No Lani

by EzraANeemsay

Summary

47 had a smile to remember. It was charismatic, magnetic, electric, lovable. It was a smile that tore his face into two. That of a man who wanted to be a good person, and a man who did not want to miss out on a life he had no business living. 47 smiled. It's scary what a smile can hide.
“It’s smart. Really. 42 put a movie theater down here. 44 an indoor basketball court.”

“47 doesn’t hoop.”

“No. But he does know how to handle a pool cue.”

Dorian didn’t jump at the sound of 47’s voice. He was trained not to be startled so easily. He was also trained to know where his chief was by hearing alone, whether his eyes did or not. It was a reflex, by now ingrained in every instinct in his body to know 47’s footsteps from that of someone else’s.

Dorian and Hale, the other agent that he split shifts with, both turned around to address the man.

“Mr. President.” Dorian nodded. “Of course your pool game isn’t as good as mine, Sir.”

President Shelton chuckled, clapping both men on the shoulder as he passed.

“One day, Dorian. I’m gonna shut that smart mouth of yours up.”

“Good luck with that, Sir.” He replied, grinning from ear to ear. The middle finger thrust up into the air was entirely expected but never not surprising. 47 was the only president that truly didn’t care for formalities and allowed everyone serving under his detail and beyond the leeway to interact with the man as if he was just another guy off the street.

“You want to get a drink when we’re off?” Hale asked him.

“Sure. Let me tell Ally before she has a fit.”

Hale smirked. The two went back to surveilling the room, eyes on the President when he wanted them to be, and off when he didn’t. The man had hosted a boy’s night for some of his closest friends and confidants. The get together had dwindled down around midnight, his guests leaving one by one as their cars were pulled around to to the garage for them. It was another hour that passed when finally, the night looked like it was truly coming to an end, the President’s best friend the only guest left.

“One more time! One more time, come on, B. We’ll place bets.” Mr. Bradley hounded the President, grabbing onto his dress shirt as the leader of the free world laughed and clutched his best friend to him, somewhat drunkenly.

“No, no, no, no. I gotta get to bed. Josie will have my ass if I stay down here any longer. Another time.”

Mr. Bradley sighed and tried to get him to change his mind but the boss wasn’t budging. “Brad, I can’t. I have a country to run in the morning. Come on, I’ll call you a car. Go home before Stephanie kicks your ass too.”

Both men leaned on each other for support as they set their pool sticks down and made their way back upstairs. “Hale, get me a glass of water will ya?” The President asked him.

“Right away, Sir.”

Hale went back downstairs to fetch the glass and Dorian followed the two men up to the main
floor. He made sure another agent got Mr. Bradley to the car safely as he focused on President Shelton’s journey back to the East Wing.

“You’re a good man, Dorian.” 47 told him as he walked him down the various residence hallways.

“Thank you, Mr. President. Not as good as you though.”

He slung an arm around Dorian, and the younger man thought it was more for walking support than anything else. “Good answer. Hey, I want to stop by the kids’ rooms before I go to sleep.”

“Yes, Sir.”

It was a common ritual for the President to visit his children in slumber before he too retired for the night. They stopped by Jackson’s bedroom first, Dorian nodding at the agent that was standing guard outside of it.

“Mr. President.” The guard bowed his head.

President Shelton nodded back and opened the door. The ten year old was sleeping half off his bed, the covers laying at his feet as his body was hanging off the bed at an awkward angle. He watched his President walk in quietly and move his son back to the middle of the mattress, pulling the covers over his body again. He stroked the boy’s golden-brown, unruly, curly hair and walked back out. Theodore’s room was right across from Jackson’s and Dorian nodded at the other agent that was standing outside of his younger son’s door.

Teddy was tucked underneath his space blanket per usual, sniffling softly in his slumber. President Shelton sat on the edge of the bed and sighed, leaning down the next second to plant a soft kiss on the eight year old’s temple. Unlike his brother, he had red and brown curls that fell into his eyes whether he was awake or dead to the world. His boss pushed them back from his forehead. It was several minutes before President Shelton exited the room.

“All good, Sir?” Dorian asked.

He nodded. “All good.”

They walked the rest of the way to the President’s private chambers. Hale was standing there with a cold glass of water. Dorian smiled when he saw that there was no lemon in the drink—since President Shelton had to have it prepared that way per the First Lady’s request. As Dorian stopped dutifully outside of the door, 47 opened it and took the offered glass, bidding him and all of the other agents assigned to the First Lady’s detail a good night.

“You as well, Mr. President.” They responded at the same time.

Dorian turned his back to the wall beside the door and canted his head to the ceiling. He looked down at his watch only once that night, and it was five minutes before another agent was supposed to come and relieve his position. He always seemed to know when he was about to be able to go.

That drink with Hale was only fifteen minutes away.
His alarm clock went off at six in the morning, sharp, everyday except for the weekends. Blake Tollison Shelton hated mornings, even more so since he got elected for a second term. You would think that four years of practice--experience--would have prepared him for another four, but it never got any easier waking up before the Sun did.

Blake rolled over from turning the alarm off and looked at his wife beside him. She had her mouth closed, soft breaths were coming from her nose and her chest rose softly up and down as if it was on some kind of timer. Her brown hair was the color of warm mocha. When her eyes are open at approximately seven on the dot, they’re a glazed cinnamon color with swirls of honey, the same as Jackson’s. Everything about her was perfect. Even the freckles that littered her nose and cheeks were a certain distance and exact size from the next. Perfect. It used to alarm him. He guessed it still did judging by the way his gut contracted and his heart felt heavy everytime he looked at her.

Blake rolled back over and saw the clock now read 6:06. He exhaled and sat up, the covers falling away from his bare chest. He stretched and grabbed a shirt from the side table, pulling it over his head. He stood up and crossed the room to the bathroom. The routine was precise and mundane: brush teeth, wash face, wet hair, contemplate a trim, and lastly, put his eye contacts in. From there, he would change into shorts and running shoes and greet his detail outside by the door. This morning, it was Frank and Tom, already dressed in their running uniforms. He greeted them both.

“Ready?”

“Yes, Sir.” They said in unison.

Blake ran every morning except for Wednesdays and Fridays. Running always made him miss breakfast with the kids, so he was limited--by Josie--to only five days a week.

As the men walked outside from the back entrance, Blake leaned down to check his laces.

“Mr. President, I’m to inform you by your chief of staff that you have a video call this morning before the debriefing. Which means--”

“Our run is cut short for the day.” He stood up and checked his watch. “Let’s get to it then.”

“Ready when you are.” Tom told him.

“Sure you guys can keep up?” He asked.

They laughed and as Blake set off running, his men followed behind him. His running route consisted of the White House gardens mostly. They would do several laps around the perimeter and he would stop only to take a drink that Frank had already prepared and held for him conveniently. Blake had stopped by the rose bushes and was wiping his face with the bottom of his shirt when another agent caught up to them.

“Mr. President. Mr. Young needs you to return back to the House. I’m afraid it’s an urgent matter.”

Blake was still breathing heavily. He rolled his eyes at the agent’s news. “Tell Charlie, I’m running.”

“I mentioned it, Sir. He said it was important.”

“Then, tell him again.”

“Yes, Sir.”
Blake shook his head and planted his hands on his hips. He was staring up at the sun, eyes squinting as it burned.

“Mr. President. We have fifteen minutes to get back.” Frank informed him.

He sighed, realizing how much of his life was invaded by other people’s voices.

Blake handed his water bottle to Tom this time and set off down the trails again without another word.

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“Can I tie it?”

Blake was looking at his collection of bow ties when Jackson wrapped his arms around his stomach from the back and poked his head out from the side. Their eyes locked briefly, and Blake smiled at his oldest.

“This one is harder than the others. You sure?”

Jack nodded.

“Ok. Which one? You pick.”

“No! Let me pick. Jackson always picks.” Teddy whined from the bed, which he was jumping on. If Josie was there and not already busy with getting ready for the dinner, she would have snatched the boy up by his ear and scolded him. Blake didn’t much care if he jumped or not. Kids were meant to do kid things.

Blake gave Jackson a look that said let your brother choose and the older boy sighed. “You can pick Teddy.”

The eight year old jumped off the bed and bounced his way over to his brother and father. Blake picked him up so that he could see and reach the neckties easier. Teddy bit his lip in concentration, something that he got from his mother, and scanned all the different colors and designs. “I like that one.” He pointed to the blue bowtie with the small white dots scattered on it.

Jackson made a face and Blake found it adorable.

“That one it is.” He grabbed it and set Teddy down. Blake sat in front of the mirror on the floor and crossed his legs, something that his sons mimicked.

“Alright, you remember how I showed you?” He asked Jack.

Jackson nodded and flipped his father’s collar up, taking the silk from his hands and wrapping it around Blake’s neck. Teddy watched in awe as his big brother looped and pulled the fabric until it eventually resembled a bow. Unlike Theodore and Josie, Jackson concentrated just like his dad, with his eyes locked and his lips pursed.

When he was finished, Blake looked at himself in the mirror and was surprised at how good of a job he did. “Not bad.”
“When can I start wearing ties?” He asked.

“You don’t want to anytime soon. When you start wearing them, you’ll have to for the rest of your life.”

Both of his kids made a disgusted face at that.

“Exactly.”

Teddy climbed into his lap and set his head on his father’s shoulder, sighing. “Daddy, why can’t we go to the dinner with you?”

Jackson fidgeted, like he was yearning to be in his father’s arms too. Blake leaned back onto the floor and gestured for Jack to join them. His oldest laid on the left side of his chest just as Teddy laid on the right, and Blake ran a hand through both of their hair. His suit was probably getting wrinkled but he didn’t care.

“You can come to the next one. Just as long as your mom says yes to it.”

They both sighed.

Jackson looked up at him, “When are we going to play football out in the yard?”

Blake honestly didn’t know when he would have time but he stuck to his usual answer and hoped it didn’t backfire in his face.

“You play catch all the time with Uncle Tom and Frank.”

“It’s not the same. You throw deep ones.”

Blake chuckled, imagining his detail going soft to as not warrant any trouble or injuries as they played with his boys. “I’ll play again soon, ok? Dad has a lot on his plate right now.”

Teddy looked up at him now. “Can you tell us a story from when you were younger?”

Blake unwrapped his left arm from around Jackson to look at his watch. He needed to be heading down to the ballroom in a couple of minutes. He was surprised that Josie wasn’t already up there to get him.

“I got time for one. Arizona or Oklahoma?”

“Arizona.” They said at the same time before Jack elaborated, “Those are the funniest ones.”

“Alright.”

He recounted the time when him and his brother Richie snuck out of the house and went to a John Berry concert, underage and completely plastered off their asses. Of course he left that part out and censored some of the more inappropriate bits as he told the story, but his boys laughed with the kind of innocence that only a child possessed and Blake swore it was the only sound in the world that could make him feel like he was walking on clouds and everything below him on Earth was unimportant.

He was just getting to the part where Richie had punched some guy in the face because he was trash talking the drummer when Josie walked in, a vision in white. She stared at the mess of limbs on the floor with an exasperated expression that she didn’t really mean.
“There you guys are. Valerie is waiting to put you both to bed. Come on, say goodnight to your
dad.”

Their kids groaned but knew better than to argue with their mother. They mumbled their ‘I love
yous’ and he kissed both of them on the head as he urged them to get up. They walked over to Josie
and followed her outside.

“Sweet dreams, guys,” he called to them.

He heard their little voices call back to him down the hall, making him smile.

“Sir, if you’re ready.” His chief of staff popped his head around the corner, as if he was standing
there, waiting the whole time.

“Charlie, when am I ever ready for one of these things?”

Charlie grinned and ushered him outside of the bedroom. “I have notes but I have a feeling that
you won’t read them.”

“What gave it away?” He asked, teasing.

“Hmm, I don’t know. Maybe the last four years, Sir.” Charlie retorted.

“When does the Prime Minister show up?” Blake asked as he greeted Frank and Tom at the end of
the foyer. “Tom, I thought you only worked the day shift.”

“A little birdy told me you would prefer me back at night, Sir.”

Some little birdy being Andrea. She had a big mouth but Blake was grateful. It meant he had his
best detail when he wanted it the most.

“The Prime Minister is scheduled to arrive around eight thirty. Which gives you ten minutes to let
me tell you my notes.” Charlie answered, not missing a beat.

The four men fell in sync with each other as they walked down the halls of the White House.
Blake extended a hand to Tom. “Glad to have you back. And that’s fine, Charlie. Hey, Frank, you
think you can play catch with Jack tomorrow morning?”

Tom shook his hand, “Thank you, Mr. President.”

“Your wife insisted that the Prime Minister sit at your table, which I strongly advise against but it’s
your call, Sir.” Charlie stated.

“I have a family breakfast tomorrow morning, Sir. But I can cancel.” Frank said.

“Whatever Josie wants, give to her. And no need to cancel. Enjoy your family time, Frank.”

“If you insist, Sir.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Good evening, Mr. President.” The aid to the ballroom greeted.

“Evening, Samuel. How’s the wife and kids. Jimmy had that basketball tournament, right? How’d
he do?”
His aid seemed surprised that he remembered. “They’re great, Sir. And yes. Jimmy and his team won. Thank you.”

“Congratulations,” he patted the man on his arm. “I’ll see you in there, Sam.”

Mr. President. They were the most popular words around the House, especially for any formal event and Blake loathed it with a passion. He felt like he was being pulled in every direction and only stopped once he did the greeting tradition. He would stand at the entrance doors with the First Lady by his side and greet and shake hands with everyone that attended the dinner. It was tiresome standing there for forty minutes, smiling until his face hurt, hand cramping from being gripped too hard and stuck in the same position because it was easier on his arm and shoulder than having to keep moving it up and down as the line grew shorter with every passing guest.

“I want a real smile, Mr. President.”

Blake stopped zoning out to see Bradley coming up to him, next in line for a greeting with the First Couple.

“Brad, get me out of here, please, I’m begging you.”

Josie overheard their joke and slightly nudged his arm, signalling for them to keep it moving. Bradley leaned in as they shook hands. “I’ll see you at the table. Or bar. Whichever’s closer.”

He nodded and let go of his best friend so that he could hug and kiss Josie. Brad’s longtime girlfriend was behind him, dressed in an elegant silver dress that caught the attention of many, including Blake.

“Stephanie, you’re a dream in that dress.” He kissed the back of her hand tenderly.

“Thank you, Mr. President. You clean up nice yourself. Not as good as your wife though.”

“I knew she was the eye candy in the relationship when I met her.”

Josie slapped his arm reproachfully, but she was grinning and blushing in that way she did.

“Eye candy with a Yale law degree. Hi, Stephanie, you look gorgeous, honey.”

The Prime Minister was right after their friends and Blake greeted him and his wife with the strongest handshake and most charming smile that he could manage.

Once they passed, Blake could let out a breath and finish the greetings feeling much more relaxed then when he started. This particular dinner wasn’t even for the Prime Minister but they had business to attend to when it was over and he knew it would be rude to not invite the man when he was staying three whole days in America before departing for England on Friday. The dinner was mainly for honoring the six air force pilots in the KWI Unit that recently carried out and finished a mission in East Sudan that was a matter of national security. The honored guests were seen last, and Blake took extra care in welcoming them to the White House, each one thanking him for his hospitality and the invitation to come in the first place.

One pilot in particular, Wyatt Howlett, was decorated in the most medals, something that caught his eye. He was a tall guy, almost as tall as him, with strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes that were the exact shade as his own. But it wasn’t that which stopped the President in his two thousand dollar suede shoes. It was the woman on his arm. His wife, which he helpfully introduced to him and Josie. The woman, in all her efforts to avoid eye contact with him, was trying to appear small, inconsequential next to the decorated pilot. But custom was that she shake hands with the Leader of
the Free World and the First Lady next to him.

She latched onto Josie’s soft hands first, rule number one broken, but Blake remembered how much she didn’t like to follow rules when she used to grab for his hands before anyone else’s.

And he remembered when he met her, it was so clear that she was the only one meant for him. They both knew it, right away. When her eyes finally landed on his, he tried to remember what they had in the beginning.

“Stella.” He breathed, still shocked. He reverted back to her nickname, the way he used to greet her.

He saw how her chest leaped, how her breath, which was once so steady and controlled, began to falter and pick up speed all at the same time.

“Gwen, honey. Her name is Gwen.” Josie said into his ear.

Blake snapped out of his reverie and smiled. It was forced. “Of course. I’m sorry. It’s a pleasure to have you both here tonight. The White House is honored. And Lieutenant Howlett, thank you for your service.” He said the perfunctory statement and nodded them along like he had done for the rest of the guests. Hearing Mr. Howlett’s clear and strong thank you, echoing Blake’s sentiment about service back to the President for having served himself. Gwen’s quiet murmur was barely audible.

“You ok?”

He snapped his attention away from her and back to his wife. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She still looked sceptical. “Hey, did I tell you that you look absolutely stunning in that dress?”

Josie grinned. “Several times but I never tire of hearing it.”

He chuckled and kissed her cheek, hating to get lipstick on his mouth.

“Let’s start this dinner off together.” He told her.

Josie was surprised and throughout the entire dinner, he could tell she was confused, trying to figure out what was making him so nice.

Blake kept his eyes firmly away from Gwen. He performed all of his duties perfectly, talked with all the important people, danced with all the right people, and drank with all the vital people in his life. Gwen Stefani--Howlett--was not one of those people.

Not anymore.
Chapter 2

He cheated.

He stole a glance. Just one. Just as she was excusing herself to go to the little girl’s room. Blake’s eyes followed her until she disappeared up the stairs where the restrooms were located. He turned around in his chair and set his glass down, leaning over to whisper in Charlie’s ear, eyes firmly planted on where Josie was dancing with the Prime Minister.

“Breaking the seal.” He told Charlie.

“Lightweight,” he whispered back.

Blake smirked and left the table, knowing that Tom and Frank were right behind him.

His legs were shockingly steady as they carried him across the floor and up a whole flight of stairs. He did not envy the women that had to make this trek in heels.

Once he rounded the corner to the girl’s bathroom, he saluted the guard that was standing in front of the door.

“The men’s restroom is just further down, Mr. President.”

“I know. I need to know how many women are currently using the room right now.”

He expected surprise but the guard just blinked and said, “Three so far, Sir.”

Blake nodded and leant against the adjacent wall. It took only a minute for one of the women to walk out, the second, another two. Neither noticed the Leader of the Free World just hanging around outside like a creep.

Blake moved quickly to enter the restroom but Tom stopped him.

“Sir, we need to search the premises.”

Like that wouldn’t freak her out, Blake thought. But he nodded, knowing that it was protocol.

He was the last to enter as his guys immediately checked the stalls and perimeter of the bathroom. Gwen had been applying more red lipstick in the mirror when they barged in. She was now looking mildly concerned at the two agents until she saw him. Her expression changed to one of frustration. He couldn’t blame her.

“All clear, Sir.”

“Thank you. Give us a minute, please.”

Tom was the one to betray his feelings on the matter but he didn’t dare protest and Blake trusted them to keep the bathroom clear of anymore guests while they were in here.

Once the door closed back again, Gwen spoke. “They always do what you tell them?”

He didn’t know what hearing her voice clearly would do to him after thirteen years but he didn’t expect to feel like a bomb that had just been slowly diffused.
“Not all the time. They’re more stubborn than you think.”

She cracked a tiny smile at that.

She was no Josie.

He guessed that was the point. Her eyes were a different shade of brown. Her eyelashes were longer and sparse, auburn, a soft place to land. He could feel his curls coming undone with the humidity in the bathroom, his hair gel melting away with every second he subjected himself to this. He focused back on Gwen once more. Just like he predicted.

Completely unblemished.

“You’re married.” He said to no person in particular. He just needed to let it roll off his tongue.

“With two kids. A girl and a boy. Twelve and nine.” She replied.

“My boys are ten and eight.”

“I know. They’re beautiful. I saw them on that photo spread your family did last Christmas.”

It had been Josie’s idea. The American people ate it up.

He wasn’t about to say thank you, it was an empty compliment. A courtesy at best. He could tell it in her eyes, which had always been the color of warm sunshine swirled inside a dark umber. Even her hair was the same, pulled up now into an elaborate ponytail; the strands were platinum blonde, softer than anything he had felt in this world besides his own children’s hair. Thirteen years and all it did was manage to make her look younger.

“Stella.”

“Don’t call me that.”

He ran a hand down his face. “Gwen--”

“I have to get back to my husband.”

The sting was imminent. “Would you just give me one minute?”

“To do what?”

“I don’t know. To look at you, to take you in--”

She gathered her clutch from the sink and started walking past him. In another decade, he would have grabbed her arm and stopped her. But this was thirteen years later, and he was the President of the United States. So he let her go.

It wouldn’t be the first time.

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“I thought the quinoa was a little off tonight. I think I might have a talk with Michael about it in the
morning. You’ll be able to eat with us finally. I ordered the kitchen to prepare that oatmeal that you like.”

Blake let her ramble as they walked into their suite. Josie was taking her heels off, disappearing into the closet. He ripped his tie from his collar and unbuttoned the first few buttons of his shirt, laying down on his side of the bed—the left.

“Blake, how many times have I told you about shoes on the comforter. And why is it so messed up? Did you let Teddy jump on it while I was busy getting ready?”

He sighed and put an arm over his head, shielding his eyes from the light. The next thing he felt out of nowhere was his wife untying his shoes, taking them off one by one. Then, his socks.

“You have to help me enforce the rules. You can’t make me look like the bad guy because I tell them one thing and you let them turn around and do it without any consequences.”

“He’s eight, Jo. Who the hell cares if he jumps on the bed? It’s fun for him. Heaven knows there’s not much here to entertain them. They’re getting older and the White House isn’t exactly kid friendly.”

“The point I’m trying to make is that we need to be a team.”

He ran a hand down his face. Blake felt the bed dip and Josie’s hand in his hair. He flinched away from her touch, and he knew the action would hurt her feelings.

“Blake--”

He got out of bed and grabbed his phone.

“Where are you going?”

“To check on the boys.”

Blake came face to face with his security detail outside. They nodded at him and followed silently as Blake walked down to his sons’ rooms.

Jackson was shockingly not hanging half off his bed this time. Blake kissed the boy goodnight and ventured into Teddy’s bedroom. This time, he laid down in the bed with his youngest and curled the boy into his arms. Theodore went quietly, limbs pliant and soft and warm. It was only fifteen minutes when Frank poked his head into the room and saw the President sleeping soundly. He closed the door and him and Tom spent the night with the other two guards.

Their knowing glances between each of them were done so quietly and discreetly. They wouldn’t even talk about it in the morning.

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“Teddy wipe your mouth.” Josie told their youngest as syrup dripped down his chin. The boy took his napkin and wiped his face down, planting it on his brother’s half finished plate afterwards. Jackson exclaimed and pushed Teddy in his chair which Teddy responded by hitting him back.

“Cut it out.” Blake bellowed.
The boys stopped and went back to their respective place mats.


“Sorry, Mommy.”

