from his top drawer, and approached his side of the bed, biting her lip as she gently ran her fingers across the blankets, laying exactly as he’d left them before turning himself in to federal custody. Though she felt a brief moment of hesitancy about disturbing the bed as Josh had left it, the feeling was fleeting. She wanted more than anything to feel close to him, and so she allowed herself to crawl into his place, settling into the sheets and pulling the blankets close.

She rolled onto her side and pulled his pillow close, nestling into it simply to be closer to Josh. Donna closed her eyes and tried to relax, taking a deep breath and swearing she could still smell a hint of his cologne. It may not have seemed like much, but in that moment she’d take every little bit
of him that she could cling to.
When Donna landed in Denver, she felt a huge relief. Though she’d only been in Washington for 3 days, it felt as though she’d been away from Audrey for an eternity. And being in the apartment on her own for a day and half after Chris and her Dad had left wasn’t easy either. She’d thought it would take more time to get everything in order, but with all the help they’d packed everything up in record time. The guys had been thrilled to get an early start on the long drive. In fact, they were making such good speed, they might just beat Donna to the cabin.

She was anxious to get back to the Cabin soon, but her mother would be landing in about an hour, so she purchased a cup of coffee from a kiosk in the terminal before making her way to baggage claim. While she waited for her luggage, Donna reviewed the rental car agreement to make sure everything was in order. She and her Mom would make the drive to the cabin together. Once the truck was unpacked and they were settled in, her family would drop the truck off and bring the rental car back to the airport before flying home. It was a good plan. Donna was only halfway through her latte when she spotted her mother exiting towards baggage claim. The two embraced warmly and Donna was immediately relieved to be in a comforting presence once again. “Thanks for coming, Mom.” Donna held on tightly. “I’m so glad you’re here.” “Oh, of course, darling.” Meredith Moss was genuinely glad to be able to help her daughter. “Anything you need. You know that. Now, let’s get our bags and get on the road. I think there’s probably a little girl who is waiting impatiently to see you.”

Walking in stride next to her mother, Donna grinned at the mention of Audrey. “Whoa,” She remarked, eyes widening at the size of the suitcases Meredith lugged off of the conveyor belt. “What did you bring with you?” “Oh, this and that,” Meredith smirked. “... a sewing machine.” “What?” Donna couldn’t help but to laugh. “Well! You’re going to need curtains! And you told me that you painted an accent wall in Audrey’s room coral. She’s going to need a new bedspread. We can get everything fixed right up. It’ll feel like home in no time.” “Maybe,” Donna stared at a spot on the floor. “It will,” Meredith softly reassured. “And before you know it Josh will be home, and he will think so too.” The thought gave Donna a sliver of hope, and she clung to it as the two of them found the car, loaded it, and then navigated the mountain roads to the cabin. “Looks like they beat us,” Meredith remarked as Donna pulled into the driveway behind the moving truck. The car was barely in park when the front door flew open and Audrey darted out into the night, running across the yard in her pajamas and an oversized winter hat. “Donna!” She called out, practically lunging towards her. “Hi, Sweet Pea!” Donna held her close and made her way towards the warmth of the house. “I missed you so much!” Audrey held on to Donna tightly, and it was easy to see that she was nothing short or relieved that she had come back. Audrey rest her head on Donna’s shoulder, her anxiety leveling off.

“Did you have fun with Bubbe while I was gone?” Donna gave her a kiss on the cheek. She was so happy to be back with Audrey.

She could feel Audrey nod against her. “Uh-huh,” she swung her feet a bit. “Donna, Grampy Moss and Uncle Chris brought my toys in that big truck.”

Audrey pointed to the moving van as Donna made her way up the set of steps onto the porch and into the house, which was already in a state of chaos. There were boxes stacking up in the living room as Chris and Rick were beginning to haul the furniture inside.

“And my Uncle Chris gave me this hat!” She was wound up with all of the commotion that evening.

“I see that,” Donna smiled at the hat, two sizes too big, with a red and white poof ball in the top and a badger crocheted into it.
“And what do you say when you’re wearing that hat?” Chris asked from a few feet behind them as they carried Josh’s bed frame in the door.

“Oh, Wisconsin!” Audrey responded, pumping her little fist into the air.

“Atta girl!” Rick cheered as Donna smiled widely.

“Donna.” Audrey’s eyes widened, pointing at the large piece of solid wood furniture. “That goes in Daddy’s room! Is Daddy coming?”

“Oh, Sweet Pea. No. I’m sorry.” Donna cupped Audrey’s chin and met her eyes. “Remember what we talked about?”

Audrey’s chin quivered a bit but she nodded that she did remember.

Donna’s conversation with Audrey about Josh’s incarceration had been difficult to say the least, but she wasn’t going to leave the little girl wondering. Donna answered all of the resulting questions truthfully and as delicately as possible, trying to put this situation into terms that Audrey would understand.

Donna sat Audrey on the countertop and stood in front of her. “It’s okay to be sad sometimes, Sweet Pea. And it’s okay to miss your Daddy.”

Audrey looked up to Donna with wide eyes, listening intently to what she said.

“I miss him, too,” Donna admitted softly.

“You do?” Audrey looked on in awe.

“Of course I do. And do you know what else?”

“What?”

“He misses you.”

“He does?” Audrey was clinging to Donna’s every word.

“Of course he does. And he loves you so, so much.” Donna smiled. “And I do too,” she added before giving Audrey a tickle on her stomach and eliciting a loud, genuine giggle before picking her up from the spot on the counter and standing her on the floor. “Now, I think Grammy Moss has a surprise for you in her purse. I’m going to go find Bubbe.”

Audrey ran off to find Meredith while Donna navigated the boxes to look for Edith.

OoOoOoO

The next morning Donna woke up early. They’d managed to assemble Edith’s bedroom set the night before, and the rest of the family had opted to sleep anywhere they could land in an effort to simply shut their eyes after a long day.

Their plans to efficiently unpack were slightly derailed upon Edith’s announcement that she’d be moving into the small guest house behind the main cabin. Though Donna wasn’t exactly thrilled by this revelation, she realized that everyone was handling the stress of Josh’s incarceration differently, and if Edith felt that she needed to live in the guest house they’d find a way to make it work.

Rick and Meredith slept on Donna’s mattress on the floor in the spare room upstairs while Chris had made himself at home on the couch and Donna and Audrey slept on Josh’s bed in the master.
Donna rolled onto her side, unable to go back to sleep with the bright sunlight shining in through the large picture window. Audrey was still sleeping soundly, sprawled out diagonally across most of the bed, Walter resting on the pillow. Donna couldn’t help but to smile at the scene before her. Audrey was the embodiment of Josh’s personality, that was certain.

Thinking of all she had to do that day, Donna was ready to get going. She gently slid out of bed and dressed quickly, tiptoeing out of the room.

“Donna? Where are you going?” Audrey’s small sleepy voice stopped her at the door.

“Go back to sleep,” she soothed. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“Can I come with you?” Audrey sat up and rubbed her sleepy eyes. “Please, Donna?”

Donna couldn’t say no. She knew Audrey was going to be a bit more clingy than normal with Josh’s absence and her new surroundings.

“Alright,” Donna agreed. She would have preferred Audrey to get another hour of sleep, but she wasn’t going to force her to stay in the room alone. “Come on.”

Audrey hurried to her feet, climbing out of the covers and quickly making her way to Donna’s side and following her to the small garage that housed the majority of the boxes from DC.

“Put your coat on,” Donna instructed, removing a cover from an overstuffed chair, “and sit here. I’ll find a box of your books.”

“Donna? Can we play outside today? In the snow?” Audrey was hopeful as she situated herself and Walter, leaning her head against an armrest.

“We’ll see,” Donna muttered as she moved a few boxes.

“But Donna, I’m bored! There’s nothing to do here and I don’t have any friends to play with and we don’t even have toys or a TV.” Audrey crossed her arms and pouted.

“Audrey.” Donna’s stern tone left no room for interpretation as she looked over at the little girl. “What is Daddy’s rule about whining?”

“Save it for the professionals,” Audrey muttered. “I can whine when I get elected to Congress.”

“That’s right,” Donna nodded. “And besides, your toys are in one of these boxes so you’ll have plenty to do.”

Before Audrey could continue her weak protest, the door to the garage opened and Rick peeked his head through. “Heya, kiddo!”

“Grampy!”

“Uncle Chris and I are going to head into town to find some donuts for breakfast and grab a few things at the hardware store. But I can’t go without my sidekick.”

Audrey was immediately wound up at the thought of going anywhere with Rick and Chris. “Donna, can I go? Please? Please?”

Donna laughed. “Of course. Let’s get you in some warm clothes and boots.”

Once Audrey was off on her morning adventure, Donna wasted no time getting down to business.
She’d had new carpet installed in the upstairs rooms while she’d been in DC, and after vacuuming it, she made the multiple trips upstairs with boxes for each room. Her number one priority would be to get Audrey situated. The rest would fill in.

Almost an hour later Donna heard the front door open as Audrey announced her presence.

“Donna!” She shouted. “I’m home and Grampy Moss let me have a donut with sprinkles on it!”

She could hear Audrey’s little feet running across the open rooms in the bottom floor of the cabin as Donna descended the staircase.

“A donut with sprinkles, huh?” Donna grinned. “Sounds like you’re a lucky girl.”

“And guess what else?” Audrey beamed, but didn’t wait for Donna to respond. “I got my own tool box!”

“A tool box?”

“Yes!” Audrey nodded her head vigorously. “So I can help you with our new house!” She grabbed Donna’s hand and pulled her towards the kitchen where Rick and Chris were unloading their purchases. “Look!” Audrey pointed to the small, hot pink box on the counter.

“Oooh,” Donna cooed as she popped Audrey up to sit on the counter. “Very fancy, Audrey Joan. What do you say?”

“Thank you!” Audrey spouted. “I said thank you!”

Rick winked and gave Donna subtle nod that Audrey had, in fact, used her manners upon receipt of the gift.

Audrey opened the top of the box the way that Chris had showed her, and pulled each of the pink tools out to examine them once again. She lined up a small screwdriver, a carpenter’s pencil, a lightweight mallet and a tape measure.