“Sir, would you like more coffee?” One of the staff members asked him.

Blake shook his head and closed the Sudan report. “No, but I’ll take some to go for the Oval.” He stood up and Josie grabbed his arm.

“You’re not staying a little longer?”

“I have a lot of work to get done. I’ll see you later on tonight. What’s your schedule?”

“I’m taking the boys to the museum and then I have a meeting with that dress designer I told you about. You think you can make it to dinner tonight?”

Blake bent down and kissed her lips chastely. “I’ll see what I can do.” He stood back up and gestured for Andrea to grab his things. “Be good for Mom at the museum today or no screens for a week.”

The boys booed him but stood on their chairs, much to their mother’s dismay, and hugged Blake within an inch of his life as he said his goodbyes for the day.

In the hallway, Andrea gave him his cup of coffee and a folder for the morning briefing.

“Andrea, if I asked you a kind of personal question, you wouldn’t accuse me of sexual harassment would you?”

“No promises, Sir.”

“Well...you’ve been married for a long time. When did you stop having sex with your husband?”

Nothing caught his private secretary off guard so he was always relieved when she was straightforward with him immediately after he confided in her. Although, she kept her voice down as they passed many government workers on their way to the West Wing. Even though she didn’t have to, because his detail was so tight whenever he travelled through the day or when he was in a populated area.

“Well, I’ve only been married for six years. I’m afraid you take the cake in the marriage department, Sir. But...we hit a rough patch right after I got this job but that had to do with work related stress. If you and the First Lady are spending a lot of time apart then that could be a factor as well.” Something in her tone told him that she knew the couple was but Blake could hardly help that.

“Suggestions?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “For getting laid? I don’t know, Sir. Have the gardener pick her some flowers, buy her a new pair of earrings. Show her how much you want to see her more during the day.”

The problem was that he had no desire to worry about getting a bouquet together or searching for this month’s jewelry because he always had one of the assistants pick for him. And he couldn’t lessen his time at the office because they were currently in a war that Blake had to be updated and
kept in the loop about 24/7.

Their little discussion came to an end as they rounded the corner to his office. Andrea went to her desk right outside of it but not before handing the President his notes. “Good luck with what we talked about, Sir.”

“Thank you, Andrea.” He said genially as he stepped foot into the people’s office.

Charlie was already waiting for him inside, with several other Government employees.

“Morning everyone. McCain, how are those analytics coming?”

“Morning, Sir. Just a few minor hiccups...”

Blake sat down in his chair and set his feet down on the desk, crossing his hands over his stomach. He started off staring at the room as McCain gave his analytics report but soon drifted his eyes to the window. Josie had asked for sheer curtains to be placed in the Oval, thick enough that people wouldn’t be able to see in clearly but thick enough that he could look out. His chair swiveled slightly so that he wasn’t straining his neck, and the drone of each person talking in the room soon became fuzzy in his mind. It was common enough behavior that no one stopped or asked him if he was alright, or worse, listening.

He knew his thoughts would drift back to her. He had managed to avoid it by keeping busy with the boys and work but sitting there now, he couldn’t let his thoughts not drift to her.

It wasn’t even the cliche kind of missing that he was doing, where he missed the way she looked, or the way her body felt underneath his, or how she was the only woman that called him out on his bullshit. No. He was missing something more desperate. Like how she used to count his stitches when he came home every weekend, kissing the entirety of his body for everyone she totaled. Or when she convinced him to get a tattoo of the day they met, numbers in the same font that her manuscript was written in when he picked it up off the floor and returned it back to her. Or how she planned a long overdue vacation for them to go back to the states so that he could meet her family and Blake begged his captain to send him on another payload. He left without telling her and they broke up over the phone six hours later. She made him sick with grief. Even now, after all these years, seeing her had messed him up to the point that he was distant and despondent. He had hated feeling like that when they were together--it was a horrible feeling now that they were apart.

They had been thirteen years ago. And thirteen years gone and went and now she was married to a pilot with two kids and he was the President of the United States. Life could be your best friend or a total bitch. Depended on how you looked at it.

“Mr. President?”

He turned his chair around to face his team.

“Are you ok, Sir?”

Every person in the room was moving their heads to get a better look at the man. He didn’t know what they were referring to or why there were so curious about his person until he felt a drop of something on his hand. He looked down and saw red. Another drop trickled down from his nose and over his lips. He licked them and tasted copper.

“Sir, we can rejoin later in the day if you’re not feeling alright. Are you?” One of the aid’s asked him.
Blake clutched his nose and stood up.

“He’s fine. This happens all the time.” Charlie came to stand by his side, walking him to the door and telling him to tilt his head back. “We’ll reschedule this meeting for later in the day. Don’t make any plans you can’t cancel.”

Andrea stood up right away when the door opened, her expression changing to one of worry when she saw the President.

“I’ll get the doctor.” She said.

“No,” Blake raised a hand. “I’m fine. Find my wife. Tom’s intercom.”

Andrea nodded and went to find Josie’s whereabouts right away.

He walked down the hall enclosed by his detail, and he was grateful that the rest of the staff walking by weren’t getting a full show.

“Sir, she’s in the Blue Room.” Tom told him, clutching his ear piece with his left hand.

“What happened to the museum?” He pondered out loud but knew not to expect anyone there to know the answer.

They made their way to the Blue Room and Blake sent everyone away save for his agents. Charlie protested but Blake didn’t want to hear it.

“I’m fine. Go run my White House staff. That’s how you can help me.” He said as he opened the door and quietly entered the room.

His wife was sitting on the couch with several other women and dresses surrounding her. They were chatting over tea and cookies and Josie was smiling brilliantly, a soft pink dress that was more blush than anything else, sitting on her lap. She was running her fingers through the sequence, fixated on the material.

“This feels different.” She commented.

“I didn’t make that one actually. A good friend of mine has a dress shop down in Hawaii, where she lives. She gave that to me as one of her scratches and told me that I could use the design to make another version of the dress.”

“It’s beautiful. It’s a scratch?” His wife said, disbelieving.

The designer nodded.

“The woman that made it, what’s her name?”

“Stellina professionally, or at least that’s what all the dresses say on the inner stitching, but for those who actually know her call her by her real name. She’s a very private person and doesn’t want direct recognition for her art.”

“Sounds like my kind of designer. She lives in Hawaii?”

“Oahu, just a little ways away from Honolulu.”

“When can we get her a flight out here? I want you both working on my wardrobe for the upcoming Winter season. Everything here is absolutely stunning.”
Blake couldn’t understand dress talk anymore than he understood how Golf was a sport. He rapped his knuckles on the door, which got the attention of the entire room. Most of the women were in awe to see the President standing in the same space as them but the others, including his wife, looked equal parts irritated at the intrusion and equal parts worried about his bloody nose.

Josie stood up right away. “Honey, are you okay?” She came dutifully by his side and Blake allowed her touch to soothe him. He nodded as best as he could and she rubbed his back as she addressed the ladies.

“I’ll be right back. Please ask for anything that you need or want in my absence. Macie, anything.” She said pointedly to the young aid. Macie nodded.

“Does it hurt this time?” She asked him while they walked.

Thankfully, the Blue Room was near the East Wing and they made it to their bedroom relatively quickly.

“No.”

She led him to the bathroom and sat him down on the edge of the bath. She grabbed a towel and wet it in the sink, coming to sit on his lap as she gently pried his hand away and replaced it with the warm cloth. She ran a palliative hand through his greying curls and Blake’s eyes fell close. His breath evened out.

Gwen used to lay him down on the bed, stick two lotion scented tissues up his nostrils, and give him the best message of his life as they waited for the blood to subside. Blake usually fell asleep during that time. Afterwards, while he was pliant and his limbs were sated, just as she gently roused him from slumber, Gwen would wipe her lotion stained hands on the sheet, climb up on top of his lap, unbutton his pants, and fuck him back to sleep.

“What happened?”

Blake would have jumped if he wasn’t so skilled at concealing his thoughts. He sighed, knowing playing dumb wouldn’t get him off of the hook.

“Last time you had a bloody nose was when Teddy was six and broke his toe on the dining room table. You said it was because of her. That you guys were having an argument and she wasn’t paying attention to where she was going and she broke her toe the same way.”

Blake closed his eyes at the memory. She had found text messages in his phone between him and another pilot that could’ve been borderline flirting. Nothing happened, and Blake wasn’t the type to cheat but Gwen was furious and insecure and they were younger and less equipped to deal with petty arguments without them turning into full blown fights that lasted weeks.

He used to get these bloody noses everyday after the last IED caught a fraction of his head. They were a side effect of the trauma he endured but they stopped coming so often a little while after he and Gwen split up. Now, through the years, every time something happened that was remotely similar to the time he spent with Gwen, or something caught his eye that reminded him of her, he had a nosebleed. It was after a particular nasty one and Josie’s constant questions about them that he finally told her they were related to a past girlfriend.

He never told Josie her name or anything private about them other than a couple of stories, which were always linked back to the nosebleeds. He knew his wife acknowledged the incredible hold Gwen had over him, despite not knowing what she looked like or who she even was. It was
something they both agreed, nonverbally, to never speak of unless times like this showed up unexpectedly.

He thinks the mention of Hawaii, his old station grounds, would have been the cause of a nosebleed if it wasn’t for the sudden appearance of Gwen in his life again. To think that Josie and Gwen have met was a fact that he still hadn’t fully wrapped around his head.

“Blake--”

“It was nothing. A woman had the same necklace that I’d given her for our one year anniversary. That’s it.” It wasn’t a lie. He had noticed Pennelope wearing it two weeks ago. His nose hadn’t bled at the time. It was just a moment stuck in time before Blake became unstuck and got on with life per usual. The necklace was native to Hawaii, and exclusive to Ka’a’awa. He could pick it out of a crowd if he had to. He wondered if Gwen still had it somewhere with her.

“That’s it? Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. What happened to taking the boys to the museum?” He diverted.

Josie’s focus completely shifted at the mention of their children. “Jackson had an accident out in the yard.”


“It was nothing, really. He was playing tag with Teddy and tripped over one of the rocks around the rose bushes. He fell and sprained his wrist but he’s alright.”

Blake pushed up from the bathtub ledge, causing Josie to stand with him. He pushed away to get to the sink and turned the faucet on.

“I thought I told you to have an aid come inform me whenever something happened with the boys?” He ran the bloody cloth through with some cold water and ignored the way he could feel the room’s temperature change.

Josie carefully made her way to his side. “You were busy and I handled it. He’s fine, barely shed a tear. I didn’t want to interrupt anything considering you always have something more important to be giving your time to.”

He shut the water off forcefully and looked at her with a force that he had never truly felt before until that moment.

“Nothing is more important to me than my kids.”

“Then act like it.” She half yelled. But as she continued talking, her voice grew louder. “Spend more time with them. Eat more than two meals with them a week. You think just because your home is conveniently where you work that you don’t have to do more than the bare minimum--you’re wrong. I’m the only parent here doing both of my jobs and not once complaining about it!”

“I’m the President of the goddamn United States! You put up curtains and pick out drapes, and write about your next outfit choice for the State Ball. I run the country. You wanna pick a fight with me over who has more time to change diapers and wipe bloody noses?”

Josie recoiled as if she had been moved physically by his words. “You want a pat on the back for doing your job? Fine. You my dear husband are the finest President this country has ever seen. Devoted, kind, willing to go above and beyond and do whatever it takes to save the world. You’re
Blake sniffed, feeling nothing draining anymore. With one last wipe of his face and nose, he threw the towel into the laundry basket and turned to Josie. “You’re the mother of my children, but I’d think very hard about what you say to me the next time you’re feeling a little brave, Jo.”

“Or what?”

Her chest rose and fell with a quickness that he thought no one could replicate. This was the first time in their marriage that they were on opposite sides and he knew the only power she held over him was his children. Blake Tollison Shelton, the 47th President of the United States of America, never backed down or shied away from a challenge. But Blake Tollison Shelton, husband and father of two, would always step back, no matter what the costs.

He spoke steadily, eyes serious but soft, “I don’t like coming home at the end of the day and seeing my kids different than when I left them. How would you feel if you left for work and something happened to Teddy or Jackson and you didn’t even know about it until you walked through the front door several hours later, having been completely in the dark the entire time. No matter what I’m doing, where I’m at, I want to know about them. I’m never too busy for my family.”

He lost interest in fighting, lost interest in comforting, lost interest in making himself out to be the good guy when he knew that much of what she said was true.

Blake walked out the bathroom without a backwards glance or last word to his wife.

Blake rolled over onto his back, panting. Josie rose from the bed beside him, the sheets tucked around her naked body as she ventured to the bathroom. He didn’t know why she insisted on covering up when he wasn’t inside of her but she had always been like that. At first he found it adorable, quirky, but then he started to grow aggravated. It was like she was hiding a part of herself from him that he needed to see. She was always so put together, perfect, and if she ever let her hair down, it wasn’t for Blake.

At least he was getting laid on a regular now. Four weeks was four weeks too long.

There was a knock on the door and Blake sighed, sitting up and putting on his underwear just in time for Charlie to come walking in.

“What’s wrong?” Blake asked.

“Other than the fact that it’s a Saturday and I should be at home with Marcus and an orphanage in East Sudan just got shot up, everything’s great and dandy, smelling like flowers actually.”

“Charlie, shut up. What do you mean–an orphanage was targeted?”

“That’s what I said, Sir.”

The bathroom door opened and Josie came out wearing a robe, hair wet and smelling like flowers herself. She had the soiled sheets in her hands, putting them into a wastebasket off to the side of the room. “Oh, hi, Charles. What are you doing here on a Saturday? Are you joining for brunch?”
“No, ma’am. I’m just here to take your husband away for a few hours to handle a small matter.”

Josie’s good mood changed drastically. “Charles, you know it’s the weekend. I get my husband on the weekends. He didn’t even go on his morning run, that’s how much he’s not sticking to routine today or tomorrow.”

“With all due respect, Mrs. President—”

“Charlie.” Blake warned.

“There’s a war going on and I’m afraid the slaughter of innocent children doesn’t work around your schedule for family time.”

Blake was grateful that the bedroom door opened in that moment because he could practically feel the animosity flowing off his wife and chief of staff like a tsunami tide.

Teddy came running into the room, Jackson behind him. His youngest son went straight for the bed, immediately jumping on the rumpled covers. Blake winced. He walked to the bed and held his arms out, Teddy jumping into them excitedly.

“Dad, can we play football today after we eat? You promised me soon.” Jackson asked him, staring up at his father with hopeful eyes—his mother’s eyes.

Blake ran a hand through Jackson’s hair. “Dad’s gotta go in the office today for a little bit but—” Jackson started to groan. “But as soon as I’m done, I promise you I will play with you. Ok? Just give me a couple of hours.”

“Can we come with you to work?” Teddy asked, little arms tightening around his neck.

Blake was about to refuse when Jackson pulled on his arm and pleaded. “Please. We won’t do anything that will distract you. We promise, don’t we Teddy?”

Theodore nodded, his own blue eyes pleading softly. They were the spitting image of Blake’s. Charlie cleared his throat and Blake glared at him. He could only imagine what Josie looked like.

“How about this. You guys eat brunch with your mom, then I’ll have someone come and get you when I’m almost finished. You can play inside the Oval for a little bit while I get briefed. And if you’re good and you don’t disturb Andrea while she’s working, she’ll even give you some candy she’s got in her desk. Once I’m done—” His chief of staff made a displeasing noise but Blake continued. “We’ll play outside for a little and then Dad has to go back to work. Sound like a plan?”

Both boys got more than they bargained for and as a result, nodded happily.

“Ok, great. Now go let Valerie clean you guys up for brunch. Charlie give me a second to get ready.”

Josie eyed the door as Charlie, clearly annoyed, opened it for the boys and led them down the hall to their nanny. Once it was shut, her eyes shifted to him. She wasn’t mad per say, probably more hurt than anything.

“Jo—”

She put a hand up. “Make it to dinner, Blake. Just make it to dinner.”

She walked inside the closet and shut the door, leaving Blake standing in the middle of the room in
nothing but a pair of boxers. He ran his hands down his tired face and sighed. His only thoughts being the orphanage and the twenty plus kids that were probably lying dead on the floor inside of it.

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“More tea, Sir?”

Blake looked up from his speech. It was Pennelope, one of the White House aides. She was in charge of taking care of his needs at night when he decided to stay late in the office, which was becoming more and more of an occurrence as he found excuses to not eat dinner with his family.

“Sure, why not.”

She smiled softly at him and bent over the side of the desk to pour the hot liquid in his mug. Blake’s eyes couldn’t help but look at her, specifically her chest which was conveniently right in his face. She was wearing a white blouse with minimal cleavage, that damn necklace around her neck, dangling like a bad omen.

“More?” She asked.

Blake looked up to see her staring down at him, which meant she saw him staring at her breasts. He looked at the mug. It was filled to the brim.

“No, that’s good. Thank you.”

She smiled again and stood up. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Blake shifted his pants discreetly and cleared his throat. “No, that’ll be all.”

Pennelope pursed her lips but nodded, walking back to the exit. Blake noticed her yellow heels and paused, remembering a pair just like them.

“Actually, Pennelope. Can you get Andrea for me, please?”

“Sure thing, Mr. President.”

He settled back into his chair, biting his lip. He put his feet up on the edge of his desk and leaned back. The door opened again within a minute.

“Mr. President.” Andrea addressed him.

She looked tired and Blake knew she probably wanted to go home and the older man felt bad for a second, knowing that about thirty two other employees had to stay later whenever he did too.

“Andrea, I need you to find out some information for me about someone.”

Her half dead look changed to something half intrigued. “Who?”

“A woman named Gwen Renée Stefani.”

She took out her notebook and pen and wrote the name down. “And what do you want to know
about her?"

He hesitated in answering. Truth be told, he didn’t want to know much other than where to find her. And that was the most depressing truth of all, because even if he did know that information, he wouldn’t ever be able to act on it.

“I wanna know her residence. State only. Nothing specific like an address. And maybe her family. Husband, kids, parents mostly.”

“Her place of work?”

He shook his head. “I don’t care about that. Just those things.”

“You want any pictures?”

“No. And I don’t want you telling anyone about this either. If you can’t find the information yourself, you can enlist someone down in I.S. and no questions, please no questions.”

“Can I ask one? Just this one and I won’t ask anymore.” He nodded. “Who is she?”

“A woman.”

Andrea rolled her eyes. “Who is she to you?”

Blake rubbed his forehead. Realistically, he knew he didn’t have to give her an answer but Andrea, besides being one of the only government employees he actually trusted, had been a very close friend ever since she started this job in the third year of his first term. To deny her this one question would be like denying the entire development of their relationship. She never asked anything of him that the American people didn’t already. She deserved his honesty.

“She’s a woman that was once a very big part of my life.”

Andrea looked like she was going to push him for more but to his relief, she smiled gently at him. “I’ll get this information back to you in a couple of days. Unless, you need it sooner than then.”

“Take your time.”

“Is that all?”

“Yeah. Pack up. I need to go to sleep before I fall over and you need to get home to that boyfriend.”

“Husband.”

He stood up and gathered his things, handing them to her as they walked to the door. He opened it for her and she immediately went to lock up and retrieve her own items. Andrea turned her desk lamp off and walked with him down the hall, Tom and Dorian in tow behind them.

“Boyfriend.” Blake said, again, randomly. The halls were quiet and it was Blake’s favorite time of the day in the House.

Andrea smacked her lips, “He’s my husband.”

Blake wrapped an arm around the young woman’s shoulders, “Really? It seems like you’re more married to me than David.”

Andrea laughed at that and wrapped her arm around his back. “I can’t argue with that logic, Boss.”
Blake smiled.

Neither could he.
There were a lot of things that led to this moment. A shit storm of a list that Blake wished he had not scratched out or checked off as he went down this path.

The first was thinking that he could see her again after thirteen years and believe that he could control himself afterwards. The second was thinking of Gwen while he was inside of Josie. The third thing, which was probably the one that really propelled him down this rabbit hole, was asking Andrea for information about an ex-girlfriend. The fourth was having a bottle of her father’s favorite scotch sent to his house. He had never met the man, and that was his fault, and for some weird reason he thought the anonymous gift would fill at least some of that void inside of him but it didn’t and he regretted the act almost immediately after it was already packaged and delivered. The fifth and final oversight was asking for a secure line so that he could call her at her home.

It was ten at night, and he had been finishing up some legislature that needed to be looked over in the morning when he finally decided to do it. It was late, he was tired, physically and mentally, and she was probably getting ready for bed. He had been agonizing over whether he should call or not for weeks, and knew that she would be upset that he did. Confused at first, then angry, then completely upset. He did not want to leave her upset again but he was selfish and too used to getting what he wanted.

Blake leaned back into his chair and stared at the portrait of George Washington on the opposite wall in front of him as he listened to the dial tone. He heard static and then a pause before children’s laughter could be heard in the distance.

“Howlett residence.”

Her voice was something that he wished he could frame. So at least if he couldn’t hear it everyday, he’d at least know it was there, hanging somewhere for his eyes to look upon. Only he would know what it was and what it meant.

“Gwen.”

Her sharp intake of breath could be heard fairly easily, only because he was actively listening for it.

“How--what are you doing?”

“It’s a secure line.” He explained.

“What are you doing, Blake. You can’t just--you can’t call me.” She hissed, on the verge of ending their conversation short. “This is crazy.”

Blake was quick to say, “Don’t hang up. Just stay on the line for a couple more seconds. You don’t have to talk. I won’t even talk. Just let me hear you breathe. Please...Stella.”

The use of his nickname for her stopped the protesting in her heart and she fell silent. The abrupt quietness was deafening but it’s what he asked of her and Blake had to swallow it down like it was a bitter pill and say thank you afterwards.

Gwen breathed like she was making art. It was one of the first things he noticed about her in that little cafe storefront in the beginning. A smile crept slowly onto his face as he simply sat there and listened for the soft inhales and exhales that came directly from her chest. It wasn’t the real thing.
He wished he could have seen it in person, felt it in person, but it was the second best thing and he was grateful she was giving him it at all.

“Don’t send stuff to my family.” She spoke quietly.

Of course she would find out about that. “I didn’t mean--”

“Don’t. My dad doesn’t like charity and to him, that was charity. He thought I sent it. I don’t have that type of money. It was thirty four thousand dollars, Blake.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know why I did it.” He lied.

Gwen sighed, “I’m watching a movie with my kids. You can’t call here like this. Lani could have easily answered or Wyatt. Oh my God, Wyatt. What would you have done if he picked up?”

“Hang up,” he told her truthfully.

“Just don’t do this again. Ok? We talked, you heard my voice, now it’s time to hang up.”

“If I call again, will you answer?”

“Blake--”

“Give me a time to call that’s good for you.”

She started to yell at him in a whisper but then Blake heard another voice and then Gwen said, “It’s in the fridge, Manó.”

Blake was subjected to silence as they waited for her son to grab whatever he needed out of the refrigerator and leave the kitchen again.

“I have to go.” She came back to him.

“Give me a time, Gwen.”

“I’m not giving you anything--”

“All I’m asking is for two phone calls a week--” He interjected just as she did.

“No.”

“Just two--”

“One. And we keep it to five minutes.”

“Two, each ten minutes.” He didn’t skip a beat.

“Two, eight minute phone calls, and only on Thursdays and Fridays between nine and ten.”

“Deal.”

“Fine. Goodbye, Blake.”

The line licked before he could utter another sound. He put the phone back down on the receiver and smiled.

George was staring at him with a weary gaze.
He’d probably look at himself the same way if he wasn’t all of a sudden overwhelmed with her, and everything that came with being back in her life again.

Thursday was an uneventful day. He got up for his early morning run, ate in the Oval, did much of his work outside on the terrace, went to Jackson’s football game, and later on, Teddy’s golf practice. He tried to be involved as much as he could with their sports and academics but with all of his various demands, it didn’t always work out the way he wanted it to. By the time they got home, it was time for dinner and Blake sat down at the table for the first time in what felt like months.

Tonight, they were hosting Bradley and Stephanie, along with Charlie and his husband Marcus. Conversation was flowing easily, due to the boys being allowed to have screens at the dinner table while the adults chatted about everything and nothing. Blake was unusually quiet that night, knowing that he was only several minutes away from calling Gwen. He had already planned his excuse for the night, but didn’t plan on revealing why he was skipping out so early during the cocktail hour until Bradley smoked a cigar with him outside on the terrace. The anticipation was killing Blake and he needed to tell someone that he trusted not to judge him or talk him out of it. They were sipping on a fifty year old scotch when he just blurted it out finally.

“I’m back in touch with Gwen.”

Bradley had seen her at the dinner and kept his mouth firmly shut on the subject since then. He was the only one in his life that not only knew about her existence but knew what she looked like, knew who she was as a person. They had, after all, been friends when she and Blake were together.

Brad shifted in his chair and clicked his tongue, an expression to sign that he was thinking, even though Blake knew he wasn’t.

“Back in touch how?”

“I have her home number.”

“That a thing you can handle having?” He asked, swallowing a large mouthful of the amber liquid.

“I’m not going to abuse it if that’s what you’re alluding to. We’ve only had one conversation and I’ve come longer than that, Bradley.”

Brad spit up his drink laughing, punching Blake in the arm.

“What did you expect?”

“Nothing at all. I was surprised she didn’t hang up right away.”

“Me too...I’m assuming you’re gonna have another one tonight.” Blake scrunched his face, wondering how he knew that piece of information. Bradley answered him as if he could hear what was rattling about in his best friend’s head. “You’ve been quiet all night. Not one fucking word. And you’ve got that stupid look on your face, the same one you wore for a week after you met Gwen.”

Blake smiled. “I’ve been told that’s just my face.”
“Gwen used to say that.”

He sighed, rubbing the prespieration from off his forehead. “I know.”

Bradley whistled. “As your best friend, I’m gonna tell you something and you’re gonna ignore it like you always do.” Blake hummed, waiting for him to get on with it. “You’ve served your country ever since you graduated high school. You got a law degree, ran for the highest office in the world, and won. You have a beautiful wife, two gorgeous boys, and a whole country in the palm of your hands. You have no more room left to hold a mistress.”

He laughed, snorting into his scotch. “I’m not the cheating type and you know that. Besides, she’s also married with two kids.”

“I know.”

“Then you know even if I was stupid enough to try something, she’d put a stop to it right away.”

Bradley grabbed his hand abruptly, the motion stopping him mid-way from taking another sip. He made eye contact with him, the unwavering kind, like he had something not just important to say but something life changing as well.

“Listen to me. I trust you. I trust her. What I don’t trust are the facts of life. You left her out of love. The way you left was shitty and cowardly and utterly one of the dickest moves I’ve ever seen. But I know you had to. That doesn’t mean she isn’t still the only woman that fell for you, the real you because she was the only woman that you let yourself be real with. The facts are that you are in love with another woman that is not your wife. Most likely will be until the day you die. I don’t trust the universe to leave that alone. When I was in and out of rehab, everyone and Stephanie’s brother tried to keep her away from me, tried to get her to move on. And what happened? We’ve been living together with two dogs for eight years now. I love her and she loves me. Those are the facts of life.”

Blake never once took his eyes off his friend during his little speech, but his eyes were beginning to water from not blinking the entire time. “Brad. I’m happy with my marriage. All this is...is me being selfish for wanting to know her again. But that’s what it is. That’s all it is. We’re catching up.”

“Uh huh.”

There was a knock on the window and both men turned around to see Stephanie waving them in. They stood up, sighing simultaneously, until they saw what was going on inside. As they entered the sitting room, Charles and Marcus were dancing around the room to Frank Sinatra, and Josie was sitting on the couch sipping a glass of wine. The boys were sitting on the floor by their massive train station that him and Jo had bought them last year as a joint Christmas present.

“We’re dancing now. No more guy talk.” Stephanie said, pulling her boyfriend into an embrace. Bradley tipped his head to Blake, smirking, as he pulled his woman close. Blake tilted his head at the little fucker.

Josie rose from her spot on the couch and walked over to him, half expecting him to pull her in tight too, the other half waiting for the other shoe to drop with the weight of rejection. He gave it to her.

“I have to finish some work in the office.”

She hid her grin behind the rim of her glass. “Of course you do. The boys are going to bed soon, so
I imagine you won’t be back in time to tuck them in.”

He shook his head. “I’ll visit them later.”

“You always do.”

He kissed her cheek regretfully and followed Frank and Tom out the door.

As he walked down the halls, he felt progressively sicker. Not because he was going to call Gwen. He had no reservations about that. But because he lied to Jo and said that he would be awhile, knowing damn well that Gwen made him agree to two, eight minute conversations a week.

He could’ve tucked his kids in.
Lani is Hawaiian for sky, the heavens. It's pronounced LAH-nee. That is the name of Gwen and Wyatt's daughter. Their son's named is Manó. It's Hawaiian for shark and pronounced just the way it's spelled and sounds. Hawaii is a big influence on this story and as more of Hawaii becomes a bigger part of the plot and history of the characters, I will continue to explain the customs, traditions, and any other mentions of the state to keep you guys informed as much as possible in that regard.

“Nine on the dot. You were always punctual.”

Blake smiled into the phone, “The first thing that you liked about me.”

“No. The first thing I liked about you was that you smiled with your whole face.”

“I still do.”

She sighed, “I know. I see it on TV all the time.”

He let out a breath. “You watch me?”

“I see you. There’s a difference.”

He hummed. “Where are you?”

“Sitting on my couch, twirling the phone line around my fingers.”

He laughed, “Nothing’s changed.” Her laughter started and before they both knew it, they were giggling over the phone like a bunch of teenagers. When their chuckles subsided, Blake sniffed, staring off into the distance with a dumb smile on his face. He could only hope that Gwen looked the same.

“Where’s your family?” He asked, quietly.

“On Thursdays, Lani has dance practice until eleven and Manó has a sleepover with one of his friends. Darren’s mother carpoools on Thursdays…” Blake smiled. Hearing her talk about such normal things was endearing.

“What about the husband?”

“Wyatt doesn’t come back until Sunday. You?”

“It’s bedtime for the little tykes…Josie is most likely in the bath.”

There was an awkward silence that he felt more than he heard. Gwen’s soft breaths were loud in his ears, and Blake swore sometimes that she was breathing for the both of them.

“What are we doi--”
“I missed yo--”

They said at the same time. Her breath seemed to stutter in her lungs and Blake realized he was the one that said those three words.

“I missed you. I gotta say it. If you’re gonna allow me to be back into your life, whatever the capacity, I had to tell you so that I could talk to you without thinking it every five minutes. And don’t hang up. That’s the only serious thing I’ll say tonight. The rest can be whatever you want to talk about.”

“I don’t know what to say, Blake. I can’t--there’s nothing for me to say.”

“Gwen--”

“Think about it, please. What are we gaining by doing this? In case you haven’t noticed, nothing has changed for the past thirteen years. I live in Hawaii, you in Washington. We both have families. You’re the President of the United States for crying out loud. We can’t do this. We can’t see each other, we can’t meet up like old friends and have a drink. Nowhere in this world does it make sense to do what we’re doing now.”

“We’re talking. That’s what we’re doing now. We’re two people talking.”

“Blake--”

“I’m not the President. You’re not the wife of a pilot or the mother of two beautiful kids.”

“Then who are we?”

“You are just a girl, on the phone with a guy, twirling the cord around her fingers, dying to tell him everything he never knew. And I’m just a guy, on the phone with a girl, waiting to listen.”

That stutter in her lungs, she finally let it go, feeling the tension drain from her body.

“Thirteen years and you still talk like you came out of a movie.”

He cracked a smile. “Talk to me.”

“About what?”

“Anything. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You know everything. You always did.”

“I don’t know what that little corner cafe that we always used to go to looks like now. It has been awhile since I’ve landed a plane in Hawaii.”

She sighed, “The owner had the inside redone. It’s not yellow anymore. It’s all blue. It’s beautiful.”

Blake closed his eyes and tried to picture what the establishment would look like stripped of its sunshine and now bathed in an ocean.

“Do you still go there every Sunday?” He asked.

“With Lani. We go around lunch time every week.”
“She seems like your best friend.”

“She is. And she’s growing up so fast that I’m having heart palpitations every time she tells me that she wants to go to the strip with her friends or the beach with a bunch of boys. I’m not ready for it. She’s only twelve.”

Blake inhaled sharply, the tight movement causing a slight ache in his chest.

“Jackson is only ten. I can’t imagine him talking to me like a young man one day. It’ll freak me out.”

Gwen laughed, her hand covering her mouth in that way she did, insecure about the way her soft lips stretched over her teeth, and the way the sound echoed no matter where she was. It was the messiest laugh he had ever heard. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever witnessed.

“Blake.”

“Hmm?” He came back out of his reverie.

“It’s been eight minutes.”

Blake’s deep, audible breath was incredibly obnoxious to his ears but he couldn’t help it.

“You’re not being serious?” He asked.

“You said we had a deal.”

He started to laugh, “I didn’t think you were actually serious about the eight minutes. I thought it would be a quick conversation but not that quick.”

“I meant what I said. You wanted to talk, we’re talking. But we’re not going to stay on the phone for hours like we’re a couple of dumbstruck teenagers in love.”

“Wow. Destroy my hopes before I even get them up.”

“Shut up and say goodnight.” She smiled into the phone.

“Goodnight, Gwen. I’ll call you tomorrow?”

“Nine and ten.” She reminded him.

“Got it.”

“Goodnight, Blake.”

The phone clicked and Blake set it down on the desk, the one hand grabbing the edge. He held on tight and waited for that wave of nostalgia and residual pain to pass.

That night, as he kissed his boys goodnight, Blake crawled into bed with Jackson this time and fell asleep stroking his light hair.

He would have to ask Andrea for those pictures of Gwen’s kids after all.
It had been three weeks. Three weeks and six phone calls and Blake had been sleeping better. Of course, he had woken up the majority of the mornings in one of his sons’ beds but he slept the whole night versus waking up in the middle of it and staring up at the ceiling wondering if he was actually happy or not. He liked Teddy’s room best for those nights because his son was obsessed with space and pretty much had the entire universe up on his ceiling. The stickers were easy to look at when sleep was difficult.

But talking to Gwen had somehow alleviated that stress from his life. He didn’t know why he expected anything different. She could always read him, tell if he was lying or not, gage his moods and decide what he needed—mainly from her. Their conversations had healed a part of his soul that he hadn’t realized was slowly rotting away. He forgot how much he liked just the action of talking when he was on the phone with her. Especially when their exchanges consisted of everything that he couldn’t say to everyone else in his life, even Bradley. Gwen and him talked about their kids, how different and similar they were, how that ache in their chest never quite went away because a part of their hearts were walking around outside of their body and to see it grow and experience pain that they couldn’t take away or even alleviate was the most frustrating part.

They talked about other things, like their favorite foods, movies (although Blake didn’t really have time to watch any as of lately), and books. They talked about random things, like how the universe is vast and aliens are out to get them and how there really is no peace in love and war. It was like old times, except for just that. They didn’t talk about their past as a rule of thumb. It was forbidden and not conducive to their predicament. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t enjoying himself as of lately. But he was happy that his new found outlet had no adverse effects on his life or his marriage.

For Josie had been uncharacteristically joyous these past couple of weeks as well. And considering that Blake was in a better mood, their union had been relatively untroubled, surprisingly carefree, and he was nothing but grateful for it. He wanted this feeling to last forever, this ideal situation to extend on for an eternity.

He knew he was a fool to think that it could.

Blake had just packed up his work for the evening and sent everyone home, or at least back to their desks, and ventured through the house to find his wife. He remembered her talking about eating lunch with a designer that she had finally managed to get down to Washington after weeks of begging.

He found them in the gardens, sitting at one of the veranda’s tables. His wife was facing him and as soon as she saw her husband, she smiled that gorgeous smile of hers. Blake felt his insides warm at the sight of it.

“Hi, Honey.” She stood up and he came around the table to kiss her cheek. “I want you to meet the woman who is gonna be responsible for every stitch that you take off of me every night.” She winked and Blake had never heard her talk like that, let alone in the company of others, friends or not.

Blake smiled and turned to look at the woman. His smile dropped immediately and his blood ran cold.

Gwen was looking at him with a half grimace on her face, trying to keep a smile as she stood up and extended a hand to him. “It’s nice to see you again, Mr. President.”
Both of their hands were dry. She held no weight behind her shake, all compliance and quietude illuminating it. “The pleasure is mine.”

He let go and returned his attention back to his wife, smiling. “I wanted to see if you were almost done. I had Michael make your favorite cheesecake this morning. I thought we could share it over a bottle of wine.”

Josie smiled wider than he had ever seen her do before. She touched his cheek for a brief moment, “I’m almost done here with Gwen. Let me just go fetch some of the designs that May left last time she was here.” She turned around, excited, addressing Gwen once more. “Just give me a minute, I’ll be right back.”

His wife walked inside and Blake wasted no time in grilling Gwen immediately.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

“Ask the First Lady. She’s been harrassing my people for weeks about me flying out here for a consultation--”

“You’ve been in contact with my wife for weeks and you didn’t think to mention that to me?” He hissed.

Gwen flinched when he said wife. Her eyes pierced his as she crossed her arms over her chest. Blake’s own were drawn to the motion and as he gazed upon her form, dressed in a pale cream colored dress that accentuated her small, yet fit frame, his resolve and agitation lessened.

“I wasn’t talking to her. My assistant was. I told Koko to tell her that I was flattered but I wasn’t interested.”

“Yet you’re here now.”

“Yes, because your wife insisted that I meet with her to discuss the job in person and then proceeded to tell me how much she was willing to pay. I have two kids milking us every month for club and sports fees, not to mention Lani’s dance competitions. Wyatt only makes so much...the shop is doing well but I don’t have a lot of foot traffic from the locals and Hawaii isn’t exactly the cheapest place to live, as you know.”

Blake ignored the dig and instead focused on her apprehension. He could hear it in her voice, the way it wavered and dropped. She probably hadn’t anticipated revealing that much to him about her personal life. He was almost sorry that he pushed. Almost.

“Are you going to take it?” He asked.

Gwen looked surprised at his question. She squinted her eyes the next moment and Blake tried to school his face. “You want me to.” She stated.

“I didn’t say that. I asked if you were going to--”

“You want me to. You see that there--” She pointed to his eyes and they crossed as her finger grew closer. He batted her hand away. “It’s a tell.” She told him.

“What do you think? You think I want my ex-girlfriend working alongside my wife everyday? No. Absolutely not. There is nothing in the world that I want less right now.”

“You think I want to move to Washington? I’d have to take my kids from their home. Put them in
new schools, be farther away from my husband. Wyatt would have to transfer camps. I would have to see you everyday.” Blake gave her a vexed look. “I don’t want to but her offer is too good to just pack my bags and fly back to Oahu and forget I ever came. I mean--the First Lady would be wearing my dresses. My dresses, Blake. Do you know how amazing that would be?”

He knew that Gwen didn’t crave attention the way some women did--the way Josie loved. But attention didn't have to absolve her from recognition. Putting the dots together, which he should have realistically done from the moment he heard the conversation about some designer out in Hawaii with the name Stellina that she was his little star and those were her dresses that his wife were continually looking for. Even if she did take the job, public record would know her name, her kids’ names, but Gwen Stefani didn’t have to speak out into the world when Stellina was perfectly capable of speaking for the both of them. She didn’t have to show the world Gwen Stefani at all. In fact, he preferred it if she didn’t. Besides Brad, her brother, and a couple of locals around the neighborhood that they used to live, no one knew of their relationship and if even the slightest rumor that the President’s ex-girlfriend was working as the First Lady’s stylist got out, it’d be a scandal, a stain on his entire presidency and Blake did not sacrifice four years already to be elected again, only to erase everything he’s ever done good for the country. It’d be a huge slap in the face. He didn’t give up Gwen to have everything that he’s worked for to be effaced.

“Okay, I think I found them.” Josie was walking back out onto the terrace, a couple of folders in her hands. She was too busy looking down at the papers to see the perplexed expression on her husband’s face, or the hopeful/uneasy one on her potential stylist.

Blake reared in his emotions on the matter and put on a smile for his wife.

“I’m going to leave you guys to it. We’ll eat the cheesecake later for dinner, Hon. Don’t worry about it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. We’re almost done.” Josie said distracted, pulling out each designs onto the table.

Blake nodded, “Well. It was nice seeing you again, Mrs. Howlett. I hope you make my wife very happy...whatever it is that you do here with the dresses and stuff.” He finished off awkwardly, feigning oblivion. He didn’t like lying to Josie’s face so blatantly but he had to do it to keep up false pretences.

Gwen was always a quick read and an even faster learner. “Will do, Mr. President.”

He left before he had the gaul to say something else, something highly inappropriate and unnecessary.

He wished he would have showed that much restraint when he got to the door and turned around to look at the two most important women in his life. But just like he left thirteen years ago, he always managed to do the selfish thing.
Chapter 5

I'm going to start showing pictures of all the characters so that you know what to envision when you read this story. This is how Blake looks when I do these flashbacks. Which I should mention, this entire chapter, although another short one, is a flashback to when they first met. I'll be posting Gwen's pictures next chapter.

Gwen had a usual seat at the cafe, off in the corner, in front of the window with the large scale paintings. She had a predictable order of a glass of banana mango smoothie and an acai bowl in a to go container. Caius, her favorite server, would have her food ready before she even entered the eatery.

It was a particularly hot afternoon when she visited. Her spot by the window had been taken by an incredibly adorable old couple and Gwen found it hard to be malign. Instead, she shouldered her tote bag and sat down at an empty table in the middle of the room. Caius sat a smoothie down in front of her right away and she smiled gratuitously.

Gwen’s bag was filled with various pages of half-finished designs and songs. In a mad scramble to find the most recent song that she was working on, several pages dropped from her grip and landed on the floor. In the midst of her trying to catch them before they did, she accidentally knocked over her drink, spilling its contents onto the table.

“Shoot.” She exclaimed, grasping for the papers that hadn’t yet fallen to avoid getting smoothie on them.

Gwen grabbed for napkins and attempted to wipe up the mess quickly. She did her best and once she was satisfied with her work space again, Gwen wrapped the soiled napkins in a couple of dry ones and set them off to the side.
“Here you go.”

She jumped in her chair and turned around, eyes travelling down instead of up like she expected. There was a man kneeling on the ground, her manuscript in his hand. Gwen’s eyes travelled up to the man’s face and she couldn’t help the smile that blossomed.

The guy’s eyes were a swirl of azure and teal, like a whirlpool circling around and around until they met at a black hole where his pupils were. His hair was a curly mess on top of his head that probably had more to do with the heat than his actual fringe. He was wearing a white shirt and navy blue cargo pants. Her gaze landed on the dog tags that he was wearing around his neck.

He moved the manuscript closer to get her focus again and Gwen snatched the song from his hands, coming out of her trance.

“Thank you.”

He nodded and stood up. “That a song?”

Gwen looked over her shoulder at him. “What do you know about it?”

He smiled. But he didn’t just lift the corners of his mouth to do it. He smiled with his whole face and it made him more handsome, more charming, more open. It was refreshing.

“I write too. That’s why I asked.”

“You write?” She asked skeptically.

He gestured to the open chair in front of her and she nodded wearily, watching as he settled down into it the next second. “I used to write, I should say. I don’t anymore. I don’t have time.”

She gestured to his uniform. “Yeah, I don’t imagine you would. Military?”

“Air force, yeah.”

“Well, thank you. For your service and your sacrifice.”

His eyebrows raised and he tilted his head to the side just a bit.

“What?” She asked.

He shrugged, “Nothing. It’s just...I have a lot of people that thank me for my work. Everyday. But none ever for my sacrifice. Except you.”

He blinked and the beauty of the color was momentarily covered by the shield of his eyelashes; naturally long and soft looking--strikingly feminine compared to the rest of his well structured, sharply designed features. It was probably the only feminine thing about him.

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?” She smiled. “Giving yourself day to day, night after night, morning into morning, for me and the rest of the population on this island--in this country? Service and sacrifice, they go hand and hand, right?”

“Just like gratitude and grief.”

She stopped smiling. “I’ve been saying that for years.”

He picked up the smile she dropped. “Really?”
Her fingers toyed with the corners of her manuscript while she tried to find the same speech that she used to tell her friends and family back home. “Short version. We’re all grateful, we all give thanks, and we all think we can do more to feel less like shit when we do. Nothing in life stands alone, not even your kindness, and if it does, you can be sure there’s a million other things running up behind it, waiting to take its place.”

He chuckled and extended a hand to her. “Good to know. I’m Blake.”

She shook it softly. “Gwen.”

“What a breath of fresh air it is to meet you. Gwen.”

Her cheeks didn’t color, her face didn’t warm, but her soul brightened and she felt less alone in the world. Gratitude and service, sacrifice or not, she knew in that moment that grief would always follow right behind them.

She often wondered from that first day what would be there to take its place in the end.

The moment his phone rang, Gwen had a feeling that she would see him around again. To think that he probably had a certain day that he came to the cafe too, that he sat in a certain seat and ordered a specific lunch, and she just hadn’t seen him until then...was a pleasant thought. It gave her hope that he would make an appearance in her life again, if not for the conversation about humanity, then for the company between meals. She’d like that. She just hoped that he did too.

They said their goodbyes and Gwen ate her fruit and oats in relative silence as she started a new song. If the lyrics were filled with blue eyes and gratitude then that was just a coincidence.

Just like it was a coincidence that they met again at the little corner store just a week later. She walked in, bag hanging half off her shoulder, a croissant in her left hand and a mug of coffee in her right. This time, her table was free, and she sat down into it right away, basking in the glow of the sunlight that filtered through the window. Caius set her smoothie down two minutes later with a wink. She grinned over the rim as she watched him walk away. Her eyes travelled around the room and instantly, like she was being pulled, they landed on Blake. He was sitting on the other side of the room, sipping a cup of coffee himself. He set his cup down and looked at her again, smiling.