“You’re all set,” Donna confirmed, watching Chris lug a large sander into the house to refinish the hardwood floors.

“Yeah!” Audrey replied with a wide grin, still captivated by her new treasures. “Come on, Donna. We better get to work.”

OoOoOoOo

Audrey, dressed in a pair of overalls, was sleeping soundly on top of Josh’s bed when Donna found her. They’d worked nonstop for the previous five days sprucing up the cabin. They’d cleaned, painted, sewn, and organized from morning until night. Audrey had measured everything in sight with her little pink ruler, and now she was sprawled out on the bed, Walter beside her.

Chris was just finishing grouting the new tile backsplash in the kitchen and everyone else was ready to call it a night. The Mosses had an early flight back to Wisconsin the next day.

Donna moved carefully to change Audrey into her pajamas without waking her, tucking the little girl into the covers and snuggling Walter in beside her. Though Audrey’s room was finished and ready to be slept in, Audrey simply wasn’t ready to be alone upstairs at night. She’d become Donna’s shadow over the last few weeks. Though they’d have to get back to a normal routine eventually, Donna knew it would take some adjustment time for all of them and she didn’t push.
Leaving the door cracked, Donna made her way back to the kitchen where Chris was finishing his clean up. He washed his hands and grabbed the last 2 beers from the 6 pack he’d purchased a few days prior, handing one to Donna.

“Well, Sis, it looks pretty good in here,” he remarked, taking in the freshly updated cabin.

“It does,” Donna smiled softly, looking around at the cozy little home. “I can’t thank you enough. I could never have pulled this off without you, Mom and Dad.”

“I’m glad I could help. And I have to say,” Chris laughed, “I’ve never seen anyone negotiate like you did at the hardware store. You sure you don’t want to work for me?”

Donna gave a small smile. “What can I say? I’m a girl on a budget. And with the discount on the rental equipment for the floor and all the items that I purchased from the clearance section, this whole remodel actually stayed fairly affordable.”

“It’s none of my business,” Chris continued somewhat hesitantly, “but is Edith chipping in on any of this?”

“Ummm…” Donna shifted uneasily. “It’s complicated,” she hedged. “And she has a lot on her mind. She paid for the hotel last week and I’m sure once we get settled in we will figure out the finances.”

“And in the meantime?”

She knew Chris’ question came from a place of love. He’d always looked out for her and she’d always been able to talk to him. Chris was observant and Donna knew he’d picked up on Edith’s eccentricities over the last 8 days.

“Josh left us with some money,” Donna acknowledged. “And we have very few expenses. This place is paid for, and so is the car and the condo in DC. HR is letting me use up my vacation time so I’m still going to receive another paycheck and actually I got a call about a job today, from one of the biggest resorts in the area. The pay is just alright but Audrey and I would have benefits and…”

“Whoa,” Chris laughed at his sister’s word vomit. “Calm down. I’m sure you have it all under control. I mean, you’ve pretty much had a plan for everything since you were about 6 years old. I’m just… I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” she quickly supplied, speaking more on reflex than anything else.

“Are you though? Because typically when you give me an answer like that I don’t believe you but I know if somethings wrong…” He trailed off.

“What?”

Chris cleared his throat and leaned back on the kitchen island. “If something was wrong, Josh would be there.”

Donna gave a sad smile and stared out the window.

“I thought you were crazy, you know. Going to New Hampshire to join a Presidential campaign. I mean, I wasn’t surprised because it’s you but I thought it was absolute insanity. I didn’t say anything at the time because if it meant you’d leave What’s-His-Nuts then I was all for it. What does Josh call that guy again?”

“Dr. Freeride,” Donna muttered.
Chris laughed. “Yeah. That’s him. Dr. Freeride. Anyway, you left and I was a little scared for you, to be honest. But I was home that weekend and Mark and I went out for a beer with Dad, who reminded me that you’re smarter than all three of us combined, and that you’d be okay. Still, even after I got over you working on a campaign, I thought you had completely gone off the deep end when you moved to DC. And when we actually saw you, on your first trip home, I couldn’t believe it. You were so happy, D. You had this new confidence and this... purpose. You kept telling us about all of the things you were helping to accomplish in the White House and I think you must have shown me a hundred photos of Audrey. And that REALLY confused me. But that night I visited you in DC, when my flight was delayed, and Josh picked me up from the airport and took all of us to dinner, well, it all clicked. You’re happy Donna. It may not be completely traditional, but you have the life that people dream about. Josh is a smart guy, D. And he has a team of smart people working diligently for him. You guys are all going to get through this and you’re going to be happy here. I really believe that.”

Donna felt the emotion building inside of her. “Thanks, Chris. I hope you’re right.”

But before Chris could respond, Audrey cried out from the master bedroom. “Donna?!” She sobbed, still not used to waking up alone in new surroundings.

“Duty calls,” Donna whispered, taking a quick last sip and carefully placing her bottle on the counter.

“Night,” Chris nodded. “And Donna… if you ever need anything…”

She smiled genuinely, grateful for the support of her family. “Thanks, Chris. I mean it.”

OoOoOoOo

“Okay, Sweet Pea, are you going to set the table?” Donna gently stirred the sauce simmering on the stove. She’d had what was easily the worst day in the four weeks they’d been living in Colorado, but she put on a cheerful smile for Audrey’s sake.

“Yes,” Audrey hopped up from where she was situated in the living room, coloring a picture to send to Josh. They’d quickly taken to writing him every evening after dinner. Even if the letter was short, Donna wanted to make sure he remained a consistent part of their lives, and sharing their lives through daily letters seemed to be the best way to do just that.

Donna handed Audrey placemats and napkins, followed by forks, and Audrey carefully set the table the way she’d been taught. Edith would join them for dinner, followed by cleaning up in the kitchen, and then they’d all sit down in the living room to watch an episode of I Love Lucy. Donna had seen the videotapes of the series in the clearance bin of a local store and purchased the complete set. It was one of the few shows that amused all three women. Edith would turn in immediately following their program and Donna and Audrey would write their daily letter to Josh. They’d go through Audrey’s bedtime routine, read a book or two and then it was lights out. Donna had wasted no time establishing a routine and they’d all grabbed on to it, grateful for some sort of stability in their changing lives.

“Okay, go pick up the puzzle on the floor in your room and then you can start to snack on some veggies before Bubbe walks over,” Donna instructed, pulling a container of carrots and broccoli florets that she’d prepared in advance out of the fridge.

Audrey moseyed up the stairs to do as she had been instructed. She had barely rounded the corner on the staircase when Donna’s phone began to ring. Glancing at the number, she immediately took the
“Hello?”

“Donna? Donna, is everything alright?” He was clearly worked up.

Donna closed her eyes, remembering everything she’d told herself on the drive home from Englewood that afternoon.

“Everything is fine, Josh,” she assured in the most soothing voice she could muster at that moment. “I promise.”

“You’re okay? Audrey and Mom are alright?”

“We’re all absolutely fine. I assure you,” she repeated her sentiment.

“Then what… Why… They told me you came to see me today.”

“I did.”

“Why?” He was completely dumbfounded. He couldn't fathom why anything other than a dire emergency would bring her to the correctional facility.

“Why?” She could hear the disbelief in her voice. “BECAUSE! Because I wanted to see you! Because I miss you! Because I thought that maybe you’d want to see me too.”

“Donna…” his voice sounded suddenly desperate in a way she wasn’t quite prepared to hear. “Of course I want to see you. Please tell me you don’t think otherwise.”

“I wasn’t on your visitor list, Josh.” Her tone was quiet as she took careful inventory of her surroundings, making sure neither Audrey or Edith were in earshot. She hadn’t told them where she was going that day, acting as though she was headed to pick up an extra shift at work when she left the house that morning. She’d arrived at the prison just as visiting hours were scheduled to begin, but she hadn’t been allowed inside. She’d been informed buy a guard that she wasn’t on Josh’s list of approved visitors and turned away. After sobbing in the car for the better part of twenty minutes she’d gathered her strength to return back to the cabin. She stopped on the way out of Denver and splurged on a well made cup of coffee and resolving to not blow this all out of proportion.

She heard him sigh on the other end of the line. “No. No, you’re not on the list. I want you to listen to me, Donna. Okay?”

“I’m listening.” She leaned back against the counter in the kitchen, biting her thumbnail in nervous concentration.

“I miss you. I miss you and Audrey so much I can barely breathe sometimes. But you cannot come back here. Do you understand me? You can never come back here and you can never bring her here. It’s not going to solve anything.”

“But Josh-”

“Donna. Please.” He swallowed the lump forming in his throat at the agony of the words he was speaking. “This is not a place where I want you to spend any time. I don’t want you to be subjected to this. And Donna, I don’t want you to see me like this.”

His words broke her heart. She was absolutely certain that nothing could diminish her feelings for
Josh, but she heard his request and though she didn’t like it, she would honor his wishes. She’d certainly broach the topic again in the near future, but given the lack of control he had right now, she wasn’t going to force the issue.

“Okay,” she whispered. “I won’t come back unless you ask me to. But Josh, I don’t want to go two years without seeing you. Audrey can’t go two years without her father. Please promise me...” She was beginning to grow emotional, and he could hear the gentle shake in her voice.

“There’s nothing happy to cling to here,” Josh told her. “And when I think of you and Audrey, every single one of those memories is warm. I want you to close your eyes and remember that morning in your apartment, Donna. And a thousand little moments over the last few years. I want you to hold onto those, okay? Because God knows I am.”

“I miss you,” she admitted without reserve.

“I miss you too,” he assured her. “I’m sorry for what I’m putting you through. You’ll never know how sorry, Donna. But we’re going to get through this. All of us. I promise.”

“I believe you.” And she did. Josh had never let her down before. She wasn’t about to let him start now.

“I only have about 10 minutes,” he attempted to change the tone. “Why don’t you tell me about what you’re doing right now?”

“I’m making dinner.” Donna felt a smile tug at her lips. She’d needed so badly just to hear his voice. Just to have an easy conversation with him.