Gwen looked away, only for a brief moment, then looked again. He was still staring, still smiling. She nodded him over, and then focused her attention back on her bag. She tried not to care if he accepted her invitation to join her or not but she didn’t think she could keep her disappoint at bay if he didn’t.

Thankfully, his footsteps grew closer and his voice rang through the air like a early morning bell signaling the start of the day.

“May I?”

She shrugged, pretending like she didn’t care. The chair’s legs scraped across the floor as he pulled the seat out and sat down. Gwen was still searching in her bag, sifting through papers and avoiding to have to make the first greeting. But he wasn’t saying anything and the silence was starting to unnerve her. She looked up finally with a sigh.

He had one leg crossed over his lap, and a pretty smirk on his face. “Hi.”

She let out a breath and smiled. “Hi.”
“I missed you.”

She would have swooned if it wouldn’t be too revealing. “Really? I find it hard to miss someone you barely know.”

“Well, let me get to know you then.” She couldn’t help it. She did swoon that time.

He continued, “You know, so I can miss you properly.”

Her laugh was unexpected and nice and something she wished she indulged in more.

“You’re crazy. Where are you from?”

His face sobered up. Blake cleared his throat, “Oklahoma originally. We moved to Arizona when I was eight. I went into the airforce when I was eighteen and now I feel like I’m from everywhere.”

“I know what that feels like. I’m from California. But I did study abroad programs when I was in highschool and then throughout college. I didn’t think I would ever do something like that or even have the money to but my parents were really great.”

“What was your favorite place?”

Gwen had to think about that one before she realized her answer had always stayed the same.

“Honestly? Anaheim. It was where I grew up and it’s just...home.”

Blake nodded, “Yeah, I get that.”

Caius came to the table to drop off her acai bowl. But he had another plate in his other hand and set it down in front of Blake. She looked over at his food. He had a bagel with a hefty amount of poi slathered between the toasted bread. Blake unwrapped his silverware and placed his napkin in his lap. He picked up his bagel and took a huge bite. He licked his lips and sighed, looking up at her briefly. She was staring, she knew, but she couldn’t help it.

“What?” He asked around a mouthful of bread and poi.

“Nothing. It’s just, Caius must think of you as a regular.”

“I’ve been coming here ever since I got sent to Base. I wouldn’t say I’m a regular considering I don’t always make it here every week but me and Caius go way back. He takes care of his own.”

Gwen smiled and looked over to the counter where Caius was wiping up some spilled water.

“Yeah. He’s a great guy, isn’t he.”

When she turned to look at Blake again, he was grinning at her. “Yeah, he is.” Blake pointed to her food, “Are you going to eat that?”

She looked at him oddly and laughed. “Yes, Blake. I’m going to eat it.”

He shrugged and went back to his own meal. Gwen decided to start eating hers.

And that’s how they spent the rest of their time there at the little corner cafe that she loved so much. They ate in relative piece. Gwen worked on her songs and Blake read the local newspaper. It was nice. The first time that she actually felt comfortable enough not to fill every molecule in the air with words and empty conversation. Blake looked like he was just content to sit there with her
and exist.

It was what people like her dreamed of. Companionship, simplicity, all things people want desperately but don’t know how to go about getting them. She didn’t even know how she had managed to do it, find it--find him. All she did was sit down and drop some papers one afternoon. Now she was sitting across from him, dropping her guard instead. All those walls that she had managed to build up were slowly coming down. And it didn’t take a bulldozer this time to do so.

All it took was a man in a uniform claiming to miss her.

She didn’t know that thirteen years later he would repeat the same sentiment.
thanks for being so patient guys. Halloweekends was fun and an absolute wreck for my sleep schedule. But updates should be coming regularly again. I have pictures of Blake's two boys and Josie. Jackson is the oldest one, with the adorable freckles that he got from his mom and Theodore has those blue eyes like his daddy. Gwen will come next chapter for sure, sorry for the push back. Also, I've added links to two songs. I don't like writing lyrics out and for the purpose of this story, music performances won't be a huge deal. I tend to deal with plot more and the music is sort of a background thing. you can listen to the full songs on youtube if you want. And lastly, this part of the story is far from done. Gwen hasn't left yet. ;)

![Image of a young boy with fluffy hair and a scarf](image-url)
Tom watched the President watch his son from the doorway of the piano room as Jackson attempted to play a song that he had just learned. The First Lady had gotten him a teacher to come on the weekends and play with him for an hour in the mornings. Tom often wondered how the boy could learn anything in such a short period of time, but as his President and the security detail would walk past the room on the way to the Oval Office, Jackson’s playing could be heard. And the sounds that came from the room weren’t a reflection of a ten year old beginner. Jackson had a knack for mastering new songs without much difficulty. He also knew that it filled the father of two with pride to know that at least one of his children connected with music the way he once did himself. Even more so because the President didn’t play often. There were only a handful of nights in 47’s first term that he had the agents stand outside of the piano room while he played a handful of songs for them. It was like having your own private show, and Tom didn’t mind those nights nor the music, even if the songs were muffled through a closed door. President Shelton was very good at playing, whether it was the piano or guitar, it didn’t matter.

Of course, his playing was limited. The President never sang a word. He would hum along with the
melody, or sigh with the notes, but that was the extent of it. Tom knew it was because of a past love. Before Stella, he didn’t play at all. With Stella, he played everyday. Once she was gone, he didn’t dare touch another piano key or guitar string until Jackson was four years old. All roads led back to her.

Tom had known that for over two years. He found it out on a particularly rough night for the President as he promptly drank his depression down with one too many moscow mules. It was that night when he confessed to Tom and only Tom in the Oval Office that he missed her--Stella. Tom was struck dumbfounded for a moment before he realized what the President was saying, or more to the point, confessing. Tom had then tried to stop him from saying anything else. His President had secrets, and though Tom was loyal to him, inexplicably devoted to the man, he knew that the Leader of The Free World was an incredibly private person. He’d regret ever opening his mouth to Tom in the morning, and the younger man didn’t want President Shelton to feel any kind of embarrassment just because he let his guard down one time. Tom vowed to protect the man at all costs, and that included protecting him from himself, too.

But the more he tried to protest, the more he saw in 47’s eyes that he needed to get whatever it was off of his chest. His President had asked him to take a seat. It was wholly unprofessional for him to do so, not to mention unsafe. Tom was on duty, and needed to be on his feet at all times. But as the older man insisted more and more, Tom’s warm faith in his chief won over and he told himself it would just be for a second. Nothing longer. So he sat.

And he listened to President Shelton talk and slur the more time passed. Tom had learned that Stella was a nickname for his old flame. 47 had never actually told him what her name was but that didn’t bother the agent. What bothered him was the man’s smile. He smiled the entire time as he talked but it wasn’t the smile of his President, more of a man that he didn’t recognize. It was a smile of a man still in love with the wrong woman, a man that did not want to be president. He smiled and Tom saw so many more secrets that he was hiding.

Eventually, he nodded off and Tom stood up at the precise moment that the older man’s head fell back onto the couch cushions behind him. He was drunk and exhausted and perhaps in pain. It was a glimpse inside of the man that everyone thought was made of steel and perpetually, unpierceable.

Tom gave the President exactly eight minutes to sleep where he was before protocol kicked in and Tom opened the door to call Frank in. The two men picked their President up and wrapped his arms around their necks as they walked 47 down the halls of a very quiet and thankfully, empty house. Once they reached the East Wing, Frank knocked twice on the door before they walked in. The First Lady was sleeping soundly in bed when they carefully entered the room and deposited her husband onto the bed. Tom allowed Frank to take the lead in getting the President’s pants and shoes off. He let him tuck the man into bed and turn off the lamp light. He let him take care of all of his needs because Tom had his secrets--well, one of them. He didn’t think there was anything more trusting than that. And the next day, when he started his evening shift, he half expected the President to call him into the Oval to apologize and ask for his silence on the matter but when he saw 47, he was back to normal. He didn’t request for his presence alone or even his loyalty. And when he did bring up the previous night, it was to thank him and Frank for seeing that he got to bed alright.

Something struck Tom in that moment.

The President didn’t remember. And if his President didn’t remember...Tom would forget.

“Dad! Don’t watch me.”
The senior agent forgot the memory as the boy’s father smiled. Jackson had stopped playing, and was looking at his father with an irate expression. It was such a comical sight for a small face that even the President chuckled along with him. Although, Tom’s laugh was silent and entirely in his head.

“It’s not funny.” Jackson pouted.

“No. You’re right. It’s not.” The father of two walked further into the room and gestured for Jack to move over as he slid in next to the boy on the ivory bench. “I’m sorry.”

“Why were you just standing there? It’s weird, Dad.”

He smiled and ran a hand through his son’s autumn curls. “You’ll understand when you’re older and have kids yourself.”

“I won’t ever have kids.”

“That’s what I said. Now I wake up every morning to you and your brother.”

Jackson laughed and shoved his elbow into his father’s side. 47 smirked and pulled Jack closer. They sat there for a few minutes, not speaking, just listening to each other’s breaths as their chests rose and fell in synchronicity. Then..

“Hey Dad?”

President Shelton hummed.

“Have you written any songs before?”

Tom saw him pause. Thinking of an answer clearly became a struggle and the agent could only presume that it was a sore spot for the man to talk about. But Tom knew President Shelton didn’t want to lie to his children.

“I have. I don’t anymore. But I have. A long time ago.”

“Do you remember any of them?”

“Now you’re just being slick. If these questions are meant to get me to sing one of them for you, you’re gonna be seriously disappointed.”

Jackson’s whole face dropped. “Seriously, how do you do that?”

47 laughed and scratched the boy’s scalp soothingly. “I’m your Dad. I know you better than you know yourself. Don’t ever forget that just in case you want to sneak out of the house when you’re a teenager and do stupid things.”

Instead of smiling, Jackson touched a key and sighed. “I want to write one day.”

The President changed approaches. “And I’ll teach you how if you want. But I’m not singing.”

“Why not? What’s the big deal?”

“I just don’t have the time right now.”

“Yes you do. Mom said that dinner wouldn’t be done until seven and its…” He picked up President Shelton’s left wrist and took several minutes to read the short and big hand enclosed in the tiny
glass. “Six and some change.” He finished.

His smile split into a huge grin. That wasn’t what he meant but he knew Jackson wouldn’t understand if he tried to explain. The older man looked down at his watch, amused, reading the time for him. “Six thirty-three.”

“That’s what I said.”

He tickled his son for that smart ass reply and Jackson laughed loudly, protesting and pushing his father away. He relented only when he heard footsteps coming down the hall.

The First Lady greeted Tom as she rounded the corner and smiled at her husband and son.

“Hi, Hon.” He greeted.

“What are you boys up to?”

“Make Dad play me a song on the piano, Mom.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Get Dad to play? You’re better off solving climate change, buddy.” She joked.


“Almost. Hey, I asked Mrs. Howlett to eat dinner with us instead of eating at her hotel alone. Her flight doesn’t leave until noon tomorrow so I thought she’d enjoy the company. Plus, I think she’s really considering saying yes to being my stylist. Isn’t that just amazing?”

Tom knew the sensation of feeling his blood clot right there inside of his body. His skin would turn ashen and his eyes would pop as if they were straining to focus. To say that the President didn’t look the same way right now would be a huge oversight on Tom’s part.

“That’s great.” He said weakly. “Really, I’m happy for you. And I’d love to have her over.”

The First Lady smiled and walked over to them, kissing President Shelton on the lips and Jackson on the forehead.

“Don’t forget to wash up. You too, Blake.”

The two males both nodded and she left the room in a happy flourish. Tom watched his chief sigh and visibly release the tension he’d been holding since the First Lady mentioned Mrs. Howlett.

“Hey, Dad?”

“Yeah?” He answered, looking down at Jackson.

“Why is Mom such a girl?”

Jackson’s father looked like he needed that brief moment of joy to weather whatever it was going on inside of his head. The President laughed and pushed Jackson up from the bench. “Don’t let her hear you talking like that. Get Teddy and the two of you go wash up for dinner.”

Jackson sighed but listened to his father. “Lasagna, Dad.”

“Eat more than three bites and I’ll let you have extra screen time.” He said, knowing that would entice Jack to at least eat some of his dinner. Tom knew virtually everything about his boss’s kids,
including their favorite foods to eat. Lasagna for Jackson was not one of them. Both men didn’t know why the First Lady had the kitchen prepare it if half of the table’s patrons didn’t like it. The President was a part of that half.

“Fifteen minutes.” Jackson bargained.

“Ten.” His father replied.

“Twelve.”

“Seven.”

“Hey! You went down that’s not fair.”

“Ten, and I’ll think about getting that dog you and Teddy wanted.”

“If we had a dog, we could just feed it what we don’t want.”

“That’s not why you get a dog.”

Jackson rolled his eyes and turned around, calling over his shoulder. “Fifteen minutes and a dog, final offer.”

The President chuckled as he watched Jackson walk out of the room, giving Tom a high five as he did.

“Don’t encourage him,” his President said jokingly.

“If I may, Sir, I’d suggest being less of a doormat next time in negotiations.”

He laughed and turned around to face the piano again. Tom guessed that he didn’t feel like getting up right away, so he sat there for a few minutes more, looking around the room as he fought the urge to play a couple notes. When he deduced that a couple of presses of keys wouldn’t kill him, Chief allowed himself to play just a few. The feel of the notes vibrating against his fingers was something that he would always love. It was the same when he played guitar. The strings would feel rough, a contrast to the smooth ivory keys he was touching now, and they would put him into an almost euphoric state.

Before he knew it, he was playing an old song that he hadn’t thought about in years. The melody came natural to him, as did the playing, and he looked like he hated himself for giving in so easily. President Shelton hummed the lyrics instead of singing them outright. Until he got to the chorus, then his voice grew slightly louder and his sounds became more coherent, finally resembling words.

“And you should take yourself. Feel the rhythm, life goes on again. Though I ain’t sure it’s really how we meant. I’ll feel settled in a simple sense. Cause I think of you less and less.”

His words faded into soft humming again, partly because he forgot some of the lyrics, the other part being that he didn't want to continue hearing his voice. Tom didn’t even know if 47 could carry a whole note, let alone a whole song, but from what he could hear, his President had a talent whether or not he wanted to share it with the world.

His playing trailed off into the air and the silence descended upon him so cruelly as if he could never play long enough to keep it away. He didn’t know why the President cared so much.
Tom was about to intervene when he heard silent footfalls coming down the hallway. He expected the First Lady to be storming down again. But it was a woman this time. She looked lost, but not for a location. She was clearly checked since she was in the private wing of the house.

As she approached, they made eye contact just as a few notes could be heard again. Tom starred as the woman made her way towards him and the other agent on duty, Dorian. She stopped next to him, and Tom admired her nerve. He also admired the situation. He wondered where he recognized her from when he thought back to the dinner and remembered the bathroom affair. It was the same woman that the President had waited outside a woman’s restroom for.

The woman, he didn’t know her name, watched as the Leader of the Free World struggled to play for a moment before he sang just a few lyrics to another song.

“Does it ever cross your mind? Are you so much older now? Your children playing in the street.”

His voice was quiet but they could still hear it. The President looked up and stopped playing, head tilted as if he was trying to remember the rest of the song. He played a note and sang again, “Does it ever cross your mind?” He trailed of brokenly and finally snapped.

His President gave up and closed the lid to the piano roughly, running a hand through his gelled curls as he stood up. He was fixing his blue tie, becoming the poster child of composure again, when he turned toward the doorway and stopped.

47 was looking at the woman standing right underneath the archway, staring right back at him. When they locked eyes, she moved suddenly, brushing past Tom as she did. It took the Chief eight seconds to realize that she was walking away from him, and down the hall, before he sprung into action. Once again, Tom was brushed off as the older man followed behind her until he caught her around the waist, stopping in front of her.

Tom and Dorian surreptitiously looked at the pair. The woman was breathing harshly, her throat swallowing her nerves with each passing second. The President’s blood grew tighter.

“What were you doing?” He asked, quietly.

“I was looking for the bathroom. Your wife said it was the first room on the right.”

He looked into her eyes and saw no trace of a lie. “The second. She must’ve been distracted. It’s the second room.”

The woman nodded and put her head down as she attempted to walk past him. He grabbed her arm as she went, calling her name. Gwen.

She stopped.

The President looked up at Tom and the senior agent immediately looked to Dorian. The two men agreed to avert their eyes. But Tom stole another glance just to see them watching one another. It seemed as if President Shelton forgot why he even stopped her again.

The sound of small footsteps running down the hall was the only thing that could have made him let her go. The woman silently walked away and disappeared behind the second door.

By that time, his sons had rounded the corner and were steadily making their way to pounce on their father. Blake bent down and scooped them up into his arms. They were going on about something, rambling excitedly, talking over one another in their haste. He set Jackson down because he was too big now to be carried but Teddy remained on his hip.
The President caught Tom’s eye as he listened to his youngest recant a story about a lizard they found in the garden. He seemed to be conveying a million and one things to him but at that moment, all Tom got was a name.

Gwen Howlett was Stella.

His face didn’t betray his revelation and he was sure the President had no clue that he knew. But he knew what that gaze meant. It was a warning. A warning of what to come.

A warning of what to expect. He just didn’t know how far down the rabbit hole to anticipate.

As a general rule, no secret service was allowed at dinner time. They waited promptly outside, four of them, two by each of the entrances. Inside, Josie and her kids--because her husband couldn’t normally make it in time--would sit every night and wait for the three courses that Jackson and Teddy didn’t bother with anyways.

Josie didn’t like calling it a lonely time. But that’s what it was. She was lonely. Much of her work and homelife consisted of her talking to children, ordering around White House aides, and making statements for the press about charities and reading events for orphans (all things she loved). But the truth was, she wanted more. She wanted her husband.

The problem was, she had to share that person with the world. That person being the President of the United States. She had half of him already. The fact that he was being pulled into a million different directions and she couldn’t even get two hands on him, let alone one, had her stress levels rising. But of course, although she was a Shelton, she was a Baker before, and Bakers always held their composure. Blake had always joked with her that she was perfect, too perfect, and nothing could ever break her from that fine-tune temperament.

Except now. Her composure was slowly faltering as she sat at the opposite head of the table across from her husband. Her sons were on her left as their guest sat to her right.

Gwen Howlett was something of an enigma. Josie had been called a lot of things in her life. Beautiful, intelligent, bossy, phenomenal, a force to be wreckin with--but she wasn’t a mystery. Now Gwen Howlett...she was difficult to gage, difficult to place in one category or another. Josie didn’t even think she would fit into any of the boxes she had already picked out for her. It was frustrating as much as it was bracing. From the first moment that she looked upon one of Gwen’s designs, she knew she had to have that type of style on her person every day. But someone who was that talented, that passionate about an art form that was lost on a lot of people, intrigued Josie. Meeting the woman behind the dresses peaked her curiosity even more. In their discussions, the first thing that Gwen wanted to talk about was being a mother. And that was more refreshing just as much as it was surprising. From there, they discussed her business in Hawaii and how that all tied into her family’s life. Her openness and honesty was what ultimately convinced Josie to open about her children and her life there at the White House. As First Lady, she was careful to keep a lot of her life close to her chest. But with Gwen, that instinct had all but dissolved like sugar in hot tea.

There was a genuineness about Mrs. Howlett, one that would be hard to replicate as if she originated from a different space and time. Josie took notice—not just of her authenticity—but of her
husband’s peeked interest in the woman as well. Of course, the way he expressed his attention to anything other than work or their children was by burying it underneath layers that she was convinced she would never touch.

Throughout dinner, a quietness descended upon their table, not for the first time. But Josie’s eyes would look up every now and then to see her husband already looking at their guest. There was nothing overtly sexual about it or even inappropriate. It just was, like a fact staring her blank in the face. He was clearly besotted with her.

The problem was not that her husband couldn’t notice other women. It was the fact that he had never before. It sounded crazy in her own mind but she wasn’t wrong about this. Ever since they were introduced that night on the boat, he had never noticed another woman besides her. She used to think that it was just luck, that he just wasn’t like any other man that she had met. It was a dream made reality. Josie had never had to worry about his fidelity, or half truths, or another woman. She had it easy, easier than most women judging by the stories that she’s heard over the years. But now, now her husband was invoking something in her that she hadn’t felt for some time.

Ambivalence.

It wasn’t Gwen’s fault. From the moment that Josie had met the woman, she turned her head. It was no surprise that she would turn her husband’s. But that didn’t lessen her distress about the matter. She had learned that night, that Blake was capable of straying. If not in body than in mind. His interest could be stolen. His appreciation voluntarily given. He just needed the right woman to come along and give him a good enough reason to. Josie thinks he found it.

“So, Gwen. What exactly do you do in Hawaii for fun. Besides the obvious of course. I’ve only ever been there once. It’s actually where I met Blake.”

Gwen swallowed a mouthful of wine and cleared her throat. “Well, besides surfing and relaxing on the beach, my family really likes to visit my brother’s ranch. We go ziplining and the kids can drive the ATVs up through the mountains behind his property. But that’s really for special occasions. We mostly just go out to eat every Friday at a place called De Cove and stay at home. The beach is just behind us so there’s really nowhere to really enjoy paradise than your own backyard.”

“Your children must love growing up there.”

She nodded. “They’re grateful. My daughter loves the culture and my son loves how you can practically see space in the sky during nighttime.”

“I love space! Does he know that Hawaii is the only state where you can see the North Star and the Southern Cross at the same time?!” Teddy helpfully supplied as he smiled excitedly at Gwen.

The other mother of two also smiled beautifully at her youngest. “He does know that. In his room actually, his dad put up the entire sky on his ceiling. He says that out of all the stars that are visible from Earth, in Hawaii, you can see over--”

“80% of them!” Teddy said at the exact same time as her.

Josie saw Blake chuckle at their son and smile over at Gwen.

“You know, if I do end up taking this amazing job that your mommy has been so kind to offer me, you and Manô can get together all the time and compare notes.”

“I have a lot of notes so you might want to tell him to be ready.” Her youngest said proudly.
The entire table dissolved into a fit of giggles and Josie leaned over to run a soft hand through Teddy’s hair.

“I’ll pass along the message.” Gwen replied.

“What does your daughter do?” Jackson asked. His parents were surprised that he did.

“Lani is really into dance. So she spends most of her time practicing. But she loves to play the guitar and go camping or horseback riding. If she’s not doing that then you can find her helping out at the local farmer’s markets or giving helicopter rides.”

“She flies helicopters?” Jackson asked, intrigue written all over his face.

Gwen laughed. “Absolutely not. I mean, her dad has taught her how to fly one of the fighter jets in his leave but she just helps out with the tours. The people that visit on vacation want to go around and see some of the other islands and Lani is involved in a volunteer program for youths. She rides with the families and the pilot and basically tells them a little bit of history about the different places.”

“She’s like a tour guide. Remember when you had a couple of your friends over and Alice walked them around the White House and showed them around?” Blake addressed Jackson.

Jackson nodded his head in understanding. “And they couldn’t go to the East Wing because it was “off limits” and Mom would’ve gotten mad.”

“That’s right.” Her husband chuckled.

“There’s places to camp?” Josie wondered.

“There’s certain places that are off limits just because it’s sacred land. But since Lani is involved with her youth group, she’s met a lot of the native children to the island. They’ve allowed us to camp on their land up in the mountains. Lani normally goes with a couple of friends every other week.”

“Dad likes to camp. He took us one time up in Camp David but that doesn’t count because he had to leave in the middle of our fire to work in his office for the rest of the night.”

Blake looked down at his plate and cleared his throat. Josie knew that he tried his best to be present for every moment of the boys’ lives but with his occupation, it just wasn’t feasible. Gwen smiled sympathetically at her husband, sensing his distress about his absence sometimes in his kids’ lives.

“Well, I think it’s great...your kids having so much experience with nature and their community.” Josie complimented her.

Her potential stylist smiled and thanked her.

Conversation ceased for a time as they continued to eat--or rather, Jackson and Blake picked at their lasagna while Teddy barely touched his food because he had too much chocolate milk before dinner. Gwen and Josie were honestly the only ones having a real meal that night.

The staff was just setting down their desserts when the door opened and Andrea walked in, immediately going to her husband’s side to whisper in his ear. Blake set his fork down and nodded. Andrea righted herself.

“Good evening, Ma’am.” She turned to the boys. “Rugrat number one and rugrat number two.”
She greeted them fondly.

Teddy got up from the table and ran around the end to hug the dark-haired woman but Blake caught him by the arm before he could get past his father’s chair. He pulled his youngest close and reprimanded him quietly.

“Did you ask to be excused?”

Teddy whimpered and coward back from his father’s steely gaze.

“I asked you a question.”

“No, Daddy.”

“Go sit back down and ask your mother for permission.”

He let Teddy go and her youngest sat back down. He asked in the softest of voices if he could get up and Josie softly stroked his hair again, saying yes. He got up much slower this time and walked over to her husband’s private secretary.

Josie felt a slight sadness for her son. She knew that the boys loved Andrea and didn’t get to see her often because they weren’t allowed in the West Wing normally. But as her husband spent more time away from her and their kids, the punishment and discipline almost always fell on her. The boys took to it differently, as they should, when it was their father using the heavy hand. They listened to him more and Josie was appreciative of him trying to help her out in that department. She knew he didn’t always agree with her rules about the boys, but he was making an effort to be on her team about it and that satisfied her to no end.

She caught Blake’s gaze just as Jackson asked to be excused as well. Blake gave him permission and turned his eyes on Gwen. The designer was steadily looking down at her plate, sipping her wine. She also caught the flicker of her husband’s fingers twitching to get close to Gwen’s where they stroked down the stem of the glass in a distracting motion. She seemed visibly upset about something and Blake had been made aware of it almost instantaneously.

Josie set her napkin on the table and stood up. The sound of her chair scraping back along the floor alarmed him and he lessened the distance between them.

“Andrea, it’s been so long. How’s David?”

She looked up from hugging Jackson and Teddy. “He’s great. Although he has a bone to pick with this one.” She gestured toward her boss.

Blake stood up and placed his napkin on the table too. “I told you. More married to me.”

Andrea rolled her eyes, “Are you ready?”

He nodded and Josie looked at him, on the verge of exasperation.

“I have a minor crisis to take care of. But I’ll be back before bedtime.”

“Are you going to tuck us in, tonight?” Teddy asked. “Because I want a story.”

Blake bent down and held both of his sons’ hands. “I can’t do story time tonight but I can do it tomorrow.”

“Pinky swear.” Jackson let go of his father to hold up his pinky finger. Teddy mimicked his older
brother.

Blake sighed, “Pinky swear.”

They shook pinkies before Blake stood up and walked over to Josie. He gave her a kiss on the cheek and squeezed her hip. Josie smiled and affectionately rubbed his back as he turned around. Gwen had already been standing up at this point and she held her hand out for him to shake. Josie watched as they did, noticing her husband’s thumb running back and forth over Gwen’s own, where the tip of her knuckle met the soft flesh of her hand.

She expected him to relay a courtesy goodbye or tell her how much he was looking forward to dining with her again, but it never came. He smiled and let her go all in one breath. The gust of air that had fallen inside the room from when he and Andrea made their exit was cold. There wasn’t enough hot glue and iron pressed dresses to ever warm it up again.

She was starting to rethink her offer. Not because she was scared or intimidated by her potential new stylist. But because for the first time in her marriage, Blake’s careful demeanor and faux mettle had wavered there at dinner. He became almost unpresidential, a little more human, less of a man that was made out of steel.

He had suddenly started smiling from the inside. And for someone who’s only ever been on the outside of him, even she could feel that thinly concealed layer--wall--of unquestionable doubt.

She had not been the one to tear it down. She did not want another to achieve in the area that she failed, especially not another woman. But what really bothered her, what really got under her skin...was who made him put up that wall in the first place.

She had a feeling.
There was a dance studio right next door to the bar that most of the men in his squadron frequented. In fact, most of the base went there typically on a Friday night when they needed to blow off some steam. The problem for Blake was, he only had one thing in mind to help him relax from his latest trip and she was denying him from having it.

Gwen and hi had only met each other a few more times at the cafe before Blake told her that he would be leaving for two weeks. He thought he would be more upset about the departure than she
was, but Gwen surprised him. She had admitted her feelings for him. How much she was beginning to look forward to their meetings, or how much she enjoyed talking about anything they wanted to, how they were quiet when they didn’t. She told him that she was just about to call him out on not asking her on a date and now he was leaving. Blake had laughed and grabbed her hand gently on the table, smiling as he looked upon her beautiful face. He didn’t ask her for a night, but for her number instead. Which she gave without hesitation.

Blake told her that he would text her whenever he had time but to not expect any calls from him. Talking on the phone was a luxury that most of the men on these missions couldn’t afford. She had understood, told him she wouldn’t expect anything when it came to them and him.

For those next two weeks, they wrote whenever they could. Much of it was about their days and how much they couldn’t wait for him to get back to base. Gwen had no idea how much he didn’t want to be away from her but he felt like that was too much too soon. So he reigned his emotions about her and focused on getting home safely.

It was a Friday morning when he got back in. Blake texted her once he landed and frowned at the text he received. Hers was short and to the point. She was going to be caught up with writing, sketching, and dancing rehearsals all day. Blake thought it was odd that she had all this enthusiasm up until the time he was actually going to be there for her to do something about it. He had responded that he would see her soon then, and to take care. Seeing her later that evening just had to be a coincidence. He was walking in town with his unit, on his way to Bevy, the bar, when he walked right past her.

Blake saw her out of the corner of his eye, stopping abruptly much to the confusion of his company. He looked inside the studio, eyes squinting against the harsh, bright lights that the dancers were under. She was in the front, all the way at the end. She had her hair down, and everytime she moved, the semi-long, silky strands moved with her body.

“Blake. Come on man.”

It had been two weeks too long in his opinion. He was ashamed to say that he had forgotten how gorgeous she was.

Blake’s friends called for him again and he nodded, backing away slowly. She hadn’t saw him, so technically, he had no reason to stay and stare like a creep.

He drank inside the bar for over an hour, until he was sure that she was done and had already left. When the guys and him piled out, Blake stumbled down the sidewalk until he needed to catch his balance. He leant against a window and laid his head on the glass.

“You good man?” Brad asked him.

He waved him off, “Yeah, go ahead. I’ll catch up.”

“You sure?”

Blake nodded. “I just need a minute.”

“Alright. Look alive. I’ll see you later. Meet us at Blossom.”

He half grimaced at his best friend.

As he saw the rest of the group disappear around the corner, Blake closed his eyes and focused on his breathing. He had drank less than he usually did but for some reason he felt nauseous after that
A sudden tap on the window startled him awake. Blake turned slowly to the source of the noise and he jumped again just as soon as he saw who was on the other side. Gwen’s eyes crinkled as she smiled at him, clearly amused. She waved him inside and Blake tripped over himself in an attempt to get to her.

Gwen was holding the door open for him and Blake actually managed to smile his thanks.

“Woah, there Cowboy. How much have you had to drink tonight?” She asked him as he leaned heavily against the adjacent wall.

“Cowboy?”

She shrugged. “I was thinking of cute nicknames for you while you were away. And seeing how you were clearly a cowboy in your past life, with that accent and all, I thought it was the cutest one. Besides Blakee, of course.”

He winced, “Ah. Not that one, please.”

She laughed and closed the door. “Only way I won’t call you Blakee is if you tell me more about you being a cowboy when you were younger. You always skip over your childhood when I bring it up.”

Blake cursed himself internally for not doing a better job of glossing over his earlier years with her. He stood up finally without wanting to double over and empty the entire contents of his stomach, but his balance hadn’t fully returned and he took a couple of unsteady steps toward Gwen until he had her against the wall. She put a hand on his chest to keep him at a safe distance.

“My childhood was uneventful. I’m more interested in yours, especially why you never told me how good you are at dancing.”

“So you were spying on me.”

“No. No, I wouldn’t do that. I happened to be walking by and you were moving that beautiful body of yours and I couldn’t just pretend that I didn’t notice.”

Her cheeks tinted. “You’re drunk.”

“We stating facts? Okay. I like you.” He revealed as he leaned his face in closer to hers. Gwen backed away, making him focus on her eyes instead of her lips.

“What do you like about me?”

He sighed and scratched the back of his head. She was going to make him have to think and talk in coherent sentences and he was going to enjoy every moment of it because that’s how she wanted it. He’d do anything to please her.

“I like your nose.”

“My nose?” She asked, incredulously.

He laughed, “Yeah. I do. And that mouth. And your eyes. They’re brown and I like brown. Every other color is boring.”

He must have said something right because she allowed him to lean his head on her shoulder. He
rested there and breathed against the pale softness of her skin until she nudged him to continue. He raised his head to look at her hair.

“Your hair is the perfect color to fall asleep to.”

Gwen laughed with her entire body. She pushed him away but he kept coming back, intruding on her personal space.

“I’m serious. Don’t laugh.”

She ignored him and if it wasn’t for his tall and imposing stature, she would have doubled over by now. Blake grinned drunkenly at her and placed his hand over her mouth, muffling her giggles. She stared into his eyes with sparkles littering her irises. It was a sight to behold.

“I like how talented you are.” He told her. “I like how beautiful you are. I like how much I want to drink and fall asleep on your floor.”

She licked the palm of his hand and he relented, giving some space for her lips to form actual words.

“My floor?”

“I don’t trust myself in your bed.”

The crinkles in her eyes disappeared and the breath she released from her nose was heavy.

“I like kissing you.” He said as he allowed his hand to slide down from her mouth and over her neck. He gripped it lightly, just enough to feel the motion of her throat as she swallowed.

“You haven’t kissed me.” She pointed out.

“No but I was hoping you’d let me. And very soon. Because I know it’s gonna be great because everything about you is already great.”

She exhaled. “You sound like you came out of a movie.”

“Well, good. Cause from my 90s collection, the girl always lets the guy kiss her back to life in the end.”

“Not when the guy is too cocky.”

“You think this is cocky? Man. I gotta work on my delivery then. For next time.”

“You’re so sure there’s gonna be a next time?”

“I meant the next girl.”

She punched his arm and he chuckled, letting go of her altogether to hold his bruised appendage close. It actually hurt.

“I’m kidding. That was a joke.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and the motion only served to push her breast up, making them even more easily visible as he stared. She was dressed in nothing but a white tank top and black tights.
“So no kiss tonight. I’ll respect that. But can I at least walk you home?”

Her anger lessened some. “You can walk me to my car.”

“Deal.”

She smiled falsely at him as she pushed off the wall and walked over to the full length mirror in the back of the room. She picked up her bag and threw her hair into a ponytail as she brushed past him. Gwen flicked the light switch and locked the door behind them as they stood on the dimly lit sidewalk together.

“You know they say that it’s a good sign if a couple can compromise right off the bat.” He leaned in closer to her back to relay the information.

Gwen finished locking up and thrusted the keys into her bag. She looked over her shoulder at him. “You’re a funny guy.”

“That sounds like sarcasm.”

Gwen smirked and grabbed his hand as she led them across the street and to a parking lot behind an old record store. They walked in companionable silence as they neared her black Nissan.

“Gwen.”

She hummed as she unlocked her doors.

“I like that I have fun with you.”

She turned around and placed her hands on his chest. Not pushing him away this time, but not pulling him closer either. Instead, she leaned in and up to plant a kiss on his cheek. Her lips were in that natural condition of slightly chapped but incredibly soft. She pulled back and smiled with all her pearly white teeth.

“I like you too. Do you need a ride home?”

He shook his head. “I’m supposed to be meeting some guys at another bar.”

She frowned. “You’re gonna drink some more?”

“It’s not that kind of bar if you’re catching my drift.”

She looked afronted at first but then laughed quietly. “I wish I wasn’t catching it but okay.”

“Look. You don’t have to be worried. I’d much rather be looking at you undress then some girl who’s someone’s daughter.”

She laughed at him and patted his cheek, right over the imprint she left with her lips. “Blake. I hate to be the one to break it to you but I’m someone’s daughter.”

He paused and the face that he was making must have been funny to her because she laughed even louder.

“You know what I meant.” Her eyebrows raised as if to say that she didn’t and that he should go on explaining what exactly he meant by it. Blake sighed. “You really gonna make me explain myself in this state?” He gestured to his clearly still pissed self.
“Well, you gotta work for that kiss somehow.” She grinned.

“Me saying I really like you wasn’t enough?”

She rolled her eyes and pursed her lips, a clear sign that said it wasn’t.

“Gwen?”

“Yes, Blake?”

“Thank you.”

She looked confused at the change of conversation. “For what?”

“For being the one.” He said simply.

He could have swore her eyes had misted over but his vision was impaired and his mind a little fuzzy. But when Gwen leaned up again to brush her nose against his, he could tell that what he saw was real…

She kissed him and the world fell away. It was slow and soft, comforting in ways that words would never be. One of Blake’s hands rested below her ear, his thumb caressing her cheek as their breaths mingled. It lasted all but a minute before she had the good sense to pull away. Because he never would and he’d happily steal her air until neither of them had any breath left to continue.

Her lips were a pretty pink color. Her mouth plump and he longed to see it bruised.

“I knew it.” He inhaled.

“Knew what?”

“That I liked kissing you.” He told her as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

She smiled and bit her bottom lip. “Not bad, Cowboy.”

“Did I kiss you back to life?” He asked cheekily.

She hummed, “You know what? I haven’t been hurt that bad to need it like that. But maybe one day you will, who knows.”

“If it’s not now but later, then that means--”

She covered his mouth with her hand and his eyes crinkled in the corners as she copied his actions from earlier.

“I know what it means.” She told him.

She looked into his eyes as she leaned in to kiss the back of her hand, right over his mouth. It was sort of a backwards kiss, but Blake didn’t mind one bit. Everything about them so far was backwards and unconventional.

“Try not to stare too hard.” She told him, releasing his mouth. She got into the car and grabbed for the door before he even had a chance to close it for her. Before they were completely separated by metal, Gwen said one last thing to him.

“You know when I said you were a funny guy?”
He nodded.

“I meant that. I like a lot of things about you Blake Shelton, but I like the fact that you make me laugh like no one else can the most.”

The door was pulled shut and the engine was turned on. He watched her drive off of the lot and on down the road with a smirk on his face and a flutter in his heart.

His blood was thrumming and he knew it wasn’t just from the alcohol.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

New year has brought many blessings and distractions. Apologize for the long wait.
Bare with me.

Below are pictures of Gwen and her family.
“I’ll handle the rest tomorrow. Charlie will want to go over everything before we submit the proposal.” Andrea shuffled the papers back together on his desk.

Blake was sipping a moscow mule and looking out the window. His fingers were tapping the edge of his desk and the noise had caught his private secretary’s attention. She put the papers into a manila folder and walked around the oak wood desk to watch him.

“That’s her right?” She asked.

He swallowed an ice cube rather roughly. “How would you know?”
“You said no pictures but that didn’t mean I couldn’t look them up for myself.”

He smiled at her with much irritation. “Nosy much?”

“Absolutely. And she’s beautiful. In fact her entire family is.”

“I guess I’ll find out soon, considering she might be moving here.”

“Yeah. That was a major oversight on your part not letting me find out what she did for a living.”

Blake rubbed his brow and downed the rest of his drink, setting it down harshly as he stood up and adjusted his pant legs. Some days--most days--he missed the air force uniforms or even jeans and an old flannel shirt that he used to wear everyday of his childhood. Dress pants and shirts with the stupid ties and the oxford shoes were easily the most annoying things he had ever had the privilege of wearing. But he wasn’t the old Blake anymore. He was the President. So switching uniforms from the one he loved to the one the people did was a requirement.

“Who is she exactly? I mean, come on, who am I going to tell if you tell me?”

He ran a hand straight back through his hair so that the curls laid flat on top of his head and not directly in his eyes. “Finish wrapping that up and you can go home.”

“Sir--”

He leaned down next to her and whispered, “Goodnight, Andrea,” as he walked out of the oval.

Tom and Frank were there to guide him to the gardens. He had asked just before he reached his office and after Andrea was already inside for them to get Gwen to agree to wait for him in the gardens, near the rose bushes. Frank had interrupted periodically to see their progress so that he could time everything just right. Making sure dinner and social hour ended at an appropriate time so that Blake could end his work soon after to not keep her waiting long. He just hoped that she hadn’t been there awhile.

“Is she alright?” He asked to no agent in particular.

It was Frank who answered. “She’s cold, Sir. I offered to get her her coat but she refused.”

Which meant that she was mad. Great.

The three men surreptitiously made their way through the gardens until they found her immaculate figure brushing noses with soft, red, petals that matched the shade of her lipstick color. She straightened up when she heard them approach.

“Give me five.” He told his guys.

They stepped away but Blake knew they never went far.

“Gwen--”

“What am I doing out here?”

“I wanted to talk to you before you left.”

“About what?”

He looked around the garden to find the words that were leaving him so quickly.
“Look. I want you to do whatever is gonna be best for you and your family. So if taking this job and moving here is what’s best, then so be it. I don’t want our history to hold you back from your successes.”

Her brown eyes scrutinized him for a solid minute before she opened her mouth. “That’s nice of you to say.”

“Mean it.”

She nodded. “You could have told me that over the phone.”

“Yeah but...I wanted a moment alone with you just in case I never get one again. The White House isn’t exactly a lonely place and I feel like the only time I’m by myself is when I’m taking a shit.”

Her lips broke into a smile and he was relieved he still could do that for her.

“Can I leave now? Or do you have something else to tell me?” She asked.

Blake had a whole treasure trove of things to tell her but not one of those things was appropriate and it was getting late. She should have already been back at her hotel by now if it wasn’t for him.

“That’s all.”

Her hand touched his arm briefly as she walked past him. She walked alone back up to the house until she reached the veranda and then three more guards led her to the car that was waiting outside at the back entrance to take her anywhere she wanted to go.

His arms used to be that place and Blake wished in that moment that she didn’t have the freedom to vanish anywhere in the world where he could not find her. Thank God that he was President, and could exhaust every resource to locate her if he ever needed.

Blake slept in Teddy’s bed that night. He woke up once or twice, the image of his former lover in the back of his mind as he stared up at the stars and planets. Teddy shifted in his sleep to be closer to the warmth that his father provided. Blake wrapped an arm around his youngest and sighed, kissing his forehead. Thoughts of a child that was never had came to him suddenly. He wondered what their child would have looked like. He wondered what they would have sounded like. Boy or girl. Politics or art. It was a dangerous road to travel down so Blake stayed right where he was.

It was closer to Earth.

=  

“You can throw two yards Dad, it’s not gonna kill you.”

Blake chuckled at Jackson as he caught a particularly fast pass.

They were standing in a triangle. Him, Jack, and Tom. An hour ago, Blake was staring at another decimated orphanage. Now, he was staring at his oldest, laughing and smiling. He cringed at the two conflicting images and threw the ball to Tom.

Two yards was essentially two weeks since Gwen flew back home. He hadn’t heard from her. Didn’t think he would anymore. If she decided to take the job, all communication would be with
his wife, officially. Unofficially...he stopped the thought before it could become fruition. If she didn’t take the job, then he had nothing to keep her around for other than purely selfish reasons. He didn’t want to live like that. Half empty, half wanting, too stupid to realize that when she said there was no reason for them to do this that she was right.

Blake passed the ball back to his son. His personal cell rang the next moment and he fished it out of his pocket. He excused himself, much to the dismay of his boy, and walked back to the veranda where his drink was seated on one of the porch tables.

“Brad. How’s the fishing trip?”

“Luke peed in Bo’s canteen so they’re both sleeping outside the tents until they make up.”

Blake chuckled at the image. “A bunch of children.”

Brad sighed, “Yeah. How’s the world?”

“Still saving it.”

His friend laughed. “Our superhero. Well look, I’m calling about the holidays. We still going to Camp David?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Stephanie’s parents wanted to have dinner on Christmas day.”

“Ah. I see. Well, I can talk to Jo about doing it Christmas Eve instead.”

“You’d be a lifesaver.”

He nodded. “No problem. I’ll see you next week.”

“Alright. Talk to you later.”

“Bye.”

Blake pocketed his phone and took another sip from his drink.

“Dad!”

He sighed. “I’m coming!” He yelled back.

As he continued to throw around the ball with his son, his mind couldn’t help but drift off to Gwen. What was she doing right now? Was she with her kids? Her husband? Working? Drawing?

He sighed, frustrated with himself. He should have never loved her if he knew he couldn’t keep her.

Never again.

="You think the Cardinals have a chance this year?”
“I’m an Eagles fan, Mr. President.”

“Ugh. I’ll try not to barf the next time you say shit like that to me.”

Tom laughed in front of him as he led the president down the private wing. It was finally the month of November, more importantly, it was a week before Thanksgiving. Blake’s favorite time of the year. He was on his way to the tea room to have lunch with Josie and a couple of their other married friends. Josie had taken to doing this lunch every year as a way for Michael, the white house chef, to try out new recipes for the upcoming holidays. Sort of like a taste test. Blake could hardly wait for it each year.

They passed the piano room on their way to Josie and Blake stopped when he heard quiet playing coming from inside.

“Tom hold on.” He stopped the agent and walked closer to the door. He opened it softly and took a peek inside. His frown was unmistakable as he didn’t immediately recognize the young girl sitting at the bench. She wasn’t exactly proficient at playing the instrument but she was practicing a run that was familiar to his early teachings when he was a young boy and just starting out.

“Sir.” Tom whispered, grabbing his attention again.

He closed the door, knowing that he was already running late. He was just about to ask Tom if he knew who that was but his boys came running down the hall. He turned around and paused, seeing not two but three little boys.

“Daddy, can we build forts tonight and watch the new space movie?” Teddy asked him, latching onto his leg.