“Nothing fancy, just spaghetti. Audrey’s picking up her puzzle so she can watch TV after we eat, and your mom is probably walking over from her area as we speak.”

“That sounds amazing,” Josh told her with unhindered sincerity. “Wait. She’s out in the guest house? Not in the main house with you?”

"Yes. But Josh, really, it's fine. The guest house is lovely and if she needs a little bit of privacy to get through this, well, that's fine too. I'm sure it's not easy on her. And Audrey and I are fine in here. She walks over in the mornings. There's a little path that we salt between the two houses."

"Donna..." Josh sighed, sorry that he had to put this, along with everything else, out there for her to deal with. "When Joanie... after the fire... she sealed herself off. She doesn't cope well with things like this."

"I know," Donna tried to gently reassure. She'd seen first hand what it looked like for Edith to meltdown and wall herself off after Rosslyn, and Donna thought she would likely be dealt the same set of cards in this situation. "I'll take care of her, Josh. I won't let her feel as though she’s all alone."

"I know you will, but that's not what I meant. She... You need to watch her, Donna. Please. I'm sorry to ask you but... I worry." "Josh..."

"She'd never do anything to endanger Audrey. She wouldn't, Donna, I'm sure of it. It's never been out of control. She just... when things get rough she can't always deal with it. She's been known to drown her sorrows in a bottle of gin." "Josh, I know."

"You know?!"

"I do. It's pretty obvious that your mother doesn't do well with stress, and I can't blame her. So, she..."
told me."

"She… did?"

"Yes," she continued very gently. "In Connecticut. Just after your father died. She was afraid it
would be on your mind and that you’d worry about leaving Audrey to rejoin the campaign. We
talked about it once more after Rosslyn and again in Wisconsin, too. And you're right, she wouldn’t
ever drink when she is watching Audrey. Nor would she ever do anything to jeopardize Audrey’s
well being. We're going to be fine, Josh. I don't want you to spend your time worrying about the
three of us."

"You're my angel," he told her softly, unable to find any other words. And for just a moment, they
remained silent, simply cloaking themselves in the warmth of their connection with each other.

But a few seconds later Donna felt a tug on her sweater and she knelt down with a warm smile,
pulling Audrey close and handing the phone over for her turn.
“Okay, Sweet Pea. Put the flower in.” Donna knelt in the garden, patiently waiting for Audrey to delicately place the dahlia bulb into the small hole she’d just dug. They’d been outside for the better part of two hours planting a garden in front of the cabin and both of them were loving every minute of it.

Audrey gently placed the dahlia bloom in the appropriate spot and filled the dirt in around the stem.

“All done!” She announced, rubbing her cheek and smearing dirt across her face.

Donna laughed outright, causing Audrey to giggle too. They were both absolutely filthy, but the yard looked vibrant. As Spring came to an end, the cabin was really starting to feel like home. Donna had installed a porch swing the prior weekend and she was especially looking forward to enjoying the fresh mountain air and a warm cup of coffee overlooking their new garden.

“Let’s get you cleaned up and start dinner.” Donna stood and picked up the small garden trowel they’d been using.

Audrey did as she was asked and was soon all clean, playing with a pony figurine in the living room with her damp hair drying into wild curls.

Donna, satisfied that Audrey was occupied for a moment, took a quick shower and changed into some comfortable clothes before starting dinner.

She’d found a recipe for chicken pot pie and decided to attempt to switch up their dinner routine with something new. Audrey helped pinch the edges of the crust, pleased to be contributing and enjoying the task at hand.

“Now we just slide it into the oven,” Donna narrated her actions, “and it will ding when it’s ready. 40 minutes.” Donna wiped down their hands and the workspace in the kitchen before moving to settle in beside Audrey on the sofa.

“Are you ready to write our letter to Daddy?” Donna picked up the small notebook they frequently used to correspond with Josh and clicked her pen. Along with turning the cabin into a home, over the course of the last few months Donna had figured out how to move on with life, but still keep Josh a part of it in some small way. She and Audrey wrote nightly letters to Josh telling him about whatever caught Audrey’s fancy. Donna also made it a point to sit down and craft something more substantial from herself about once a week. She found it therapeutic, and it made her feel like Josh was co-parenting, even though he couldn’t be there, and even though he’d never once disagreed with her approach. Still, getting a letter back from him, thanking her and telling her she was doing a good job raising their little girl always made her day.

Audrey agreed that she was, looking towards Donna. “Let’s tell him about our garden,” Audrey suggested, “and the pretty flowers.”

“Alright,” Donna agreed.

“And riding our bikes!” Audrey spent the early part of the morning riding in circles on the new pink bicycle she’d received for her birthday last month. Donna had admired it a window of a local bike shop, with its wicker basket and the streamers on the handlebars, and had picked up extra shifts at work until she’d saved enough to surprise Audrey, placing a large bow on it with a tag that read
Happy Birthday, Audrey Joan!
Love, Daddy & Donna

The look of awe on a Audrey’s face had made all of Donna’s extra effort worth it. She’d done little laps around the garage and could hardly wait until Donna took her to the park later that same afternoon. Once Donna had seen how quickly bike riding had become a favorite activity of Audrey’s. Donna had kept an eye out for a used bike in her own size. Luckily it had only take a few weeks to find one for sale at a reasonable price. They’d made a quick trip to the park that morning, riding a little trail to a diner and having breakfast, just the two of them.

Donna had certainly always been able to find joy in life’s simple pleasures, and she was proud to watch Audrey’s gratitude grow.

“Should we tell Daddy about the turtle we found today on the way to breakfast?” Donna asked, referring to the box turtle crossing the bike path in town.

“Oh, do you mean Tim?” Audrey didn’t miss a beat. She had a particular affinity for animals and named practically anything she came into contact with.

Donna stifled a chuckle. “Yes… Tim.”

“I’ll draw a picture,” Audrey stayed with resolve, picking up a green crayon and stating to color a rendition of the scene Donna was describing.

“What did you learn today?” The question was standard in their home.

“Turtles can be 100 years old.” Audrey offered. “And they like to eat lettuce.”

“That’s right,” Donna nodded her head. They’d stopped by the library after lunch and picked up a book about turtles in addition to the other books Audrey selected for the week.

“And what is our country of the week?” Donna asked. After their relocation to Colorado, Donna had taken a more direct approach to Audrey’s education. Though she was very pleased with the quality of instruction at Audrey’s preschool 3 days a week, she also knew that Josh had immersed his daughter in non traditional forms of education as well.

“Peru?” Audrey looked to Donna for confirmation, trying to accurately remember.

“Yes, it is.”

“So we’re going to learn a little bit about Peru and the people who live there this evening, and you can draw the flag on a notecard for our fridge.” They’d learn a few things about the country of origin over the week, and have a traditional meal on Thursday evenings. The meal, in Donna’s opinion, served more than one purpose, both educating Audrey on the world she lived in as well as combating picky eating habits that may have been forming.

Donna helped Audrey write the rest of the small letter and left her to color a picture of a day in the park on her bike with a turtle. Donna would write her letter to Josh that evening before she went to sleep and include a worksheet from Audrey’s school that she’d done particularly well on from the prior week before dropping an envelope in the mail.

Donna chopped the lettuce for a salad and Edith walked over from the guest house just as the timer on the oven buzzed.

“Mmmm… It smells wonderful in here.” Edith let herself inside.
“Hi, Bubbe!” Audrey greeted enthusiastically.

“Hi, Edie,” Donna gave a warm smile.

“Hello, my darlings. Tell me all about your day.”

OoOoOoO

Donna leaned against Josh's headboard and sighed. Audrey had been a little ball of energy all day and though they’d had a wonderful afternoon riding their bikes around the lake and meeting Edith for a picnic lunch, Donna felt particularly alone.

She crawled under the soft flannel comforter on top of the bed and looked around. It really was starting to feel like home. She’d kept Josh's furniture and added some new linens that she’d found to be cozy but still somewhat masculine. She’s painted the master bedroom a warm gray and accented the area with soft finishes and candles.

Donna opened the drawer of the nightstand and pulled out Josh’s latest letter. He’d gone on for several pages, as he always did, about everything and nothing. He’d clearly been doing a lot of reading, outlining for her both a new theory from a particle physicist in Switzerland and the merits of sight based words and phonics theories for Audrey’s reading. It warmed her heart to know that even when he was away from them, he still wanted to teach them every he knew. It was a distinctly Josh way of showing his affection, and it was never lost on Donna.

He’d praised her for the life she’d created in Colorado. Her resilience in the face of change, her ability to adapt to new surroundings and the extraordinary job she was doing raising their Audrey.

And then he’d told her how he’d missed her. Every day, he’d written. Every day.

OoOoOoO

Donna was completely exhausted. She’d worked a double and her feet were killing her. It was late and the crowd at the resort seemed to be particularly demanding that weekend. She simply had to help take the trash out and she’d be done for the evening.

She followed her coworker out the back door chatting casually, waving hello to a few ladies from the front desk who were headed to their cars.

“Shoo!” Donna jumped at the sound of a grounds manager shouting. “Go on! Get out of here! Shoo!”

Craning to see what the commotion was all about, Donna wasn’t exactly sure what was going on. She stepped forward a few paces before she was even able to spot the small, dirty beagle puppy shaking with fear in the corner. She looked up at Donna with wide, sad eyes and tucked herself even farther into the cardboard box where she was hiding when Donna stepped towards her.

“I’m calling animal control,” the groundsman announced in disgust.

“No!” Donna found herself interjecting. “I’ll handle it.”

The groundskeeper scoffed but quickly washed his hands of the situation, walking back towards the main building.

Donna crouched down and spoke to the frightened puppy in soothing tones, removing her jacket as she inched closer to the tiny animal.
“It’s okay,” Donna coaxed. “C’mere.”

A few minutes later the puppy was snuggled into her sweatshirt on the passenger seat of Josh’s car as Donna drove home.

She let herself quietly into the house, depositing the puppy and the sweatshirt into a laundry basket to keep her contained before slipping in and saying a quick hello to Edith, who had been dozing in a reading chair after putting Audrey to bed. She’d said goodnight to Donna and turned in quickly.

Donna gave the puppy a thorough bath and a small meal, which it gratefully scarfed down.

“We’ll pick up some dog food and a bed in the morning,” Donna gave the puppy a soft pet before placing her back in the laundry basket, which had now been lined with a few old towels and situated in Donna’s bedroom. “Stay here, I’ll be right back.”

The puppy whimpered a bit when Donna left the room, but had fallen asleep by the time she returned from checking on a soundly sleeping Audrey.

Donna watched at Audrey’s peaceful breathing, kissing her forehead and smiling at the thought of Audrey’s excitement the next morning when Donna would introduce her to the puppy.

The next morning Donna was up with the sun, letting the puppy outside for a few moments before climbing the stairs to the loft.

“Good morning, Sweet Pea,” Donna woke Audrey gently. “I have a surprise for you.”

Audrey’s eyes opened at the sound of the word ‘surprise,’ and she rubbed them lightly sitting up in bed to lean over into Donna’s arms.

“What is it,” she asked, climbing into Donna’s lap.

“Well you have to go downstairs and find out.”

“Okay,” Audrey agreed, groggily descending the stairs.

“Donna!” She gasp, eyes widening with her growing smile. “There’s a puppy in our house!”

The dog trotted directly over to Audrey, who crouched down and softly pet the animal.

“Hello, Lucy!” Audrey exclaimed, the puppy immediately wagging her tail.

“Lucy?” Donna smiled, immediately catching Audrey’s name for the dog.

“Yes.” Audrey was firm in her conviction. “Her name is Lucy. And we are going to be best friends.”

Lucy lunged forward and gave Audrey a kiss. Donna just shook her head, wandering to the kitchen and starting breakfast to a background of giggles, happy squeals and a very excited howl.

OoOoOoO

“Hello?”

“Donna!”

“CJ!”
“Boy, is it good to hear your voice.”

“You too!”

“Donna?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s that racket in the background?”

“Oh. Umm, Audrey started piano lessons this week.”

“I’m going to send you a giant bottle of Excedrin first thing in the morning.”

“I won’t fight you on that.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t called in a few weeks. It’s just been so crazy with the re-election campaign and… Donna? Is that a… dog howling?”

“Oh. Yeah. That’s Lucy. She likes to sing along.”

“Will you put Audrey on the phone? We all miss our little daily dose of happiness around here.”

“She misses you too, Auntie CJ. I’ll call you back after she goes to sleep and we can catch up.”

“Ok. Talk to you then.”

OoOoOoO

Donna was preparing the watermelon for their 4th of July celebration when all of a sudden it hit her. Josh had been gone for 6 months. Tears sprang to her eyes unexpectedly as a sudden wave of loneliness hit her.

She wanted to be proud of herself. They were making a good life. Audrey was doing well. She was learning all sorts of new things. She was happy. She was adjusting to life without her father.

The tears spilled over then. Audrey was adjusting to life without Josh. It dawned on her all at once that Audrey had stopped asking for him. There were no more tearful cries in the middle of the night. None of the daily questions about how long it would be until Daddy came home or looking hopeful every time the phone rang.

Donna felt her chest tighten at the reality of the situation. She didn’t want Audrey to give up hope. She didn’t want any of them to give up hope. She wanted Josh here, with them. She didn’t want to go another 18 months without him.

As she heard the back door open she quickly scrubbed the tears away and put on a bright smile, greeting Audrey and Edith and deciding on the spot that they were going to make the most of their holiday.

OoOoOoO

“What if they don’t like me?” Audrey squeezed Donna’s hand, clinging close to her as they walked towards the small school, the first hints of a fall breeze hanging in the air.

“They’re going to love you, I’m sure of it,” Donna stayed confidently, crouching down to Audrey’s eye level and smoothing her hair. “Just like I do.”
Audrey smiled at that.

“Besides, Sweet Pea. You know most of these kids. They’re your friends. The only thing that’s really changing this year is your teacher.”

“Miss Karen?”

“Yes. Miss Karen. You liked her last week at orientation night, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” Audrey nodded in the affirmative. “She was nice to me.”

“Yes, she was.” Donna smiled softly. “I’d never let you go anywhere if I thought people weren’t going to be nice to you. But you’ll have fun today, and Bubbe is going to pick you up at lunch time. And I’ll be home after work, in plenty of time for dinner. And maybe we can go get ice cream after we eat. How about that?”

“Really?”

“Yes, really!” Donna highlighted the relevant text in her blue marker and made a careful note in the margin of the book. There were days when she thought that maybe she was making some headway, but the majority of the time she felt as though she was barely treading water. She wanted so badly to do something useful for Josh. She wanted desperately to make this all go away.

She’d fallen asleep with a stack of papers spread over her bed more nights than not, and her late night calls from Sam reminded her that she wasn’t the only one who wanted to make this right. She’d cried and, one particular evening, yelled about the unfairness of it all. How he was too stubborn for his own good and too smart for her sanity someday. She’d sobbed that she didn’t understand why he wouldn’t just take the pardon and come home, though she rationally realized why he was hellbent on staying the designated course. Sam and listened to her, softly reassuring that he’d do everything he could, though he reasonably wasn’t making any progress either.

She’d done all of the research Sam has asked her to complete, and some more of her own, compiling documents and recounting events to Sam, who wanted to verify that he was remembering events accurately. But their endeavors seemed to be fruitless, and Josh remained behind bars, hellbent against taking a presidential pardon.

Josh has put his foot down, demanding that the senior staff focus on the re-election campaign and Sam’s phone calls had become less and less frequent. When she heard from Senior Staff their conversations were personal in nature, and they all shied away from Josh’s legal situation. It was clear to Donna that they were losing all hope. They’d exhausted every option that any of them could think of, and they were right where they’d started out. She could hardly bear to hear the rapidly increasing dejection in Josh’s voice when he called. He’d put on a brave front for Audrey, but he couldn’t fool Donna. She could tell. He was slipping away, into a deep pit of despair.

But Donna wouldn’t give up. She’d never stop fighting for him.

With the arrival of fall, the heat of the summer gave way to cooler evenings. Donna found that she enjoyed the mountain air more than she would have imagined, enjoying the laid back time reading...
with a cup of warm tea or watching Audrey and Lucy play in the back yard.

Donna woke in the night, somewhat groggily, to Audrey’s faint cries. She was up the stairs quickly, scooping Audrey into her arms.

“I don’t feel good,” Audrey whimpered.

It was easy to see that she had a slight fever and was under the weather. After giving Audrey a dose of the proper medication and changing her into different pajamas, Donna was fairly certain that Audrey had the flu, and it wouldn’t be going away before morning.

“Donna? Can I sleep in your room? Please?” Audrey’s lower lip trembled as she held onto Donna.

“Of course you can, baby girl.” Donna carried Audrey and Walter downstairs to her room as Lucy trotted dutifully behind.

Donna held Audrey, gently rubbing her back until she fell asleep once again. But only a few short hours later Audrey woke again and it was easy to see that the little girl felt miserable.

“I want my Daddy,” Audrey cried.

“I know you do,” Donna soothed. “I’m right here and I promise I’ll take care of you.”

“But I want Daddy!” Audrey continued, emphasizing the word Daddy and becoming increasingly worked up with every passing moment.

“Sweet Pea,” Donna attempted to capture Audrey’s attention in the most loving way possible as she pulled her close and rubbed her back. But before she could continue her thought, Audrey’s cries interrupted again.

“Please, Donna? Please?” Audrey was sobbing.

Donna truly emphasized for Audrey. “If I could fix this I would. But I can’t. And I’m so sorry.” She kissed the top of Audrey’s head.

“Can you call him? And ask him to come home?”

“No, sweetie, I can’t,” Donna soothed. “You know that I can’t. I’m so sorry.” They’d had this conversation before.

“But why?” Audrey sobbed, her cries cracking with her complete despair. “Why doesn’t Daddy want to come home and see me?”

Donna’s heart shattered with Audrey’s desperate plea.

“Oh baby girl,” Donna pulled her close. “Of course Daddy wants to see you. He loves you so, so much. He just can’t come home quite yet. But I promise I’m right here and I’m not going anywhere.”

Audrey continued to cry, slowly but steadily falling back to sleep in Donna’s arms. And though Donna hated that she couldn’t give Audrey what she wanted, her father’s comfort. Donna was a little relieved that Audrey still wanted Josh there. She hadn’t completely moved on from him.

OoOoOoO

“Hey you.” Donna couldn’t help but to smile when she answered.
“How’d you know it was me? Wait… did you know it was me?”

“It’s Sunday at 4:30. Who else would it be, Josh?”

“Is that Daddy?” Audrey chimed in from the background as she ran towards the phone.

Although she loved the sound of his voice, Donna rarely spoke to Josh for more than a few minutes on the phone when he called. It was so much more important to have Audrey spend that time with him. Instead, Donna wrote him regularly, and he’d respond with enough Josh-like calculated enthusiasm that she knew he wanted her to continue her weekly multi page letters.

“I think someone’s ready to talk to you,” Donna smiled softly as Audrey bounced on her toes and reached towards the phone.

“Wait. Before you hand me over, I just…” he trailed off.

“What is it, Josh?”

“I just… I miss you guys.”

Donna softened at his tone of voice, running her hands through Audrey’s auburn curls.

“I miss you, too, Joshua. And so does Audrey. And we aren’t going to give up hope or stop advocating on your behalf. You know that, right?”

“Yes,” he swallowed the lump in his throat. She believed in him.

The promise of seeing his family at the end of his two year sentence was what kept him going every day.

OoOoOoO

Donna sat at the desk in the makeshift study balancing her checkbook. They were lucky to have limited expenses as the cabin and Josh’s car were both already paid off, but she still had to pay careful attention to her budget. With utilities and insurance and maintenance on the cabin, Donna tried to save money where she could, clipping coupons and watching for sales on clothing in Audrey’s size.

Edith, though financially stable, typically didn’t contribute much financially. She’d buy the groceries if she did the shopping, but even her help with the errands was rare. Donna knew she was struggling with Josh’s absence and didn’t want to burden her with additional problems.

She’d vowed to take care of Josh’s family while he was away and she wasn’t going to fail him. She’d find a way.