He was still looking at the little blonde haired boy that he had never seen his life. Jackson had his arm slung over the boy’s shoulders.

“Sure. Um, let me check with your mother.” He answered.

“Ask her if we can have milkshakes too.” Jack told him, and the little boy with blue eyes nodded enthusiastically, albeit a little bit shy.

“Who’s your friend?” Blake finally asked.

“This is Manó. Mommy said him and his sister are spending the night. A sleepover!” Teddy exclaimed.

Blake’s blood ran cold. Just then, the door to the piano room opened and the girl stepped out cautiously. He did a double take. And then his feet caught up with his thoughts and they were taking him right to the source of his conflict.

The tea room held thirty people or so. Normally, five couples would be there greeting him. This year, there was six. Blake’s heart stopped when he saw her. It had been a whole month. A whole month and he finally just stopped waking up to thoughts of her. A whole month and he finally got used to the idea of never seeing her again. A whole month and Josie had not said another word about getting the woman to take the job.

"Honey. Finally, you made it. I was just about to send the calvary.” His wife joked, standing up to kiss him hello.

He managed a weak smile and made his rounds. He had to take his time--wanted to take his time
because seeing her, talking to her again, was going to take a whole year off his life. But he couldn't chat golf for another fifteen minutes with Kevin or he would cut his ears off himself so that just left Gwen. Her by herself, no husband from what he could see then.

Her and the same eyes, her and the same voice, and the same smile, and the same smell. Her and different hair. He noticed it right when he walked in and it was such a sight to behold that he couldn't stop himself from staring now.

“What did you do?”

She grinned down at the ground. “I needed a change. I figured new job, new home, new hair.”

He scratched the back of his head. “So you did--I mean you are--”

“I took the job.” She finished for him.

“Right. Christ.”

She bit her lip and looked away. “Look, I know this isn’t ideal and probably really awkward but we don’t have to talk to each other if that would make you--”

“Will you stop getting more beautiful.”

The words left his mouth before he could stop them. Gwen’s eyes never strayed from their shoes and Blake felt the blood rise to his face, no longer cold and stiff within his body. “I’m sorry. That was... You surprise me. Even after all this time, you still know how to surprise me. I mean moving here. Taking the job...the hair…” He pointed to the brunette locks. Her wavy tresses came to rest just above her shoulders. He had only ever known her to be blonde. The dark color matched her eyebrows and pale features. She looked younger, as if that was even possible.

“How do you think I felt the first time I saw you wear a suit?”

“It’s just another uniform.”

“Mhm.”

Blake felt a brush of fabric across his shoulder and a flash of grey before Wyatt Howlett came to stand beside his wife. He saluted the President when he saw him and introduced himself again. Blake sobered up from his one-on-one interaction with Gwen.

“Lieutenant. Nice to see you again.”

“It’s my pleasure, Sir.”

“Blake, come on, sit down. We’re about to start.” Josie grabbed his arm and led him away from the couple. He went willingly, casting a smile back to the pair.

Through the entire lunch, Blake kept his eyes off of his ex-girlfriend. He paid attention to which dish was what and weighed in like he always did. He talked with Brad and Charlie and most of the guys about the football season and let the women talk about whatever it was that they did. The end of the meal was slowly approaching as the lemon cakes were devoured and Blake watched from his seat at the head of the table as his friends made their way to the East sitting room. Josie beckoned him with a tilt of her head and a beautiful smile.

The fireplace was already crackling by the time the adults settled in. Blake sat down in the corner
of the sectional and wrapped an arm around his wife. He looked across the room to the love seat to see Gwen and Wyatt in a similar position. He looked away and to the offered moscow mule that Michael was serving him. He thanked the man and downed his first glass all in a minute’s time.

Conversation continued to flow steadily as Blake watched on.

Josie, eventually, nuzzled her face into his neck and sighed. “I invited Wyatt and Gwen to stay the night with their kids. I hope you don’t mind. I figured you’d be in the office all day. I’ll entertain the both of them, no worries.”

Blake tried to stab off some of the irritation he felt at being the last to know these things, especially when they were occurring in his own home. “Why didn’t you tell me that Gwen accepted the job?”

Josie sat up and gave him a perplexed look. “You’ve never cared about who I hire for my team before.”

She had a point and he was almost more upset with himself for bringing it up. “You’re right. I guess I just felt like I needed to change that. I care, Jo. About your life, about the decisions that you make. I know you think I don’t sometimes but I do.”

That earned him another gorgeous smile and a chaste kiss on the lips. She went back to her spot in the crook of his neck and Blake went back to his, staring at Gwen, only to find out that she was already looking at him instead. Her expression was unreadable and she put her attention on Brad soon after as his longtime friend told a story about his recent fishing trip.

The hour dragged on until eventually, it was time for most of their guests to start heading home. Blake had been called away for some office business around that time. So, he said his goodbyes and followed Charlie to the oval. It wasn’t until several hours later that he was finally free.

Blake took to venturing around the house in search of the first person he could find. He wanted to laugh when that ended up being three boys, a teenage girl, and Gwen.

They were all in the sitting room, an episode of Full House on the flatscreen. Gwen was standing by the entrance, completely oblivious to his presence. She was watching their sons hop around the room, trying to attach blankets and chairs together to build their fort. The girl was sitting on the couch, staring down at her phone screen.

Blake came up behind Gwen and lightly touched her hip. She jumped slightly and turned around. His hand travelled from one hipbone to the other.

“Still skittish.” He murmured.

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

She lightly took his hand off of her body and held it in between their stomachs. He looked down at their intertwined fingers.

“Who’s doing what now?” He taunted.

She smiled and let him go completely. “You gotta meet my kids.”

Gwen turned back around and called out to her daughter. The girl looked over the back of the couch to stare at him. He tried to make his eyes as soft as possible as he looked upon her.
“Manó, c’mere please.” The little boy stopped tying a blanket to the end table and walked over to his mother. His sister was right behind him. “I want to introduce you to President Shelton.”

“Call me, Blake.” He held out his hand first to Manó and then Lani.

“Can I see the oval sometime?” The little boy asked.

“Manó.” Gwen scolded.

Blake chuckled. “Sure. My boys think it’s a boring place now but I’d love to show you both around sometime.”

A whistle sounded out through the air and Blake looked up to see Wyatt walking back in the room. He stowed his phone away in his pocket.

“What did they say?” Gwen asked him.

“Furniture should be here by tomorrow evening.”


Wyatt tapped her head. “Yeah, so thank you and your wife so much for letting us stay the night here while we sorted that out.”

Blake didn’t even know that was the reason for the sleepover but he nodded and reassured them that it was no problem.

“You and Josie and the kids will have to come over for dinner one night.” Gwen offered.

“Say yes.” Manó whispered.

Gwen wrapped a hand around the boy’s neck and another over his mouth.

Blake chuckled. “We’d love to.”

As if she could sense herself being mentioned, Josie came into the room with a pile of sheets. Blake assumed it was for the kids.

“Michael is gonna make hot chocolate for everyone. Is that okay? He can prepare something else if you want.”

“Hot chocolate is perfect.” Gwen smiled at Josie.

“I’m gonna pass.” Blake voiced.

“You okay? What’s wrong?” Jo asked him, worried.

“I’m tired. I got an early run tomorrow. I think I’m gonna head to bed early.”

“Aw, come on, Dad! You have to put the stoppers at the top.” Jackson reminded him.

“I can help if you guys want.” Wyatt offered.

“My daddy’s taller.” Teddy whined.

“Yeah, Blake is taller, Dad.” Manó agreed.
Gwen hid her amusement behind her hair and Blake caught the lieutenant's eye. The pilot shrugged. “You are, Mr. President. Guess you’re gonna have to stick around.”

Blake shook his head, grinning. “There goes several hours of uninterrupted sleep. Alright, fine. Let’s get this damn thing built.”

The boys cheered and started working on the bottom layer with the sheets.

Blake and Wyatt worked on the top layers while Lani helpfully tied the ends to various pieces of furniture. He had no idea where the wives went but by the time they were done, Gwen and Josie reappeared with two trays of mugs, filled to the brim with milk and cocoa. Blake took his and put on the new space movie for the boys. They settled inside the fort and sipped their drinks. Lani opted to stay on the couch and the adults sat next to each other on the sectional.

He was in between Gwen and Josie with Wyatt on Gwen’s right side. He wanted to laugh at the seating choice but kept his focus on the screen instead. The movie was about two hours, and by an hour and a half in, the boys were fast asleep. Josie was in perfect slumber next to him, her head nestled in the arm of the couch. He looked over to his right to see Wyatt knocked out, his head leaning behind him on the back of the couch. He was snoring lightly. Gwen wasn’t faring any better. Her eyes kept opening and closing and when she finally succumbed to sleep, her head rolled slowly to his side. Before he knew what had happened, she was sleeping on his shoulder. Her hair tickled his neck, soft as it was. He knew he shouldn’t, not when they were surrounded by their families, but he couldn’t help himself. Blake leaned down slightly until the tip of his nose touched the top of her head. He inhaled softly, and sighed at the smell of sunflowers and lavender. He was pushing it being this close to her, and when he ever so slightly kissed the top of her hair from where he was beant down, he pulled back almost immediately, seeing the error of his ways.

He looked back up to the television but felt eyes on him. He glanced over to Lani. The pre-teen was staring at him with a peculiar expression. He saw no contempt behind her eyes, no malice, no disgust, just intrigue. A curiosity only a child on the cusp of teenhood could harbour.

He smiled with his eyes and was relieved when she smiled with her lips back at him. She still was curious, still looking out for her mother. But she returned her attention back to the movie.

He could never slip up like that again. Ever. He knew he wanted more. He knew he could never have more. There were children and spouses and islands between him and Gwen.

He couldn’t part an ocean even if he tried.
This is probably the chapter that points us to the new direction of the story. There are like four plots in this fic so this chapter is really important. Updates coming quicker and quicker the more time I have. Also, this is how Blake looks now.
Blake was not used to eating breakfast with his family. It was Sunday. He normally went for his morning run on Sunday. Josie had woken up super early to turn his alarm off. His eyes only opened at the sensation of a wet and perfect tongue pressed over the smooth skin of his neck. It travelled lower and lower and Blake sunk deeper and deeper into a little slither of Heaven. They made love that morning, and all Blake could think of was newly dyed hair and red lips.

Afterwards, he left Josie in bed to take a shower. He said it was to clean up but he couldn’t help rubbing his skin a little harder with scalding water and soap. Like he was rubbing any trace of his wife’s pleasure off of him lest Gwen take one look at him and know. Blake leaned his forehead on his arm against the shower wall and sighed. He was allowed to fuck his wife. He didn’t need to feel guilty. Gwen had probably done the same thing with her husband in their guest room. Blake spit at the thought and turned off the water.

He didn’t put his contacts in. He dressed in a simple white button-up and a pair of jeans. Josie occupied the bathroom shortly thereafter. It was still early so Blake took pleasure in sitting out on the balcony with his tablet as he watched the sun come up. He flicked through various news apps and contemplated dozing off when Josie slid the door open softly and told him she was heading down for breakfast. He waved her off and shared in several more minutes of peace and quiet before he too couldn’t ignore his desire for fresh sausage and fluffy eggs.

He thought he’d be early to the table but when he got to the dining room, he saw every single one of his guests and family awake. Well, sitting at the table at least. Teddy was half asleep with a piece of waffle hanging out of his mouth. Jackson looked more alert as he sipped a strawberry and banana smoothie. Manó was drenching his cut up sausages in syrup, something Blake smiled at because he did the same thing. Lani just had a plate of eggs and was listening to her mother and his wife chat about dresses and designs. Lieutenant Howlett was reading the paper.

Blake greeted everyone and sat down at the head of the table. He was served coffee and his own plate right away. There was a quietness to everyone’s interactions that Blake didn’t necessarily ever have in his life. He didn’t have a huge family growing up and with just his wife and two young kids, Blake wasn’t subjected to large, intimate, gatherings such as this one. It was weird to think that this was something that Gwen had always talked about to him. She used to share stories of her own large family and how she wanted to carry on that tradition someday. She had never said that she wanted to carry it on with him specifically and the sting he felt in the back of his throat at how they didn’t wouldn’t allow him to swallow properly.

“Daddy, you’re bleeding.”

Blake snapped his head to his youngest. Josie reached across the table from his right and put a napkin up against his nose. He held it there and tipped his head back, taking his glasses off. He could vaguely hear Josie explaining to Gwen and Wyatt that this sort of thing happened all the time. Gwen was taking care of him in this state long before Josie started and that thought was the one to make Blake excuse himself from the room.

Dorian greeted him right away and led him down the hallway to his private quarters. “Can I get you anything, Sir?”

“A drink.” Blake mumbled through the napkin. He disappeared inside his room and grabbed a rag from the bathroom. He wet it and sat down on the floor. He banged the back of his head against the wall. Harder each time he did it. He hoped the sudden rush of movement would mess with the flow of the blood and make it stop but really, he didn’t much care if it ever did. Let him bleed to death. He felt like he deserved it.

Dorian came back with a moscow mule, a box of tissues, and his glasses, which Blake ordered him
to sit all three things down next to him. Dorian stood in the doorway and waited. Blake sighed and closed his eyes. He heard the bedroom door open and was about to tell Josie that he was fine, to go back to breakfast and that he’d be back in a minute but when he opened his eyes again, it was Gwen hesitantly walking across the room. Tom was standing outside the door and had to be the one to let her in.

Blake pondered why the agent would allow such a thing but he couldn’t take his focus off of Gwen. She looked wholly out of place in his room.

“Dorian.” The agent snapped his head to the President. “Go outside. Make sure Josie doesn’t come in.” The young man nodded, face not betraying any emotion.

As he walked past Gwen, the woman smiled charmingly at the secret service agent. The smile dropped when she looked back to him and his blotchy face.

She entered the bathroom cautiously, stepping over his legs as she walked to the other side of the wall, in front of him. She sat down. For a moment, they just stared at each other. She made no attempt to move to help him, to talk him down, to make him feel any better. And all Blake’s anxiety could do was remind him that if they were seen like this, no matter how innocent they looked, it could be a national problem.

“Josie said you’d handle it yourself.” Gwen finally spoke. “I had to pee.” She smiled. And Blake realized what she was doing, appeasing his fears, letting him know that Josie wouldn’t come looking for them. “You still get ‘em, huh?”

He lifted the rag away from his nose. “Every superhero has their defects.”

She grinned. “That what we’re calling it now?”

He shrugged. “I’ve gotten them more since you came back into my life.”

She arched a single eyebrow at him. He wouldn’t go back on his word. It was a fact. She had a profound impact on his body in one of the most peculiar ways and he thought she had a right to know.

Gwen, seeing that he was serious, returned her face back to neutral. Then, without a moment of hesitation, got on all fours and proceeded to crawl over to him. Blake had to look away for a second, feeling the tightness not only in his heart but in his jeans as well. His former girlfriend stopped right by his side and took the rag from his hands. She set it aside and plucked two tissues from the box on the floor and stuck each one in both nostrils. He still felt the blood rushing to spill and was grateful when she leaned his head back against the wall at an angle that didn’t immediately strain his neck and shoulders. Blake remembered a time where her hands would cure and her body would soothe.

This time, Gwen sat next to him, tucked in his side and leaned her head on his shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her and wished he was anywhere in the world with her but there.

“This is a long pee.” He eventually said into the stretch of silence that had enveloped them.

Gwen laughed loudly, before pushing her face into his shoulder to muffle her voice. He grinned and bathed himself in the feeling of her joy.

Her hand had rested on his stomach as she quieted herself but it moved up to caress his chest, then his neck, then his hair. She carded her fingers through his aging strands and he didn’t know what to do. Brad’s voice was coming back to him in that moment. Promises he told his best friend of not
doing anything with Gwen that would constitute as cheating. Was this? Was being touched by her in this way cheating? Was allowing his heart to be this content? Was the stubborn blood gushing from his nose no longer running because of her and her unique ability to save him? Was that cheating?

“You are such a loud thinker.” She murmured.

He chuckled. “I think it stopped.”

Gwen raised her head and plucked the two tissues from his face. She inspected his nose and mouth before she was satisfied enough to leave the warmth of his body to dispose of the soiled gauze.

He looked at her as she moved around the bathroom, cleaning up, keeping her hands busy so that her mouth could stay firmly shut.

“Gwen.”

She ignored him so that she could pretend but Blake didn’t want to pretend.

“Gwen.”

She turned around abruptly to face him. “I’m gonna make my dresses.”

He gave her a confused look.

“I’m gonna make my dresses.” She started again, slower this time. “I have a job to do. I’m gonna do my job. I’m gonna continue to raise my kids and support my husband. I can’t be worried about you. I can’t feel bad for you. I can’t be made to feel like every time you have a nosebleed it’s all my fault when I know it’s not. I can’t.”

“Gwen--”

“Treat me like you would if you never knew me and we’ll get past this in no time. Before you know it, me and my family will be back on a flight home and you’ll never have to see me again.”

She left him with that, sitting on the floor, dried blood on his face, and a heart beating slower than the clock on their relationship.

It wasn’t enough to be in love with a woman like Gwen. You had to nourish the sight of her, give her clean air and room to grow and create. You had to give her a foundation to fall on time and time again but somehow manage to put her up on a pedestal at the same time, one not too high or else she’d get skittish, but never one too low or else she’d feel unworthy. In short, it wasn’t enough to be the man she gave her heart to, the man who broke said heart, and thought he could repair that heart, and believe that she’d ever provide a second chance to hold that heart again. Life was about opportunities but Gwen was a miracle. She wasn’t a choice you made, she was the only option. She wasn’t the woman you left, she was the woman you kept. She wasn’t just apart of this lifetime, she was in every lifetime, in every world. And when he took that flight thirteen years ago, he flew far far away from any place that she’d ever allow him back in.

Blake pinched his nose and waited for the eventual dam.

Damn.
Chapter 10

“Who sent it?”

Gwen set her bag and mug of tea on her desk. She dropped back into her chair and held her hand out for the envelope her assistant, Koko, was carrying.

“Dash.” The younger woman replied.

Her brother’s name was written in dark ink, cobalt blue, across the front corner. She pulled out the card, noting the expensive paper, dense and textured.

A wedding invitation.

She smiled. Finally.

Gwen set aside all the mail and asked Koko to bring the new shipment of silk into the drawing room. Her office wasn’t really an office, more of an entire suite, really. But it served its purpose. Besides it being in the White House, it was basically the paradise of all office spaces. It was essentially two rooms divided by two, cloudy glass, double doors. Her desk and view of the outside back lawn was in one room while her sewing machines, drafting tables, and other materials was in the other. That’s where the furniture and private bathroom was too.

She had been working there for an entire month. It was her first time spending Thanksgiving in D.C. She managed to get the apartment decorated in time for the holiday and cooked or usual menu for the occasion. Of course, a couple of things were a little different since most of her groceries came from Hawaii.

Now it was December, a week away from Christmas and the New Year. It was a little bit daunting to think that she would ring it in with a new set of friends, the few her and Wyatt had made since being there, in a new state, with a whole new set of responsibilities. At least her new job allowed her to spend a little extra on presents this year.

Gwen sighed and stood up, walking to the main room. The box of silk was waiting for her by the drawing table. She sat down and started in on a ball gown that would be worn for the White House Christmas Party. She had spent three hours alone on the cuff around the neck that led into the torso. It was a little risque drawing a middle part for the chest, since the dress was intended for the First Lady but Josie Baker-Shelton had loved every single one of her designs thus far and at least two of them were on the less than conservative side of history.

She fleshed out the bottom of the gown with an ivory colored pen in quick flourishes, listening only distantly to her assistant outside the door.

“That would be so cool if you did let us design you a suit one day.”

“I’d wear anything she’d make me.”

Gwen’s pen bled into the paper at the edge of a line as his voice sent a cascade of nerves down her spine.

“Promise?”

Gwen could practically hear the smile in Koko’s voice. She was always fond of the President. She
had only met him a couple of times around the House as she went and fetched Gwen a couple of things, or so she’s been told. President Shelton didn’t come to this part of the House. He didn’t need to and Gwen was grateful for it. Ever since that day in his bathroom with the bloody nose, when she told him to treat her like he would everyone else, they had minimal interaction, if none at all. She would occasionally see him as she left in search for his wife so she could show her employer some of the designs she’d been working on, but it was never longer than a moment, a quick glance in his direction as he was coming and going, and sometimes, he didn’t even notice it—notice her. It was on purpose, his indifference to her. Those times especially stung but only mildly. She had told him to treat her fairly, like she was of the world, not to treat her like she was already his whore—America’s mistress, she’d come to know it as—because she wasn’t. She had done nothing wrong. So of course, it was for the best if they didn’t have any contact.

So what the hell was he doing here?

She stood up, stiffly, and open the doors that led out into the private receptionist area. Heads turned her way and she forced back the color creeping up her neck and face.

“President Shelton stopped by to ask you a question. I convinced him to let us make him a suit.”

“Did you?” Gwen forced an unconvincing smile.

Koko was none the wiser and just smiled in that naive way about her.

Blake stuffed his hands in his pockets, a handsome grin covering his face.

“Koko can you go to the kitchen and ask for my lunch early please?”

The kitchen was on the other side of the House. She’d be awhile. Gwen had a feeling this would be awhile.

Koko nodded and headed for the hallway, making a quick exit to fulfill her orders. Gwen really needed to give her a pay raise.

The room grew quiet except for the hum of air vents and the click of footsteps as Blake approached her. She really hated those shoes. They weren’t him. In fact, she hated the white, striped, shirt he was wearing too, the silver paisley tie, the grey of his suit. His long legs and arms, the dark hair arranged in smooth curly lines back out of his face. He had shaved. It made him look younger. The promise of a smile in the corner of his eyes was a tragic thing.

“What can I do for you, Mr. President?” Gwen asked evenly as she could manage.

He took a deep breath and looked around the small room. “I wanted to see where you’ve been spending most of your time.” He explained.

“Well, this is it.” She said curtly. “You really didn’t need to go out of your way or take time from your busy schedule, this place isn’t anything noteworthy.”

Blake’s eyes traced a steady line from hers, to her mouth, to her neck. Gwen paced over to Koko’s desk and looked for something—anything—that could give her a distraction from his presence. She picked up the drop-waist sketch that she had her assistant be point on, and walked into her drawing room. She glanced behind her to see Blake following, closing the door quietly. Exasperation finally broke her voice.

“You can’t just show up here like this. There’s no reason you’d need to ask me a question. You shouldn’t even be in this part of the wing. People will notice.”
Blake moved closer to her, like water lapping at the shore of a lake. “Don’t worry about that.”

“How can I not? Where are your agents anyways? Isn’t that suspicious, you walking around without them?”

Blake chuckled. “Gwen, they’re outside in the hallway.”

She frowned. She hadn’t seen them.

“Well. Still.” She protested.

He smiled, his eyes crinkling. “I did have a question to ask you, though.”

“Well, what is it?”

He bit his lip. “Would you have lunch with me?” She waited for more. Blake’s head tilted. “I miss you.”

Gwen’s heart jerked. “Are you serious?”

He opened his mouth to say something but whatever it was going to be was just going to piss her off further. She cut him off before he even had the chance to begin. “You miss me and yet every time you see me you look as if I was the gum on the bottom of your forty thousand dollar suede shoes.”

“That’s not fair. You told me--”

“It doesn’t matter what I said. I can’t have lunch with you.” She turned away and busied herself with picking out fabrics for the dress.

“When I want to have you, you tell me to stop. When I stop, you want me to have you. What do you want, honestly? Because you’re the one who took this job. You hate me for thirteen years and now you’re here working for my wife. You’re confusing the hell out of me, Gwen.”

“I’m confusing? You want to have lunch with me, talk on the phone with me, and yet we’re both married. You come in here after a month of not even saying hi to me when I walk into a room but you want to go grab a meal like we’re buddies. I get that you don’t want to seem suspicious but you don’t have to act like an ass to do it.”

He walked over to the table until he stood in front of her. “I’m sorry. When you told me to back off I thought that’s what you wanted.”

She sighed, running a shaky hand through her hair. “I don’t want to do this.”

“Gwen, I said I was sorry.”

“I know. And I told you to back off and then I didn’t like it when you did and now we’re here…” She took a second to gather her thoughts. “I took this job for me. I really did. I didn’t want to complicate anything but I have. So, I’m going to fix them.”

“Gwen--”

“Don’t look at me. Don’t talk to me. Don’t come to my office and ask me to lunch. Don’t miss me. If this is gonna work, you have to pretend like you’re still on that plane thirteen years ago and I have to pretend like it didn’t tear me apart inside when I found out. I can do that. I know how to now.”
She was asking him to let her go a second time. Something that wasn’t going to sit right for a man like Blake. But she didn’t care if it did. She stopped caring about his needs a long time ago. She wanted this job. She wanted the experience, the education, the critique, and the praise. She finally admitted to herself that she wanted what she could never get in Hawaii.

Approval.

Her work had always felt incomplete. Maybe because she wasn’t challenged enough, maybe because she never had something to elevate her vision. The world would be looking at her work now, and that was something she didn’t know she needed--needed.

Just then, Koko came back into the office. Her smile was almost painful to see. The girl had probably never felt heartbreak in her life. Gwen envied her.

Blake sniffed and sobered up when her assistant set the lunch down, talking about how Michael had given them a piece of chocolate cake to share as a thank you for the new chef jacket Gwen had sewed him.

“I should head back. The world isn’t gonna save itself.” Blake said but hadn’t made a move to leave. Instead, he asked her, “You’re sure about this?”

She was. “Absolutely.”

She could see his heart turning. “Right.” With one last look in her direction, he turned around to bid Koko farewell.

Gwen watched him go, only releasing a breath when his grey form had completely turned the corner of the hallway.

“What did he want?” Koko asked.

“He actually wanted me to make him a personalized tie for the State of the Union Address. I told him we could make him a whole suit if he wanted.” She lied through her teeth.

Koko went on and on about how great that was. Gwen barely heard her through the fog in her mind. He’d taken off once again and she was just trying to find the air in her lungs to keep her landed.

Sometimes she thought how easy it would be to just let herself fly away. And then she saw the sun behind her closed eyes and knew she would eventually crash right into it and burn.

A month later, she was made into an icarus. The problem with her and Blake’s agreement to basically ignore one another had one little variable that they didn’t anticipate but should have seen coming.

Josie.

It started at Christmas and went on from there. The First Lady had, of course, invited her family to participate in all of the holiday festivities. Sometimes that meant that her and Blake were in a room full of a couple of hundred people, other times, it was just them and their spouses and kids. They were never left alone. Not until the designer was summoned one week to have lunch with her employer out on the terrace. She thought nothing of it, and actually enjoyed Josie’s company the more she got to know the woman. She was pleasant, perfect, a sweetheart, most of all. So when she stepped out into the backyard and saw the woman laughing candidly at something Blake had said, Gwen’s walls shot up and her chest struggled to move where it had been constricted, all of a
sudden.

She had sat down and ate what was already ordered for her. She talked and smiled and even let her guard down long enough to really enjoy Blake’s presence. Something she had not done in a long while. When Josie was needed for something in the House, Blake and her were left alone. At first, they said nothing. And then, he complimented her dress. It was like a floodgate had opened, allowing her to flatter him right back. He was wearing his glasses instead of contacts that day, and she loved that look on him. They got maybe ten minutes of polite conversation in before his wife returned. But ten minutes was all they needed to give that spark that always burned deep down in the both of them to fan itself into a small flame.

From thereon, it seemed like the universe wanted them to have those small and private moments together because every time she came into work, expecting Koko to grab her lunch from the kitchen, she was invited to eat with Josie. Blake wasn’t there all the time, but when he was, they got to be by themselves. Sometimes for five minutes, others as long as thirty minutes.

She hated to admit that what they talked about changed from time to time. It got more intimate without them intending to. They told each other their fears, their aspirations still, their frustrations with work and homelife. It was like when Harry met Sally. They were able to tell each other things that they didn’t otherwise tell their other friends.

It was nerve wracking. To think that just a month ago, she had told him to basically forget her existence, and now his existence was all she could think about when she closed her eyes at night to sleep, Wyatt’s arms wrapped around her. It only got worse from there. He’d stop by her office, sometimes just to say a quick hello in the morning before heading to the Oval. But the other times, he’d come in, sit down, and watch her work. He wouldn’t say anything unless she did. Koko had taken up a camaraderie with one of his secret service agents, Tom. She was never around when the President was and Gwen never thought to inquire about it. Today was one of those days that he felt like sitting and watching. She had stopped worrying about Josie and anyone else finding them like this because there was nothing to find.

The dress designer was sewing the last of the First Lady’s State of the Union dress when she looked up briefly to find Blake’s eyes on her, always on her, a small smile playing at the corner of his lips. He was leaning one arm against the back of the couch, the tip of his thumb’s nail in between his white teeth. She grinned down at the fabric, hating the way she let herself become so comfortable around him.

“You really are talented, Stella.”

He knew not to use that name but ever since they had gotten back to whatever this was, he had taken to calling her it again. “Lots of practice.” She replied.

He hummed. His eyes burned her skin and she looked up to see the blue unflinching from her form.

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there and do nothing and then that little voice inside her soul reminded her, that that’s love, and she threw the thought away immediately.

Standing up after another fifteen minutes of her fingers cramping, she went to the small refreshment counter by the window and poured more tea in her mug. She looked outside for a second as she tore a sugar packet open, staring right where the sun was shining on the grass and flowers and smiled at the beaming rays. Squinting the next.

She was vaguely aware of him standing up from the couch, vaguely heard his footsteps approach. She was pouring the sugar when his hand reached for hers. He clearly ignored the sharp diamond of her ring as it scratched his fingers, both physically and mentally. She slid her hand away, reaching for a spoon to stir the dissolved contents. He was having a lapse in judgement in that moment, so she was going to pretend that the brush of skin was accidental.

When he stepped behind her, bracing an arm on either side of the counter, effectively trapping her, Gwen’s body tensed. He stepped closer.

“Don’t.” She warned.

His long arms circled her waist as he softly kissed the curve of her neck. She refused to lean into it, into him, but she didn't pull away either, and she hated herself for it. His lips slid from her neck to her shoulder, hands tightening around her small frame. She turned around abruptly to face him. He leaned in but Gwen pushed him back by the shoulders. He wouldn’t budge.

Damn him.

“Blake…” Her voice was barely a whisper as she quietly pleaded with him, afraid that if she spoke any louder, Koko or one of his agents, or someone would hear and barge right in.

He knew better than to kiss her on the mouth, because his lips went right back to the side of her neck. Her head dropped back, and she couldn’t understand for the life of her why his touch felt so good. He kept doing it. Just soft kisses, never a hint of tongue, or suction, or bite. Gwen slid her hands through his hair and Blake pressed her body closer to his. Her breath became shallow as she felt every inch of him. The unmistakable feeling of his stiffening member should have been the thing to make her finally pull away but she was ashamed to find out that it was the arrival of the man’s wife that did it.

They were in the drawing room, the door was closed, but she heard the woman talking to Koko before the doors opened. Blake had already jumped to the other side of the room, as far away from her as possible. He sat back down on the couch, crossed his legs at his ankle, and pretended to be in conversation while she made herself a cup of tea.

What the fuck. She turned back around and opened another sugar packet even though she only liked one in her drink.

“Oh. Honey, what are you doing here?” Josie was genuinely surprised to see her husband.

Blake smiled at the mother of his children. “I wanted to see how my suit was coming along. I especially wanted to see the tie.”

Gwen never worked on his clothes on the days that he stayed to watch her. She had wanted them to be a surprise. “Which I told him that I wasn’t going to show him until the day of. Speaking of which, you shouldn’t be in here either because your dress is a surprise too.” She lied like she was breathing and moved to stand in front of the dress in question.
“Don’t worry, babe. I’ve already seen it and you are gonna look amazing.” Blake complimented both women in just that one sentence and Gwen wanted to stab him with her spoon.

Josie laughed beautifully. Blake stood up and walked over to her, kissing her with the same lips that touched her skin just seconds ago. “I only stopped by to see how the suit was coming along. I gotta get back to the office.”

“Okay. I’ll see you for dinner.” Josie kissed him one more time and patted his chest as he headed for the door.

He hadn’t even turned around to give her one last fleeting look. When they say that the wife gets all of the man and the mistress is left with the scraps, they weren’t joking.

You’re not a mistress. That man has nothing of you that you haven’t given him. He has nothing because you have given him nothing. He has taken nothing. You’re better than this. This is to never happen again. You aren’t this type of person.

She kept repeating the mantra even as she talked more dress designs with Josie out in the lounge that Koko had sort of made out of her receptionist area. Gwen twisted her wedding ring as the First Lady looked through the fabric and color book. She sipped at her tea.

It was exceptionally bitter.

=

Gwen didn’t walk the halls of the West Wing. Ever. She had no need to except for today. She had a meeting with the President’s Chief of Staff. Koko had only told her that it was clothing related and Gwen drew her conclusions from there. She didn’t normally make men’s clothes. She knew how, but it just wasn’t her normal clientele. Not that she was complaining. She started off just making the First Lady’s clothes, now the President, and then for Mr. Young--hopefully.

As she ventured further into crazy land with all these important people walking around her as if they were going to save the world, Gwen looked down at her phone, having chimed from a message. It was from Lani, reminding her that she had a lacrosse game at four. She noted it in her calendar with a reminder alert and turned the corner. She looked away from her phone at the precise moment that he saw her, just as he was walking down the same hallway.

“Stella.” He stopped for a brief second, expecting her to. And Gwen did pause before she realized what a bad idea it was to talk to him, how much she really didn’t want to at the moment. She hadn’t seen him for two weeks, ever since the Josie interruption in the drawing room. She had nothing to say to him that was appropriate for a lower rung employee to say to the President of the United States. She had finally learned her place and she was staying there no matter what he said or did.

Blake followed after her as she continued to walk away from the situation. He caught up to her quickly. “I haven’t seen you.”

She stopped going to lunches with him and his wife. The invitation would come everyday and everyday she would decline politely, sending her assistant to mingle on her behalf instead.

“I’m busy.” She replied.
He walked beside her now. “I’m busy too. However, I’m not sending my aids to lunches in an attempt to avoid you.”

“I’m busy.” She repeated again, in the kindest voice she could muster.

“Gwen.” He leaned in closer to her as they rounded another corner. “I miss you.” The tip of his nose touched the top of her head.

She wasn’t fazed. “You didn’t even turn around. You kissed her and didn’t give one thought about me.”

They both were looking ahead, not at each other as they walked. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“I don’t know what you expect. I don’t want to be in this.” He looked at her suddenly. “This--I am not this person.”

“Look.” He stopped right in front of her as they reached a little corner. “I know this is difficult. I know I made it difficult--”

“Difficult--” She cut him off right as he returned the favor, clearing his throat as a couple of White House staff members walked past them. He smiled at the two men until they were out of earshot.

Gwen continued when they were gone. “Somehow, I’ve become this person who--I have no words.” She couldn’t even find what she wanted to say, what she wanted him to understand about the situation, about how he made her feel.

Gwen moved to walk past him, done with the conversation as a whole, but Blake blocked her with his shoulder. “We were together, finally.” She saw the desperation and confusion written underneath his frown. “That’s all that matters.”

She looked affronted. “Really? Because I’m feeling a little, I don’t know, Lucy Mercer/Franklin Roosevelt about all this.”

Now he was the one to look insulted.

“I have to go.” She did push past him this time.

“Stella.” He called her back.

She turned around. “I have to go. I have a meeting with Charlie.” She left him standing there, probably speechless, most likely pissed. But she didn’t have time to worry about him when she was too busy worried about herself and her future there at the White House.

She wouldn’t have one if she continued down this path with him. She was already too close to the sun. If she kept pushing, she’d find herself falling at a pace not even she could come back from.

This wasn’t her. She wasn’t raised to be this person. She wasn’t raising her kids to be this person so why did she think that she could act this way? She knew why. You let a person take control of the plane and you put your life in their hands.

Gwen needed to get back into the pilot’s seat. She needed to chart a new course.

Easier said than done.
Chapter Notes

Just know we will have a happy ending, but this story is LONG. Gonna take awhile to get there. This chapter really sets up the second plot for this story.

I've put pictures of the clothes they wear in this chapter. Gold is Blake and Josie. Pink is Gwen.

Enjoy!

![Gold Tie](image)
“How does someone decline an invitation for a photo op with the President?” Gregory asked.

The White House Communications Director weaved through a swarm of employees as he walked with Alaina, the White House Press Secretary, to the Oval office.

“Well, this week hasn’t exactly gone our way. I mean I’ve never seen the President this moody and the State of the Union is in three days.” Alaina voiced.

“He’s not moody. He’s a grown ass man not a teenage girl with mood swings.”

“See that’s just sexist, Greg.”

He smirked and opened the door to Andrea’s office. “Andrea does the President have free time this morning?”

The secretary was seated at her desk, typing away on her computer. She didn’t even glance up when they walked in. “He has nothing but free time, Gregory. Right now he’s in the residence eating frosted flakes and enjoying Kathie Lee and Hoda. Shall I get him for you?” The young woman asked sarcastically, sparing him a look out of the corner of her eye.

Gregory knew that when the President was in a bad mood, it seemed the entire office was. He just hoped President Shelton wouldn’t snap at him like he did poor Sean from logistics, last week.

“Sarcasm’s a disturbing thing coming from a woman your age, Andrea.” He bit back at the private secretary.
“And what age would that be, Greg?” She asked, staring into his soul.

He knew that as much as they bantered, truly getting on Andrea’s bad side was the end of his happy days there at the White House. She could make his job a living hell if she wanted to, all because she had the President in the palm of her hand.

“You don’t look a day over nineteen.”

“Attaboy.” She went back to her screen and Gregory looked down at the container of sweets perched at the end of her desk.

“Can I have a cookie?” He took the lid off, expecting the answer to be yes.

“No.”

He made a face just as his name was called.

“Greg, they turned down our request?” Sam, his Deputy, came barreling in, asking.

“It’s not been our week.” He quoted Alaina.

“Morning, Sam.” Andrea greeted, kindly.

“Morning.” He smiled.

“Have a cookie.” She offered him.

“Thank you.”

Gregory watched on as Sam plucked a cookie from the top of the jar and took a large bite. He gave a shitty look to Andrea which she pointedly ignored.

“We’re gonna have a press release about this. We’ll be playing defense all day.” Alaina voiced, glasses perched on her face as she read through a report that was just handed to her by Penelope.

“Where’s Charlie? I’m sure he’s tearing his hair out. He loves golf.” Sam asked, crumbs spilling from his mouth.

“Outside on the terrace with Blake.” Andrea answered on reflex.

“You know you’re the only one who can call the boss man by his first name. Besides Charlie, of course.” McCain noted.

Andrea gave a fake smile and waved a hand for them to go through into the Oval, if not to get them out of her hair.

Just as they were filing in, the President and Chief of Staff were coming in from outside.

“They’re gonna back out on the trade surplus.” Charlie was just saying to the President.

“That’s shit negotiating. Francisco knows that’s shit.”

“Mostly he’s going to say that the Japanese need to buy more American cars.”

“Americans need to buy more American cars.” President Shelton responded, setting his glass of moscow mule down with the file he had in his hands.
“That’s what I told him.”

The president sighed and put on his glasses. That meant it was a bad day whenever he couldn’t even summon the energy to put his contacts in.

“Morning, everyone.” He addressed the room. The staff greeted him quietly. “What’s wrong with the world today that wasn’t wrong yesterday?”

“478 is going to stay in committee.” McCain began.

“I heard. What else?”

Alaina prepared herself to be the bearer of bad news. “The Ryder Cup Team declined our invitation to come to the White House.”

Charlie looked about ready to pop a vein in his forehead. “You’re shitting me.”

“Because of the joke.” She continued.

“You’re joking.” The President spoke.

“I’m not, Sir.”

“The Ryder Cup Team?” He asked for clarity.

“It’s a group of the best golfers in the--”

“I know what the Ryder Cup Team is.” The President was handed a binder by Penelope.

“Sir, if I may. This could be a good time to talk about your attitude toward the sport--”

President Shelton walked around the front of his desk to stand in front of his Press Secretary. “I have an intelligence briefing, a security briefing, and a 90-minute budget meeting all scheduled for the same forty-five minutes. You’re absolutely positive that this is a good time to talk?” He removed his glasses, and the height of their leader, the hostility that rolled off of him in waves, was actually the scariest thing that the aids could have been privy to in their adult life.

“No, Sir.” Alaina answered, quietly.

“Me either.” He agreed, walking past her to sit down on the sofa. He crossed his legs and ignored the silence in the room that he no doubt created with his less than approachable attitude.

“You know what I need?” Blake voiced. “I need someone to convince the First Lady that inviting my in-laws to the State of the Union Address is a threat to national security.” He tried to joke but there were no takers.

“No one? Twenty lawyers in the room and no one wants to take this on? Charlie?”

The Chief of Staff cleared his throat. “Your wife is scarier than you, Sir.”

Blake chuckled to himself. “Have a seat, everyone. It’s gonna be a long morning.”
Blake sighed as he felt hands run through his hair, lips kiss over the sensitive skin of his neck. He closed his eyes and tipped his head towards the ceiling.

“You work too hard.” Josie’s voice was gentle, like a warm blanket.

He hummed because she was right.

“Take a bath with me.” She kissed the tip of his ear.

“I wish I could but I’ve got to finish this.” He gestured to the mass of papers on the living room table.

She pouted. “It’ll make you feel better...You’ve been, stressed out lately, more than before. We’ve all noticed.”

“Comes with the pension, Jo. Seriously, I’m fine. You go enjoy a bath to yourself. Have Valerie bring you up some wine and chocolate.”

“Valerie is for our kids, not me. Which by the way, you should spend some more time with the boys. They miss you.”

“Okay.” He stretched away from her touch and leaned down to grab another budget report.

His sudden change in attitude to her worked because she sighed and left the room with one last lingering look. Blake ran a hand through his disheveled hair and laid against the back of the couch. His mind was racing miles and his body, physically, couldn’t keep up. He had thoughts of the boys, how his interactions with them were at breakfast and maybe dinner if he had the appetite to stomach eating with his family. He was neglecting them emotionally and that all too familiar shame crept up his spine and took hold. He was paralyzed most days by it. He had to do better. He had to do better in a lot of areas in his life.

The office was a mess. Another thought that took hold and wouldn’t let him go. He knew his workers were keeping him afloat but he was their leader, he had to step up and stop pissing around over some hurt feelings and a woman that wasn’t his wife.

That thought led into dangerous territory, territory where Josie didn’t hold a candle to Gwen and he wished he had more respect for the mother of his children to change his mind--change his heart.

He had fell for her, again.

Fuck. He could hear Brad laughing at him now.

So stupid. It was all his fault. He told Josie to have lunch with Gwen, if not for the company since his wife often ate alone, for the companionship between the two women. He knew he hurt Gwen when he treated her like she wasn’t even alive to him. He tried to make up for it by showing her that him and his wife were on the same playing field for him. She wasn’t non existent to him. He took it a step further by joining the women once in awhile. That had turned into more lunches, with him making sure to schedule meetings and work around lunch hours. Sometimes, it worked. Other times, Blake just couldn’t get away. But the times that he was successful, he was rewarded with a couple of minutes of alone time with Gwen.

He hadn’t planned that part. Talking to her again, getting to know her, allowing them to reconnect in a way that they hadn’t experienced since the first time they met. He loved every moment. He
fell deeper every second, every detail, every word. It’s why he started going to her office. To just sit there and watch her in her element was the best part of his days. She was stunning, and she didn’t even have to try. Imperfect she was.

To put it simply, he was in love. Just like that, he was in love with her again.

He should have kept it to himself that day. He shouldn’t have touched her hand, kissed her neck, pressed his body into hers because it only reaffirmed what he already knew.

He loved her.

He was cheating. He was lying. He was ruining his relationships, slowly, one by one, but it didn’t matter because he was in love. Right?

It didn’t matter that Gwen wouldn’t talk to him, that he hadn’t seen her for a whole week. He’d stop by her office but she wasn’t there, each time, she was gone. And each time, he’d smile sadly to himself and walk back to his wing of the house. But he was in love. That was the most important thing. He hurt this bad because he felt alive again, truly alive, like his skin was too raw, his heart much too young to handle such a thing as love. She did that for him.

She did that to him.

=

Blake stared at himself in the full length mirror. Running sure hands down his suit, Blake looked upon the sleek matte black of the material. It was slim and well-tailored, hugging his thighs and biceps in all the most flattering ways. But the real kicker was the tie. It was a splash of goldenrod and pink pastel paisley print atop a pinstriped oxford. Gwen even made a matching Hankie to go with it. He didn’t think he’d be able to wear such a thing at the Address, considering it was tradition to wear blue or red depending on the affiliated party. But the media had nothing but high praise for Josie’s fashion choices ever since Gwen came into their lives. His wife’s dress was gold as well, so at least they’d be matching.

“Turn around.”

Blake looked away from his reflection and into Jo’s eyes. She pinned the American flag on his lapel. “Gwen really did such an amazing with these. We look like royalty.”

Blake attempted to smile. “You are a vision.” He complimented.

“Daddy. Daddy, look!” Teddy came in bouncing in his little tuxedo.

Josie allowed them an hour, two hours tops, to join in the festivities after he would give his address. Him and Jackson were dressed to the nines just in case they had to take any photos.

His youngest pulled down his vest and jacket, smiling cutely up at his parents. He did a little twirl to show off his get up.

“Teddy, you look so handsome.” Josie leaned down to kiss his forehead.

“Dad, can I wear some of your cufflinks?” Jackson came into the room, asking.
Blake nodded. “Go pick out a silver pair.”

His oldest skipped over to the jewelry compartment that one of his aids had retrieved from the House and looked through the selection.