With Josh’s assets frozen, the only thing Donna had access to is a Trust designated for Audrey’s education. She’d read the paperwork very carefully, and while she probably could use the funds if necessary, Donna prided herself on not touching them.

Besides, the money in the trusts was for Audrey’s future. She wanted her little girl to go to college and not have to worry about finances. Even if she’d wanted to access the funds, she wasn’t sure where to begin and she hated to bother Edith about it.

Donna was working 40 hours a week, picking up extra shifts at the resort when she could and trying to build the best life she could for Audrey.
Donna carried the 1 and totaled out the balance in her checking account with a sigh. Audrey had plead with her for two weeks about taking ice skating lessons and Donna was having a hard time saying no. Audrey had enjoyed ballet in Washington, and Donna herself had been lucky enough to enjoy extracurriculars in her youth. Though it didn’t seem as though it was in the budget, Donna would find a way. She’d skip coffee and lunches and get haircuts less frequently. She could wear her worn in winter coat for another season or two. She’d come up with something.

OoOoOoO

“Donna, look!” Audrey grinned wildly as she twirled in her poodle skirt. “I’m fancy!”

“Yes, you are.” Donna did a quick once over of Audrey in her Halloween costume. She was decked out in a poodle skirt that Donna had made out of felt with an old pair of Keds painted to look like saddle shoes and bobble socks with cat eye glasses and a scarf tied atop her curly ponytail. “Do you have your candy bag?”

“Yes! Are we going trick or treating now?” Audrey picked up the small novelty bowling bag that Donna had picked up at a thrift shop a few weeks prior. It had been the inspiration for the whole costume and Audrey had been so excited for the idea.

“Almost,” Donna nodded as she reached for a brown parcel on the kitchen countertop. “But you have a box to open first.”

Donna scored the tape and allowed Audrey to open the flaps, a full dimples grin spreading across the little girls face as her eyes widened in delight at the contents.

“There’s candy in here!” Audrey marveled.

“Let’s read the card first,” Donna gently encouraged.

Audrey pulled a small card with a cartoon black cat and jack-o-lantern on the front out of the envelope.

“Let’s sound it out,” Donna continued as Audrey opened the card.

“Ha...pppeee... Haaa...ll...ooooh...weee...een. Happy Halloween!”

“That’s right!” Donna looked on with a wide smile.

“Wuh...ee euh...veee ee ouuu. We love you!”

Donna beamed.

“I got it!” Audrey announced with a new found pride.

“You sure did.” Donna’s heart was practically bursting with joy. “It says that since you aren’t going to be able to trick or treat in the West Wing this year, they’re sending the candy to you. It’s signed from Papa Leo, Aunt CJ, Uncle Toby, Uncle Sam, Margaret, Carol, Bonnie, Ginger, Ed & Larry.”

“Wow...” Audrey was amazed at the sugary goodness inside the box.

It was packed to the brim with her favorite treats, and Donna noticed that it contained a few of her choice indulgences, too, as she grabbed a piece of foil wrapped Dove chocolate.

“You can pick one piece,” Donna informed Audrey. “And we will write a thank you note tomorrow and save the rest for later.”
After careful consideration Audrey chose a few pieces of candy corn and followed Donna out the door to Edith’s guest house.

“Trick or Treat!” She exclaimed as soon as Edith opened the door.

“Oh my!” Edie exclaimed, grabbing the fancy, oversized cookie shaped like bat and iced in purple sugars. “Aren’t you lovely?”

“Thank you, Bubbe,” Audrey stated in a singsong voice, using her best manners. “Are you ready to go with us?”

“I believe I am.” Edith grabbed her jacket and snapped a few photos of Audrey posing next to the the pumpkins they’d carved that currently sat perched on the front stoop before all three loaded into the car and headed into town.

Once they arrived at the fall festival, Audrey trick or treated at the booths of local businesses and then moved on to participate in the crafts and games.

Edith was chatting with a woman she played bridge with about joining the library board as Donna sipped a cup of hot apple cider, thinking to herself how much Josh would love the quaint little town they now called home, even though he’d whine endlessly about the lack of access to cable news programming in the cabin.

She couldn’t believe it had only been 9 months since his incarceration. It felt as though a lifetime was passing by without him and they weren’t even halfway through his sentence.

She missed every single detail of his presence. It killed her to know that Audrey was growing up and making memories without him, and that he was alone in a strange, desolate place.

She took a deep breath and willed herself to come back to reality. She had no idea how she’d make it another 15 months without him, but she would summon her strength to get through each day one at a time and make it through this phase of their lives.

No matter what, she wouldn’t move on without him.
Chapter 36

Donna stood at the stove, gently stirring the soup that had been simmering for the past several hours. It was close to ready, she thought as she added just a pinch of salt.

The temperature had dropped into the single digits as the sun set over the mountains and a light dusting of snow covered practically everything. They were expecting a few inches that evening, along with some heavy winds. She'd spent the afternoon making sure the cabin was truly ready for winter and started a fire in the hearth to warm the cabin.

Donna placed the spoon on the rest near the stove and checked on the fresh bread baking in the oven when a pair of headlights in the driveway caught her attention.

She saw a small SUV hesitate near the top of the road before making the turn and slowly approaching the house. Knowing that Edith would still be another hour before she was due home, Donna wasn't sure what to think about the unexpected visitor. Glad that Audrey was upstairs playing in her room, she watched carefully out the window.

When the vehicle slowed to a cautious stop at the front of the drive and passenger door opened Donna was sure that her heart skipped a beat.

"Josh," she whispered to the empty room, hardly believing her eyes. She didn't know how this could even be possible! Last week Sam had reminded her not to lose hope but hadn't given her any more information, and certainly hadn't even hinted that it was even in the realm of possibility that Josh would be released soon. It took a few moments before Donna could find her footing and move to the door, and she felt conflicting emotions course through her veins.

Donna was a bit surprised by the sudden burst of anger she felt when she saw them. How dare he leave them for so long! The last 10 months without him had hurt her more than she'd ever let anyone know.

She stepped out to the porch not even realizing she'd left the door open and the snow flurrying into the kitchen. She didn't even seem to notice as the chill seeped through her sweater. All she could see was Josh.

She thought she'd have more warning than this. That she'd be ready to see him and know exactly what to say. But instead, he'd reappeared just as quickly as he'd left.

He met her gaze across the distance and slowed his pace, saying nothing as he hesitantly made his way to stand in front of her, stopping as though he was waiting for her permission.

"Don't you EVER-" she began, fully intending to let him know how gutted she'd felt without him for the last months after his sudden disappearance. But when he shifted slightly and she saw his face in the light, completely broken and so much older than the last time she saw him, her words died on her tongue. Donna stepped closer and slowly reached up, causing Josh to flinch slightly and close his eyes. But when her hands tenderly cupped his face and her thumbs softly caressed the stubble on his cheeks, his eyes fluttered back open to looked at her once again.

She choked back a sob she'd been holding in for ten months and she knew- she couldn't wait for it anymore. Donna didn't hesitate. She moved forward and kissed him, their lips meeting tenderly as Donna took the lead, trying to tell him everything she'd ever felt for him with just one action. Josh hesitated briefly, mostly out of shock, before tilting his head and leaning into her, taking control as
his arms wrapped around her.

Her lips parted and he deepened the kiss, moving slowly and with purpose, further into unfamiliar territory. She sighed gently into him, her body relaxing into his as the rest of the world faded to gray around them.

His movements eventually slowed and their lips separated ever so slightly, but Josh didn’t move, lingering next to her, drinking in her very being.

He trailed his lips gently across hers once again, shifting slightly, his arms still encircled around her waist. He buried his face in the crook of her neck, inhaling deeply and letting out a slow, shaky breath. She could feel the dampness of his slowly escaping tears on her skin and couldn’t hold back any longer. She let out a soft sob tightening her hold on him.

“Shhh,” he soothed her in a muted tone. “Shhh, it’s okay. Don’t cry.”

She didn’t verbally respond, her hand finding the disheveled hair at the nape of his neck as she entwined her fingers in his curls.

“It’s all over now,” he continued to assure her, his thumb gently grazing across the small of her back. “I’m here now.”

And though he’d never been there before, Josh Lyman knew he was home.

*To Be Continued*
"Donna?" Audrey's little voice rang out from inside the house, peering into the dark night. "Who's here?"

Donna heard Audrey make her way down the stairs and took immediately took a jarring step back from Josh, losing contact with his body completely and wiping her lips and she looked away, feeling her face flush.

She had to focus on Audrey. They had to focus on Audrey.

She plastered a smile on her face amidst the mix of emotions coursing through her and turned around just in time to see Audrey, who had been running towards Donna, stop dead in her tracks at the sight of her father.

She stood just outside the threshold of the cabin door as the bitter air whipped by, and stared at Josh. She was stunned into a stillness Donna wasn't used to seeing. Audrey looked at Josh for a few moments as if she was trying to make sure she really believed he was there, before glancing briefly towards Donna to get her bearings again, and turning back to stare at him silently. Audrey slowly blinked a few times, her silence almost deafening, before bursting into gut wrenching sobs.

Josh's heart broke. He didn't know what he was expecting, just showing up, but it certainly wasn't this. He stood there in shock, momentarily frozen to his spot.

Donna quickly swooped in and picked Audrey up and held her close, whispering soft reassurances into her ear as Audrey clung to her.

"Come on, Sweet Pea," Donna spoke in a normal tone once the cries had initially faded, continuing to rub her back, "let's get you inside."

She motioned for Josh and Sam to follow her, all of them glad to be out of the near freezing temperatures. "Your mom should be back in an hour or so. Dinner will be ready in just a few minutes," she noted, glad she'd made an extra large pot of soup.

"Oh, I, uh," Sam looked towards the door awkwardly.

"I should go."

"No!" Josh and Donna both interjected at once.

"Sam, I insist," Donna continued. "We have plenty and we'd love to catch up with you, wouldn't we, Josh?" Donna looked to him for confirmation.

"Yeah," Josh cleared his throat. He was still somewhat off balance.

"Okay, so it's settled," Donna tried for a chipper voice. "Make yourself at home, we'll be right back," she told them, heading into the bathroom to wash Audrey's face and try to calm her down.

Josh looked around the cabin for the first time, the unmistakable feeling that he was home washing over him. It was strange, he thought, to feel that way about somewhere he'd never been before.

He wandered over to stand by the fireplace and warm up while he made some small talk with Sam, trying to cover the ache in his heart that resulted from Audrey's reaction.
“Hey there,” he spoke directly to Lucy, who was staring at him from where she lay curled up on her bed. “You must be the famous Lucy.”

Josh bent down to give the dog a scratch behind the ears but Lucy barked at Josh and ran off to find Audrey.

“Ah kay,” Josh remarked to nobody in particular. “This is one hell of a homecoming,” he muttered and began to look closely at the photos on the mantle. Though he was familiar with the majority of them, as they’d been moved from his apartment, he picked up a few of the newer snapshots to examine them closely.

When Donna emerged once again with Audrey clinging to her, Josh was relieved to see that at least the tears had stopped. But he didn't miss the red, puffy look in Donna's eyes that now matched his daughter's. He'd never meant for any of this to happen, and he wondered how long the people he loved would have to pay the price for the deal he'd made.

Audrey clung to Donna, buying her face in her neck as Donna stirred the soup still simmering on the stove, declaring that it was ready and pulling a loaf of warm bread from the oven.

"Ok, Sweet Pea," Donna sat Audrey on the edge of the counter, "I've gotta put you down." But Audrey didn't let go of the hold she had on Donna. Silently shaking her head 'no.'

Donna sighed, knowing that it wasn't worth the fight. Any effort she made to get Audrey to be a little more independent right now would likely result in another meltdown. And she couldn't bear to see Audrey in that state again tonight. Or, for that matter, the look of devastation on Josh's face that accompanied it.

She moved around the kitchen with ease, able to prepare the meal and hold Audrey. Josh watched the two of them intently, swallowing the lump in his throat when he began to realize just how much he'd missed them both. He'd tried not to let himself think about it over the last months. But it was unavoidable now, watching them move around in unison, making a home cooked meal in the warm comfort of the cabin.

"Can I help," Sam offered Donna, the sound of conversation pulling Josh from his thoughts as he stood, also ready to lend a hand.

"Glasses are in that cabinet," Donna nodded towards the far side of the sink. "If you could get everyone something to drink. Audrey will have milk."

"Can I have juice?" Audrey asked softly.

"No, Sweet Pea," Donna didn't miss a beat. "You've had enough sugar today."

Josh watched Audrey accept Donna's answer without protest. He wondered what other changes in her personality he'd missed.

Josh and Sam set the table and took their seats as Donna sat Audrey next to Josh and returned to the stove to retrieve the bowls of soup she'd ladled out.

She could hear Josh's almost desperate attempt to converse with Audrey but the child never said a word, her eyes glued on Donna every second that she was away.

Donna returned quickly enough, placing Josh and Sam's dinner in front of them and letting her hand rest gently on Josh's shoulder and give it a soft squeeze. She wished this was easier for them, but at this exact moment she wasn't sure how to fix any of it. But she'd do whatever she could to hold them
all together until she figured it out.

She made conversation with Josh and Sam through dinner, attempting unsuccessfully in the process to engage Audrey, but she mostly spoke to Sam. Josh was still, understandably, out of sorts.

He’d reached over to try and assist Audrey during the meal, but he was met with a grumpy irritation that let him know without words she could do it herself.

After dinner Sam thanked Donna for the meal, hugged Josh and headed back to Denver. There was a snowstorm heading in and he had an early flight back to DC.

An odd still fell over the house as Josh attempted to help Donna clean up. He watched Audrey carefully walk her bowl to the sink and stand somewhat patiently as Donna rinsed off all of the spoons and handed them one by one to Audrey, who placed them carefully in the utensil rack of the dishwasher. Audrey stared at Donna in anticipation of what was to come, and Josh watched closely.

"Thank you for helping me clean up, Audrey," Donna stated. "You may be excused."

Audrey ran to the corner of the living room and pulled out a small basket to color, as was her nightly routine.

Josh grinned a bit, leaning back on the counter. "I see you've got her on a schedule."

"I've learned that Lyman's do better with routines," Donna quipped, purposely bumping into him a bit with the side of her body and smiling.

As Donna continued to clean up from dinner Josh watched Audrey in the living room and slowly dried the soup pot. "What's the routine," he asked, trying desperately to get a handle on daily life, and quite frankly blanking on any other topics of conversation.

"Umm, not far from what it was in DC, I suppose," Donna told him, rattling off the order of events in a typical day. "Breakfast and getting ready for school. I drop her off on my way to work and your mother picks her up at three. They run errands or go to the library or the park. On nights when I'm home by 5:30 we work on reading or math while dinner cooks. Audrey helps clean up and then plays until bedtime."

Josh nodded slowly. "You have a job?"

Donna chuckled. "That's what you got out of that? Yes, Joshua, I have a job. I work at a major resort about twenty minutes north of here. What did you think I did all day?"

Josh grumbled something unintelligible. Truth was, he hadn't considered it. He'd hoped he'd left her enough money to take care of anything they may need, but he hadn't anticipated he'd be gone for so long either. "The, uh, the place looks amazing," he told her, changing the topic. His mother's letters had outlined all of the hard work Donna had put into making the old cabin into a cozy home but none of them did it justice.

"Thanks," she spoke softly, appreciating his compliment.

She'd never known Josh to be too caught up in interior decor, but she'd desperately wanted him to feel at peace in the little cabin. She'd made every decision with him in mind.

"Josh? What’s going on?" Donna dropped her voice as low as possible to stay out of earshot.
“How… how are you here?”

“We can talk about it after she goes to sleep.” Josh was firm in his decision.

“You’re scaring me…” Donna understood his lack of desire to get into the details when Audrey could potentially overhear, but she’d been worried sick about him for 10 months and she had lots of questions.

“Don’t be scared,” he quickly assured. “I just… there’s a lot we need to talk about. And I’d like to be able to give you my full attention and unabridged answers. You deserve to know the truth.”

Donna nodded her head.

“Don’t worry,” he added with a self deprecating smile. “I didn’t tunnel out with a spoon.”

She gave him a little laugh, hoping to god her Josh was still somewhere inside the shell of a man standing in the kitchen.

Donna finished the task at hand and closed the dishwasher and dried her hands, placing the towel to rest on the lip of the sink. "She'll come around," Donna assured Josh when she saw him watching Audrey intently. "She's just a little overwhelmed." Donna made her way over to the pantry and opened a tupperware of freshly baked cookies, offering one to Josh and placing a second on a napkin and nodding her head towards Audrey.

Josh walked over to the couch and perched on the edge. "That's a pretty picture you're coloring, Shortcake."

Audrey ignored him, staring directly at her coloring book and pressing down with force, coating the page in glittery purple crayon. Her tongue stuck out at the corner of her mouth in concentration, and though Josh was hurt at the lack of interest his daughter was displaying in spending time with him, he was comforted by her familiar mannerisms.

Josh sat the cookie down near Audrey's coloring book. "Want some dessert? They're pretty good."

Audrey's motions stilled and though she didn't look up, Josh could tell that she was considering his peace offering. He could see her eyes flick over to him without lifting her head, and eventually the coloring resumed and a much slower pace. Josh could tell she was watching him. He stepped away for a quick moment to get a glass of water and he could see from his peripheral vision that Audrey's head jerked up and followed him closely. He returned quickly and Audrey looked away, but not before taking a bite of the cookie that Josh left for her.

"Bedtime, Kiddo," Donna announced. It was actually well past Audrey's bedtime but Donna had let it slide for obvious reasons. Audrey didn't stop coloring so Donna tried again. "Audrey? It's late. Daddy will still be here in the morning but we need to go to bed, okay? It’s already way past your bedtime. Let's put on your jammies and brush your teeth and Daddy will be up in a few minutes for a story. Okay?"

Audrey kept coloring.

"Audrey Joan." There was no response.

Donna's voice came with a bit more of a warning tone. "1... 2...."
Josh watched Donna take Audrey's hand and head towards the staircase. "We'll give you some privacy," she told Josh, motioning towards the window where a pair of headlights began to slowly make their way down the driveway. Edith was home.

Josh nodded his thanks and stood, walking slowly towards the front porch. Donna talked to an unusually quiet Audrey as the little girl put on her pajamas and brushed her teeth. She could tell Audrey was deep in contemplation.

Donna heard a commotion downstairs, followed by a shout of joy, as Audrey washed her face. Knowing that Edith and Josh were being reunited caused her to smile involuntarily.

At the sound of the noise downstairs, Audrey stopped scrubbing her face with a washcloth for a moment and glanced over to Donna, who was perched on the edge of the bathtub. "Bubbe's home?"

Donna nodded confirmation and Audrey went back to what she was doing.

"You know," she began, hoping to get Audrey to open up a little bit, "Daddy is so happy to see you. I know he missed you so much."

Audrey said nothing, but listened intently to Donna.

"Come here," Donna opened her arms and Audrey walked into them, letting Donna hold her close. "I love you so much. And I know you don't like it when things change, but this is a good change. I promise that Daddy and I are both going to be there if you're scared or worried, okay? You can talk to us. Do you understand, Audrey?"

"Yes," Audrey whispered.

"I love you, Sweet Pea, and so does your Daddy. Do you know that too?"

"Yes," Audrey whispered again.

"Okay," Donna kissed her forehead and hopped up, taking on a more chipper tone. "Pick out a story for bed."

Audrey crossed the room and looked intently through her books as Donna called downstairs for Josh, who was up in a flash.

Donna pulled back the covers on Audrey's small bed, placing a small bottle of water on the nightstand and Walter in the pillow.

"Night night, Lucy Dog." Audrey whispered softly and pat the beagle on the head before crossing the room to her bed and crawling under her blankets.

Josh looked around the room that Donna had clearly taken a great deal of time putting together just for Audrey before picking up the book on the nightstand and taking a seat on the edge of Audrey's bed. Donna lay down on the other side of Audrey and the little girl curled into her. "Come on, Dad," Donna told Josh. "We can't see the pictures from way over there."

Audrey made no protest, looking at Josh with anticipation as he leaned back against the headboard and began to read Harry the Dirty Dog. He was only a few pages in when Audrey fell asleep, breathing deeply, but Josh was content with his surroundings for the first time in a long time, so he kept reading. This wasn't lost on Donna, who reached over and gently rest her hand on his knee. By the time he closed the book Donna was asleep, too.
Josh sat where he was, watching the two doze peacefully. He choked back his emotions, not wanting to make even a peep and risk disturbing either one of them. He’d missed them so much it hurt. He sat there, in the comfortable still of the room, for the better part of an hour until Donna woke.

"Mmm," her eyes fluttered open. "I dozed off." She glanced down at Audrey before gently standing up. Josh followed suit, tucking in the covers around his daughter and watching as Donna softly kissed her goodnight. Josh leaned over, unable to hold back his tears, and did the same. "I love you baby girl," he whispered, gently brushing the curls from her face. "And I promise, I'll never leave you again. Not for anything in the world."

Josh and Donna closed the door to Audrey’s bedroom and paused on the landing. "She's okay up here? She doesn't get scared?"

"She's been doing really well. But I can hear her at night with the door cracked if she needs anything."

Josh nodded his understanding and descended the steps slowly. "Where's my Mom?" He looked around trying to find Edie.

"Oh. She probably went to sleep. It's late, Josh." Donna couldn't believe how long he'd let her lay there asleep. "I'm sure you're tired."

He shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. I'm all honesty, he hadn’t considered it. But he’d grown used to having a set schedule and he followed her lead without hesitation.

"Where, um, should I…?" He glanced hesitantly around the living room, eyeing the couch. "Do you have an extra blanket?"

She gave him a sad smile. "This is your home, too, Josh," she stayed, inferring what was on his mind. "You'll sleep in your room."

"My room?" He raised his eyebrows.

She nodded her head softly and motioned towards the master bedroom, leading the way down the hall. Donna slipped inside and opened a drawer to his dresser, removing some sleepwear for herself.

“Your clothes are on this side,” Donna pointed to the second set of drawers in the oversized piece of furniture.

“All of my things are here?” He looked around, as though he hadn’t really pieced that together, even though she’d informed him of all that she’d moved to the cabin in a few letters.

“Yes,” She answered patiently, watching him look around the room from where he stood in the doorway, his uncertainty practically radiating off of him. “Your clothing is on the left side of the closet,” she nodded towards the door. And your toiletries are on the left side of the vanity,” she explained softly. “I… I hope that’s okay. I’ll just grab my things and-“

“No!” He rushed. “I mean… yes. It’s okay. It’s really very… nice. In here, that is. In the cabin. It feels… I dunno… warm and cozy.”

She smiled genuinely at his praise. She’d wanted so badly for the cabin to feel welcoming to Josh.

“But you should stay in here,” he continued, shifting his weight rather nervously as he shoved his hands into his pockets. “I’ll take the couch.”
She stilled her motions, turning to look at him. In her head and her heart she knew that he was feeling out of sorts and she didn’t want to push him.

“I don’t want you to be uncomfortable,” she admitted softly. “I can sleep upstairs.”

“It’s not that,” he assured her. “Believe me, it’s not. I just… it’s hard to explain?”

“Sure,” she nodded her head in genuine acceptance, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear somewhat nervously. He didn’t have to explain himself.

“I’ll probably, uh, just watch some TV or something,” he tried to add noncommittally.

She wasn’t convinced but Donna didn’t press the issue. He’d need time, and space and she’d give him both. Whatever he needed to heal.

“Well you can take a hot shower first if you’d like,” she offered. “I’m sure you’ve had a long… day.”

“Donna...” Josh caught her attention and met her gaze. “I know we need to talk about this. All of this. You deserve answers, and . And I’m not avoiding you. I just… not tonight, okay?”

“I’m here when you’re ready,” she offered, respecting his request for time. She was more than understanding with his request to do this on his own terms, in his own time.

“Towels are in the linen closet.” Donna pulled out his favorite pair of pajama pants and an old Yale T-shirt she’d worn on many nights during his absence and placed them on the corner of the bed so he’d have something to change into.

“Thanks,” he offered, gathering the items and stepping into the master bathroom.

“Josh?”

He turned to face her in the half closed doorway.

She crossed the room towards him, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek and a bright, genuine smile. “Welcome home.”
Chapter 38

Donna had stared at the ceiling for the better part of two hours trying to fall asleep. He had finally reappeared in their lives, but Donna had more questions than answers. They didn't really matter though, she told herself. As long as he was home, safe and sound, the rest of the details would work themselves out. He’d come to her when he was ready.

She could hear him on the couch, tossing and turning in the silent cabin. She contemplated several times getting up to join him, but talked herself out of it, not wishing to overwhelm him.

Eventually she fell asleep, knowing that they’d have a long day ahead of them the next morning. But Donna hadn’t been resting long when she was startled out of bed by Audrey’s wail. She was up the stairs in a flash.

“What’s wrong, Sweet Pea?” Donna moved over to sit on Audrey’s bed but the little girl offered no specific indication regarding her cries. Donna wiped the tears on her red face as Audrey continued to sob wordlessly. “Did you have a bad dream?”

Audrey nodded slightly and leaned into Donna.

“Well, it was just a dream,” Donna softly assured. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“I couldn’t find you,” Audrey whispered, holding onto Donna’s shirt. “And I was all alone.”

Josh, hanging back just outside of Audrey’s bedroom door, felt his chest tighten. He’d never, in a million years, wanted things to end up this way. He leaned against the wall and listened closely, not wishing to overwhelm Audrey or upset her more with his presence. She’d been less than eager to interact with him when he’d arrived at the cabin, and though he had to fight every urge he had as a parent not to comfort her in that moment, he held back. She was responding to Donna and the tears were disappearing.

“You’re never going to be alone, Audrey,” Donna stated confidently. “I promise you that. Daddy and I will always make sure that you’re not left alone, okay?”

“But… but… I was scared.” Audrey sniffled a bit, rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands.

“I know you were,” Donna assured. “And it’s okay to be scared sometimes. But you don’t need to worry about being left alone, sweetheart.” Donna brushed Audrey’s curls out of her face, giving her a smile. “And you’ve got Walter and Lucy up here to keep the bad dreams away.”

Audrey held her stuffed bunny close as Lucy wagged her tail at the sound of her name, her front paws perched on Audrey’s bed. She too had woken to the cries and had rushed to Audrey’s side.

“Come on, Luce.” Donna pat the top of Audrey’s bedspread and the dog jumped up, sniffing Audrey closely to ensure she was okay before curling into a ball at the foot of the bed.

“Let’s lay down,” Donna offered, tucking Audrey’s covers in gently around her before laying down next to her. She knew Audrey would fall back to sleep fairly quickly, but she also knew that the little girl had a lot on her mind.

“Will you stay here?” Audrey asked softly.

“I’ll lay here until you fall asleep and then I’ll be downstairs in my bedroom. Okay?”
“Kay.”

“And Daddy will be downstairs, too,” Donna added, carefully broaching the subject she knew was at the core of Audrey’s fears.

Audrey looked up at her with wide eyes. “Promise?”

“I promise,” Donna assured. “I know that you were surprised to see him today. I was too.”

“You were?”

“Yes. But it was a wonderful surprise.”

Audrey said nothing, but she listened intently.

“I was so happy to see him,” Donna continued. “I missed him. And I know that you did too.”

“Yes.” Audrey admitted softly.

“And I know Daddy missed you and was so happy to see you today,” Donna continued. “And if you’re ever feeling scared or sad or confused you can always talk to him. Or you can talk to me, or Bubbe. Okay?”

Audrey nodded her head.

“Okay.” Donna gave her a kiss on the forehead. “Now let’s close our eyes and think happy thoughts. And we’ll wake up ready to have a lot of fun tomorrow and I’ll make pancakes for breakfast. How about that?”

“Okay!” Audrey grinned and the two settled into the silence of the middle of the night.

It was only a few moments before Audrey spoke again, her voice so soft it was very audible.

“Please don’t go away,” Audrey snuggled in to Donna, holding onto the fabric of her shirt.

“I won’t, baby girl.” Donna assured once again, pulling her close.

Outside of the room, Josh inhaled a deep, shaky breath and leaned his head against the wall. He’d remained quiet, waiting patiently to hear Audrey’s steadying breathing.

Donna moved slowly off of the bed, quietly making her way out the door.

She didn’t startle when she saw him, assuming all along that he was nearby as soon as she heard Audrey’s cries.

“I, uh, didn’t want to scare her.” He admitted, staring at the floor.

“She’s not scared of you, Josh. She’s just a little overwhelmed.”

He swallowed the lump in his throat. “She’s not the only one,” he admitted with a self deprecating chuckle.

“Josh?” She was instantly concerned.

“Is she asleep?” He peered through the door, choosing to ignore Donna’s implication.
“Mhmmm. Out like a light.”

“Do you think she’ll wake up again?” He was straining to see Audrey, trying to make a determination.

“I don’t know,” Donna stood next to him, watching Josh as closely as Audrey. “We can sit on the top step and listen for her a few minutes?”

“Yeah.” Josh agreed but didn’t immediately move. “She’s grown so much,” he remarked.

“She has,” Donna agreed. “And she really has your passion. I see so much of you in her.”

Josh smiled at Donna’s words. After a few moments they moved to the top of the stairwell, sitting down next to each other.

“Has she been waking up with nightmares often?” Josh was afraid of the answer.

“Not really, no.” Donna hedged. “She’s slept through the night consistently for the last 6 or so months.”

“And before that?”

Donna was silent for a moment, unsure of how to begin.

“Yeah.” He concluded all he needed to know from Donna’s silence, and it broke his heart.

“She really missed you, Josh. It was hard for her to settle in. And a big part of that is my fault. I uprooted her just as her life was already drastically changing, and brought her to a new home. It was a lot for her to handle. But, I just… I was afraid of what would happen if we stayed in DC. I was afraid there’d be press outside her school, and that she wouldn’t be able to play outside or that everywhere we went people would talk about what was happening to you in front of her. I was scared, Josh. Of things being posted in chat rooms, and lies about you on tv. It was the only way I knew how to protect her and now I’m so worried that I just ended up hurting her more.”

“You did the right thing.” Josh didn’t hesitate. If there was anything in this world that he knew to be certain it was that Donna always had Audrey’s best intentions at heart. “You’ve done an amazing job with her. But you always have.”

She smiled softly and turned the palm of her hand up extending it towards him.

“I guess we still make a pretty good team,” she offered.

He clasped his hand with hers, feeling her warmth immediately radiate through his body.

“Yeah. I guess we do.”

Donna sighed and leaned over on his shoulder, and Josh found himself gently kissing the top of her head. And while he couldn’t really wrap his mind around what had happened when she’d greeted him earlier that night, he wasn’t going to ignore the fact that it felt completely right to him, either.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, the dark house illuminated only by the moonlight shining in through the windows.

“I’m out on parole,” he finally spoke, his voice soft and unsure in the silent cabin.

“What?” She slowly turned to look at him.
“I was paroled,” he repeated. “For good behavior.”

“They didn’t drop the charges?” She could was shocked. She assumed that when Sam had arrived with him it meant that they’d made some headway in Josh’s case.

“No. I plead guilty and was sentenced. No chance of reducing the charges. After that the only thing was pardon or parole or serving my sentence.”

“And you weren’t pardoned?”

“No, Donna. I wasn’t. Just as I asked not to be.”

Donna’s mind was racing but she stopped herself before her thoughts spun out of control, trying simply to focus on the good in the situation.

“Well, you’re home. That’s all that matters.”

“Donna?” Josh ventured a glance over to her. “Talk to me.”

“I just…” she searched for the right words. “I don’t understand,” she admitted softly. “Why this all happened to you.”

Josh sighed. “I’m sorry, Donna. I am. You have to believe me. I’ve regretted every moment I’ve spent away from you and Audrey.”

“Josh, that’s not what I meant. We’ve missed you just as much, of course. But I don’t understand why this hasn’t been resolved. You didn’t do anything wrong! I thought Sam was there because he’d… he’d… I don’t know! Found something to prove your innocence, I guess.”

“No,” Josh swallowed. “It, uhh, all happened pretty quickly. I wasn’t scheduled to go in front of the parole board until next month and even then I wasn’t sure what would happen. That’s why I didn’t say anything. I didn’t want to get our hopes up over nothing. But Sam and Toby heard some rumblings in DC about getting me released this week. I think the republicans want to dredge this up again and dominate the news cycle the week of the election. Leo put Sam on a plane to Denver this morning just in case and he arrived to see me around 2. And they were right on the money because I was released around 3:45. I have to check in with my parole officer in Denver every week and I can’t leave the state without permission. I’m sorry I didn’t call, Donna. But I had no idea what to say.”

Donna nodded her head, wiping the rapidly falling tears.

“Please don’t cry,” he practically pleaded, desperate to stop her tears.

She leaned into him, desperate to simply be close to him, and leaned her head on his shoulder.

Josh wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close.

“God, I missed you so much,” he admitted.

She gave his arm a gentle squeeze. “We missed you too.”

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, but when Audrey didn’t wake up again, Josh and Donna quietly made their way downstairs and retreated to their separate areas.

Morning came quickly and Donna was relieved that she was scheduled to be off work for two days. She’d splashed some water on her face and brushed her teeth before peeking out into the living room. She didn’t want to disturb Josh if he was asleep on the couch.
But there he was, dressed in the same ill fitting clothes he’d worn home the day before, sitting at the
kitchen table reading the local paper with a warm mug of coffee.

She wandered towards him, noting that the couch was made up with the blanket he’d used folded
neatly on the end cushion.

“Good morning,” she gave him a bright smile, and then stifled a yawn.

“Morning.” He beamed, thinking she looked particularly adorable in her pajama shorts and oversized
sweatshirt. “I made coffee,” he offered. “Hope that’s alright.”

“Of course.” She let her hand rest on his shoulder and leaned down to give him a quick kiss before
continuing to casually wander by.

“So, uh, we’re doing that now?” He asked nervously, watching her move around the kitchen.

She froze. “Well…”

He stood, making his way quickly to her leaning his hip against the counter where she stared out the
window above the kitchen sink.

“I just… I don’t know.” And she didn’t. She honestly hadn’t thought about it before she’d acted,
merely kissing him without thinking of it first. She needed to be near him and for once, she hadn’t
played through every possible ramification in her head. She was sure of her feelings for Josh but she
was terrified of the thought of making a wrong move, and Josh’s nervous response made her feel
flustered, too.

“It was nice.” Josh spoke softly, padding gently into the unfamiliar territory. He was uncertain of
almost all aspects of his life at that moment, but not a day had gone by in which he hadn’t thought
about her, and he was absolutely certain that he wanted his relationship with Donna to grow into
more.

She hesitantly glanced over at him, almost afraid to meet his gaze. They locked eyes, his normal
intensity clouded by the fear that had built inside of him over the better part of the last year. Both
stood, silent, for more than a moment. Eventually Josh worked up enough courage to reach out and
lightly touch her hand.

She glanced down to see his fingers intertwining with hers, and before she knew it, her body was
moving closer to him, hovering only inches away. She was sure he could feel her pulse quicken with
anticipation, but she waited patiently wanting him to take the lead on this.

“I’m afraid,” he admitted, his voice low and raspy as he spoke, only inches away from her lips. “I’m
afraid of what this means or doesn’t mean to you. I’m afraid of what the future is going to hold for
me. I don’t know anything about where my life is going next, and right now I’m scared that I’m
going to ruin things with you. Donna, the last thing I want is to hurt you even more. And when I
think about Audrey and I not having you in our lives I just…” He trailed off, unable to finish his
sentence at the thought of losing her.

“Shh,” She soothed. “That’s not going to happen. I promise.”

“I just feel so lost right now, and I know I’m going to screw this up. I don’t want my instability and
my insecurities to ruin what I hope we could have together before it even begins. But I’m not willing
to continue to act as though I don’t feel anything for you. I don’t know what to do next, Donna. And
it terrifies me.”
She placed her lips softly against his, Josh’s eyes falling closed at her touch. “You’re not going to ruin anything, Josh,” she told him softly. “I’m not going anywhere. I just want you to know that. I realize that you need some time to get settled in, and I didn’t mean to rush you. We can table this for now, but if in the future you’d like to revisit the conversation just remember that you don’t have to carry the weight, okay? It’s something we could explore together.”

He rest his forehead against hers. Somehow, she always knew what to say. “I’d like that,” he admitted.

“When you’re ready,” Donna reassured, cupping his face. “When the time is right, I’ll be here.”

Josh didn’t move away from her, instead circling his arms around her. It felt so good just to be close to her again. Though they’d never had sex, Josh couldn’t deny the physical aspect of his relationship with Donna. Over the last months, he’d clung to the memory of simple moments with her. Soft touches on the arm or her fingers gently entwining themselves in the curls at the nape of his neck. On more than one occasion in the last 4 and a half years, she’d fallen asleep next to him and they’d gravitated to one another. He’s always been a tactile person, but with Donna it was something different entirely. It was all he had. Those tender moments when they could communicate without words were all that he had of her for years, and they’d come to a crashing halt the prior January. He’d worked hard to try and ignore how much he’d missed them.

The two glanced up towards the ceiling when they heard the sound of two tiny feet hit the floor and head towards the landing, with four paws following closely behind.

Donna felt Josh tense a bit, and she gave him a comforting squeeze on the arm as they parted. She wished that she could reassure him somehow that everyone would go back to normal but with Audrey’s reaction to Josh’s sudden reappearance the night before. Donna just wasn’t sure how true it would be. All she could do was look and hope that everything else would sort itself out.

Josh settled back into his place at the kitchen table while Donna poured herself a cup of coffee. They could hear Audrey plodding around upstairs for a few moments, and her muffled voice as she spoke to Lucy.

As she descended the stairs, Donna could see Josh tense a bit while he pretended to scan the paper. She knew he was worried about what Audrey’s reaction would be.

Donna held her breath for a moment when Audrey reached the bottom of the landing, stopping at the end of the banister and lingering a moment as she fidgeted, looking at Josh.

“Good Morning, Audrey.” Josh remained where he was, nervously waiting for a response.

Audrey continued to stare at him for a moment, and Donna could easily see that her mind was kicking into overdrive.

“Daddy?” She questioned softly.

“Yes, baby girl. I’m right here.” Josh leaned forward in his chair and opened his arms ever so slightly.

As though something clicked in her mind and she was now understanding this wasn’t a dream, a huge smile grew on Audrey’s face.

“Daddy…” she whispered again, taking off towards him at a run and practically flinging herself into Josh’s waiting arms.
Josh scooped her up and pulled her close, clinging tightly to her. He was immediately overcome with emotion, unable to find any words as he closed his eyes but didn’t attempt to fight back the tears, gently rubbing Audrey’s back and lovingly resting his hand on the back of her head.

“I missed you so much, Daddy,” Audrey whispered.

Donna let out a little sob at the tearful reunion, but remained where she was standing and allowing Josh and Audrey to have a moment of privacy. Her hand gravitated to cover her mouth and stifle any additional cries threatening to break free.

Though Josh would have been content to simply hold her close for hours, Audrey eventually began to squirm and Josh loosened his hold a bit, sitting Audrey on his knee.

“I’m hungry,” Audrey told him, glancing at the local paper spread out on the kitchen table as Josh gently pulled the sports section over the front page. “Donna makes me dippy eggs on Saturdays but last night she said I could have pancakes for breakfast.”


Audrey hopped up and grabbed Josh’s hand. “Come on, Daddy. I’ll show you how. You have to give her a scoop of food in her bowl,” Audrey explained as she pulled him towards the garage with enthusiasm.

Donna smiled at Josh over her mug as she took a long drink. Josh glanced back and met her gaze, shooting her a full dimpled grin.

Maybe everything would be okay after all.

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