“Can you put them on him? I have to go check a few things over with Charlie.”

Josie nodded and kissed his cheek as he left the room, carding a hand through Teddy’s hair as he did. Once outside, he greeted Frank and Tom. They walked through the halls of the Capitol until he arrived outside another room. Charlie was waiting for him with his husband, Marcus.

“Nice to see you Marc.” Blake shook his hand, pulling him into a side hug.

“Always a pleasure, Blake.”

“We’ll run through the seating chart and then look over the speech one more time.” Charlie said, getting right down to work.

“Sounds good. I’ll pour the drinks.” He said, as all three men walked into the office.

He was called to the stage approximately twenty minutes later. Blake felt better after the last read through, making sure nothing was left out as he was getting ready to inform the American people of his administration’s view of the state of the nation and their plans for legislation.

When he arrived to the House Chamber, he got a touch up on his makeup for the cameras and then proceeded to walk out to the podium where he would deliver his address. This part was always fun for Blake. He’d block out all the rest of the people in the room, and only speak to the millions sitting at home, eyes glued to their televisions.

The speech was a fine one. His writers did an amazing job. And by the end of it, Blake took a deep breath and relished in the thunderous applause. He was led off stage and given a glass of water.


His Vice President clapped him on the back. “And that’s how you do it.”

Blake pulled Luke into a hug. “Save me some beer at the dinner.” He told him.

The Vice President waved him off as he headed for his car to take him back to the White House where the reception would be hosted.

“Sir, did you want to make your entrance with the rest of the First Family?” One of the aids asked him.

“My wife would have my ass if I didn’t.”

He took the Presidential limo back by himself, thanking God that Josie wanted to ride with the kids separately so that they could beat the traffic. He leaned his head back and closed his eyes, hating the way he couldn’t enjoy anything anymore. Or at least, that’s what it felt like.

Once back at the White House again, Blake was taken to one of the briefing rooms where him and the kids waited until all the guests were seated and settled inside the ballroom. Josie came in right as they were called out and she wrapped her arm around his as they each held onto one kid. She was holding Teddy on her hip as Blake held Jackson’s hand.

The doors opened in a flourish and they were greeted by a couple hundred smiles. The applause
was deafening. Josie released his arm so that he could wave to the mass of politicians and party members. His arm felt heavy and awkward as he moved it but he knew how to hide it well.

“We’re over here.” Charlie came in behind them, leading the First Family over to their table.

Blake was restless the entire time, even as dinner was served. Dessert was next, then wine, then champagne. He drank a beer discreetly because he wasn’t much of a wine person. If he could sit there and pretend like he wasn’t off in some other world, then he could make it through the rest of the reception. But then the time of the night when dancing was permitted and even encouraged crept up on the Leader of the Free World, and Josie begged him to take her out on the floor at least once that night.

He regretfully let her drag him to the middle of the room. They were the only ones dancing at first, and Blake firmly kept his gaze down so that he didn’t have to see eyes staring at the pair of them. Per custom, he danced with three other partners, one of them being Charlie, which instantly put him in better spirits. His Chief of Staff was very entertaining. At one point, Teddy begged to be held and threatened to cry if he wasn’t. Blake danced with the eight year old until the little boy actually fell asleep in his arms, his perfect face smooshed into the crook of his father’s neck and arch of his shoulder.

The guests that saw the father and son duo awed and ate up every last bit of the sight of their leader being tender and affectionate with the little boy. Josie suggested they call it a night for the boys and Blake agreed. The parents excused themselves to put the kids to bed. They both took turns going to the other boy’s room and reading them a story. They hadn’t done that in awhile and Blake had to admit to himself that giving up those moments all for the idea of a life he’d never had any intention of living, would’ve been a huge mistake. But intention and desire were two very different things in his heart.

“They were really tired. It was a long day. For all of us.” Josie said right as they closed the bedroom doors at the same time.

“I have a headache like you wouldn’t believe.” He replied.

She grabbed his arm and ran a hand down his chest as they walked back to the ballroom. “You’re almost done.”

He exhaled deeply, focusing on the way her touch soothed his pain.

The ballroom was just as they left it. Alive, bright, loud. His temples pulsed. His brain short circuited.

“Another dance?” His wife asked.

“Jo, I’m tired.”

“Please. Last one, I promise.”

He was pulled by the wrist. He led her without much enthusiasm, only saved by the song coming to an end a minute later. He saw his way out when Josie gasped rather dramatically, leaving his arms. He turned to see her hug their couturier.

Blake bit the inside of his cheek and tried, discreetly, to look Gwen up and down. She was wearing a pink colored dress, tall nude heels, with her hair straightened at the top, curled down at the ends. Her husband was standing next to her, decorated in his medals and a freshly pressed suit.
“You outdid yourself. I kept telling Blake when Koko dropped them off this morning.” He could hear Josie saying as the two women held on to each other, tightly. Gwen was smiling widely, clearly affected by the praise.

“You both look so amazing. It came together better than I thought it would.”

Blake greeted Wyatt briefly as their wives talked to each other some more about colors and lace.

“We should dance.” Josie interrupted a moment later, just as Blake and Wyatt were talking about being on camera, the former who having much more experience than he cared to admit. “And by dance I mean get my husband to stop being such a buzzkill. Wyatt would you…” She gestured for him to dance with her and the pilot was surprised yet no doubt honored to accompany the First Lady in a waltz.

That left him and Gwen staring at each other, oddly, at odds, forced to reconcile for the moment. Blake sighed and wrapped an arm around her back, lower than she would have liked, lower than he should have done. Gwen held onto his broad shoulder tightly and together, they danced in silence. He should have looked everywhere but at her but he couldn’t.

Her eyes, of what he could see of them, shone the color of dampened soil in the summer. Her pale skin was brushed with makeups and blush that she didn’t need but brought out the sharp structure of her bones. The soft pink shade on her plump yet thin lips was the same color as her dress. The slight space between them allowed him to stare further down, to the top of her dress that ran straight across her chest, then near the top of her waist where it tightened around her curves.

His eyes went back to her face and even though she wasn’t staring back, he kept looking upon her beautiful features because it gave him some relief, some hope.

“Don’t look at me.” She murmured.

“How come?” He asked, eyes still roaming across cheekbones and eyelids.

“Because everyone will know.”

He looked over her shoulder. “I can’t not look at you.”

“The song will be over in a minute.” Her gaze was firmly planted around the room as they turned in a small circle.

He sighed. “This is ridiculous. If you were anyone else--” He didn’t finish the sentence. But he was right to. If she were anyone else, he’d be able to look at her without all the assumptions and judgments hanging over his head. “How did we get to here?” She remained stoic. “Dammit just look at me.” She wouldn’t budge.

“Look at me,” he whispered, the seriousness in just that one breath causing Gwen’s eyes to snap to his.

Now that he had her attention, he didn’t know what to do with it. It was a rare moment when Gwen would listen to him, trust him, when she was angry or hurt. He wasn’t used to getting his way, not even when they were together all those years before.

He waited for a beat too long because she snapped. “Stop it, we’re in public, look away.” She hissed.

He obliged but leaned his head down so that she could hear him. “I know I don’t have the right. I
know. I know you don’t trust me.” He glanced at her for a second but otherwise kept his eyes away from hers.

“I love you.” It was almost inaudible but she heard it.

“Your wife is ten feet away.”

“ I love you.” He repeated.

“And thirteen years ago?”

This time he couldn’t help but look in her in the eyes. “I. Love. You.”

It was a stand off from there as she held his gaze and he hers. In the distance, the song’s end was drifting through the air but this was just a beginning for them. He was unmoved by the request in her eyes for him to stop, to look away, to let her go. He wouldn’t flinch under the pressure they were under. He loved her. She had to know that. She had to let them do something about it.

Gwen was the first to avert her gaze, facing the band so she could clap her praises. Blake tore his fixed look from her and applauded with the rest of the floor’s occupants.

“Gwen.” He leaned down so that she could hear him.

“That suit looks really good on you, Mr. President. I’m glad I could be a small part of this evening.” She attempted pleasantries, putting distance between them.

He sniffed. “And that dress is beautiful. Almost as beautiful as the woman wearing it.”

She faced him, suddenly. “Just stop it. Okay? Please, stop.” She whispered-yelled at him.

He turned to face her. “What you said last week in the hallway--”

“I don’t want to talk about that.” She looked past his shoulder and smiled to her husband, who was making her way over to them with the First Lady.

“I haven’t been able to think about anything else. I can’t stop thinking about you.”

“I have to use the restroom.” She said, just as their spouses arrived. “I’ll be right back.” She told Wyatt, kissing him chastely on the mouth. “Excuse me, Josie, Mr. President.”

Blake watched her weave through the crowds and leave the ballroom entirely. The restrooms were upstairs, she knew that from the first time she was here.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, wincing as his headache throbbed harder. “I’m gonna go see if anyone has any advil for my head.” He spoke to Josie but was under the impression that Wyatt would hear.

“Okay, I think Macie has some if you can find her.”

He nodded and walked back to their table where Luke and Caroline, the Vice President’s wife, were enjoying a story from Charlie’s West Wing days when he was just an intern. Blake pretended like he was just grabbing some water, but he kept his eyes on his wife and Wyatt. The two continued to dance with one another but once their backs were turned away from him, he headed for the doors. He walked out into the hallway, where Frank was standing guard. Tom was inside, do doubt making his way to him as he stood there, not knowing what to do with himself.
“Which direction did she go in?” He asked the agent, just as the doors opened and Tom revealed his stoic face.

“The garden, Sir.” Frank answered, knowing immediately who he was talking about.

He walked off in the direction that he said, pacing the closer he got to the smell of roses. Once outside in the back of the house, Blake waved his detail aside, wanting them to stay behind as he spotted her pacing along the yard. He walked quietly to her glowing form, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“You never walk in grass in heels unless you’re about to cry. I’ve seen you do it one time and that’s when your father had a heart attack and you couldn’t get a flight out to California until the morning. You paced right outside in the grass at the airport. Cried for a solid ten minutes before asking me to take you home. Any other time you would go barefoot.”

She turned around, her eyes filled to the brim with salty water, yet, there wasn’t a shedded tear in sight. “I’m not going down memory lane with you.”

“Then talk to me.”

She smirked, viciously. “You wouldn’t like what I have to say.”

“Fine. Then I’ll go first. The Lucy Mercer/Franklin Roosevelt comment was insulting.”

“Because it’s so untrue?”

“You’re playing the boss card on the fact that I’m in love with you?” She scoffed and turned away from him. “Come on, Stella. Don’t belittle us.”

She turned back around. “I didn’t say that to belittle us. I said it because you needed to hear it. You’ve got some fantasy playing out in your head where you’re the President, and I become your little mistress--”

“Don’t call yourself that--”

“And we’re just gonna have these feelings and hurt everyone we ever care about in the process.”

He shook his head. “Me being in love with you isn’t hurting anyone but me. I carry that burden alone. And I’ve tried to tell you. I’ve tried to be with you--”

“I am not yours to be with.”

He dismissed the statement as soon as she said it. “You won’t talk to me. All you wanna do is say things that you know will piss me off. You’re trying to drive me away but I’m not going away--”

“I don’t have to drive you away, you’re already away. You’re already out of my reach.”

“I’m not.”

She sighed, smiling ruefully at him the next moment, placing her hands on her hips. “You’re the President. You’re married. You have children. You have responsibilities and a duty to that office to not stain it with another sex scandal. You’re for the American people and your family. That’s it. You might be standing in front of me, Blake, but I can’t touch you. I can’t have you. I’d hate myself for it if I even tried.”

“I don’t have to have sex with you to want you, Gwen.”
She laughed, manically to herself. “But you’d have sex with her.”

His face twisted into confusion. “So this is about Josie?”

“No! No, this is--I work for her. I like her...but I smile in her face just as I’m thinking about taking my clothes off for you. I wait for you. I’m still waiting for you. You think you can just have me emotionally and all the physical needs are going to take care of themselves? It doesn’t work like that. We don’t work like that. You don’t carry this burden alone. I can’t make love to my husband without thinking of you. I can’t breathe on my own, knowing that we’re not in a good place. You control whether I can eat for the day, whether I can drink, whether I can sleep. Everything I do, I do with you in mind. You own me. You control me. I can’t escape you! I can’t have you, I can’t not have you, I can't love you, I can’t not love you--”

“You own me. You control me. I belong to you! I can’t leave you. I can’t escape you...You think I don’t know we’re both married? That we both have children? You think I don’t wake up everyday with the world’s problems on my mind only to be laid at my feet every time I put a damn tie on and greet my Oval? You think I don’t know about the countless affairs that have happened right there on the same desk that I sign laws and legislation? I’m not looking for another sex scandal. I’m not jumping at the opportunity to fall into bed with you, no matter how much my dick thinks otherwise.” Blake took a deep breath. “I want to be able to walk into a room and you smile at me for once. I want the woman that I love to want to see me, to want to talk, and laugh, and not think about what we may or may not be doing to our families. It’s not a crime to want someone other than your partner, Gwen.”

They breathed together for a long time, neither of them saying another word as the weight of previous revelations sat insistently in their minds and hearts. He was prepared to take it all back if she would just do that for him. Want him without needing everything and everyone else. But then she walked up to him, eyes betraying nothing as she leaned in and said the only thing she could to get him to back off.

“No. It’s not. But it is a pretty shitty thing to do.”

She brushed past him on her way back to the house. Blake stood there, not breathing, and not feeling—not thinking—for once. He didn’t think he could remain standing if he did. Because to breathe without her sharing the same air as him wasn’t enough to sustain his lungs. Because feeling that knife in his chest wasn’t going to keep his heart beating for much longer. Because thinking about her footsteps pointed in the opposite direction was nothing short of a metaphor for his entire life.

It was a terrible thing. Letting others do what they wanted to you. But that wasn’t the lesson to take away from that night. Because it wasn’t a question of what people will do to each other. It’s what people won’t do to each other.
“Hey.”

Gwen turned her head around to see him walking through their front door.

“You still awake?” He was smiling. It was probably the alcohol in his system. He had went out for drinks with a couple of his friends, no doubt expecting her to be asleep by the time he came home. Like normal. But she couldn’t stop her mind from racing long enough to just go to bed and not think of the contents on his phone. Of which she was holding tightly as she watched him take off his jacket and shoes.

“Yup.” She replied, blinking away the tears in her eyes before he could see them. “How was tonight?”

“It was okay. How are you doing?” He leaned down to kiss her but she pulled away at the last second before their lips could touch.

“I’m good. Just a little tired.” She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

Blake caught on to her sour mood quickly and stared at her dumbfounded. He sat down on the chaise next to the couch. “You all right?”

“Mhm.” She licked her lips.

He stared, unconvinced, and began to speak, “Listen, I wanted--”

“You left your phone here.” They began at the same time.

Blake’s eyes immediately looked to the device in her hands.

“Yeah.” She frowned. “You’re mother called. I told her you were out...And then Sarah texted.”

“Right.” He responded, knowing exactly where she was going with this and Gwen couldn’t tell if that was a good or bad thing.

“Yeah, right. And I’m hoping that you have a really great explanation--”

“It’s a complicated situation--”

“--’Cause I’m trying so desperately--”

“It’s not what you think--”

“--to give you the benefit of the doubt here.”
“Can you just let me explain?”

“Try to explain.”

“I talked to the Captain. The other guys were giving her a hard time and he thought that I was the best guy to make her feel welcomed. I told him how you felt about her that one time after the bar--”

“The Captain? Why does the Captain have to know anything about this? You could have just said no.” She stood up, frustrated. Blake reached out a hand to stop her from leaving but she pulled away.

“Can you just stay here--”

“Don’t touch me for a second, please. Just don’t.”

He sighed and let her walk past him into the kitchen.

“You know, I’m literally sick to my stomach. Because you lied, Blake.”

“Gwen.”

“You lied to me.” Her voice rose.

“I went out of my way to tell you about the kiss.” He half yelled, standing up. “I told you. You said you didn’t want me around her. I listened. But when my Captain tells me that one of our own is having a rough time, I have to step up and help--”

She couldn’t believe her ears. “Why did you tell me about the kiss?”

“Would you just listen to me, please?”

“Wait a second, answer me. Why did you tell me about the kiss?”

“You rather I just lie about it? Listen to me, I took a phone call outside. I was talking to my father and she was there. She was drunk and babbling about how her boyfriend just broke up with her and I offered to cheer her up by buying her a drink--”

“So you were drinking together. You didn’t tell me that part.”

“I had one drink. She needed a friendly ear--”

“Were you drunk?”

“--and she had a lot. I wasn’t drunk! I didn’t kiss her! She kissed me!”

“Did you stop the kiss?”

“Yes!”

She nodded, scratching her nails down the length of her neck. “How?” She tilted her head to one side. “How did you do that? What did you do? You saw she was crying, you bought her a drink, she confessed to you how hurt she was, how much pain she was in...and she just kissed you? ...Go ahead, I want to hear this.”

“It was loud in the bar.” He began.
“Okay.”

He sighed. “Stella--”

“Don’t call me that right now.”

“It’s a difficult thing for me to explain, okay?”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it is. It was loud and I had to lean in close to even hear her order a drink. Okay, so yes, it’s difficult.”

She raised her walls. “It’s a really difficult thing for me--”

“I had a conversation about how her boyfriend wasn’t any good for her if he couldn’t handle her going off to serve our country. And that she wasn’t gonna end up alone and that any guy would be lucky to have her because she’s--pretty--I don’t know what I said exactly--” He tried to recant the night of events as she walked away from him, back into the sitting room.

“Do you think she’s pretty, Blake?”

He sighed harshly and closed his eyes, finding the energy to keep up with her.

“That’s what this is about, right?” She asked.

“Please, don’t put words in my mouth.”

“I’m not. I just don’t understand why you’re continuing to text her when you know how I feel about the entire thing. It doesn’t make any sense to me as to why you would flirt with this girl--”

“I’m not flirting! I tried to tell the Captain no. He wouldn’t--just let me finish, okay?”

Gwen sat down and Blake followed her down onto the couch. “I’m listening.”

“She apologized for the kiss. She said that wasn’t like her and that she was just drunk and hurting and I was nice to her. And yes, was I close to her while we were sitting there--I could barely hear the girl. And when I thought that she had enough and that she should probably head home, I called her a car. I wanted to--I thought the right thing to do was to walk her outside and make sure she got in it okay. She was drunk.”

“Did you touch her? She needed help walking and you were the superhero swooping in to save the day?”

“Yes, I did, I helped her outside because she would’ve been passed out in the bushes if I didn’t. I waited with her until the car arrived.”

“You waited? She’s twenty-six years old--”

“She was drunk!”

“It doesn’t matter!” She stood up, wiping at her face furiously as the tears fell onto the kitchen floor.

“Of course it matters! You don’t think I’d want the same for you? If a guy sees that you’re drunk and needs help, I’d want him to do exactly as I did. I was trying to do the right thing.”
“Hurting me was the right thing to do, right?”

“Gwen, I didn’t do anything!”

“You kissed another woman! We’ve been together for--”

“I didn’t kiss another woman! She kissed me, Gwen! Listen to me. She kissed me, okay? I stopped the kiss. I put her in the car, and I came home. Stella--”

“Are you attracted to her?”

His eyes were wide and his breath was ragged. “No, I am not attracted to her.”

“Don’t lie to me again, Blake. Are you attracted to her?”

She could feel her face contort into a hopeless fountain of tears watching her boyfriend shake his head but say yes with his eyes. The moment of silence was too long for her to be mistaken, for him to continuing lying.

“What do you want me to say, Gwen? She’s an attractive girl. Yes, I find her attractive.” His voice hadn’t lowered any since they’d begun yelling at each other and that made it all the more harder for her to stand there and listen to him.

“I don’t want to hear anymore.” She voiced, quietly.

“I don’t want a relationship with her. I didn’t pursue her. I didn’t kiss her. I didn’t do anything.”

Gwen could feel the muscles of her chin tremble. She looked up at him, his entire face blurry. “Are you attracted to me?”

She couldn’t even stomach the courage to hear his late reply. He tried to come around the kitchen island but she walked to the other side.

He exhaled, retracing his steps. “Yes, Gwen, of course I’m attracted to you.” His hands reached out to her body once he caught her but she pushed him away.

“No, just don’t touch me. Please, don’t touch me.”

“How would you like it if the roles were reversed? You hate when the guys down at the beach even so much as look at me. How would you feel if another guy kissed me?”

“I would understand if the situation was the same--”

“You’re so full of shit.”

“And you’re being unreasonable.”

“Then get out.”
He paused, the words hitting him at the last second. “Gwen--”

“Get out!”

He flinched and stared at her for a moment longer before moving the next second to grab his keys. “Fine.”

“Don’t come back.”

“I wasn’t plannin’ on it.” He put his shoes and jacket on. “But just remember you broke up with me over some girl I couldn’t give two shits about.”

“Right. You don’t care about her and yet that’s what this whole argument has been about. But just blame this all on me. Don’t take any responsibility for anything because it’s never your fault, right?”

He shook his head. “Fuck. Just give it rest, Gwen.”

“Get out.”

He finally obliged her and headed for the door, muttering underneath his breath. She started to ask him to say the words out loud, right to her face, even following after him before he could actually leave when she hit her foot on the edge of the living room table. Her toe was snagged and Gwen cried out in pain, doubling over.

She sat on the ground and clutched her ankle, crying out in pain again when the pressure applied only served to hurt her further. She felt Blake lean over her but she pushed him away. He eventually left after she promised to go to the hospital. She could tell that he felt guilty, but it wasn’t his fault just because he happened to be there. Gwen knew he wanted to at least stay and help but she couldn’t stomach their fight any more than she could stomach the pain from her accident. He had to go so that she could breathe and when he finally did, Gwen went to the hospital herself. After an x-ray and some pain medicine, the diagnosis confirmed a clean fracture.

She went home, foot snuggled in a boot. She didn’t even make it up the stairs as she laid right on her couch. As she stared up at the ceiling, she cried, not even knowing why. Her foot didn’t hurt all that bad, Blake was only gone because of her doing...there wasn’t anything to cry over that she didn’t do to herself. But she wouldn’t feel sorry for protecting her heart.

She had already been down this road before. Before she met him, before she fell in love with him, before she allowed herself to dream of a future with him in it every day. She was not about to be made into a fool a second time.

If only she’d known when she took him back several weeks later that she was going to be just that. A fool.

She’d have saved herself thirteen years.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Second update of the day. Don't get confused. If you haven't read chapter 12, go do that! Another update coming soon. Thanks guys :)

Gwen frowned at the memory. She had to stop doing that. Remembering the past only made it that much difficult to live in the present, to think of herself in the future.

As she stared at her kids running around the White House garden with the First Children, she couldn’t help but think about the man that made it possible for her to be there--for them --to be there. Blake was currently, gratefully, in the Oval doing whatever the President did. Josie was lying beside her in the other lawn chair. They were supposed to be catching some sun and enjoying the warm weather before it disappeared the next day to rain and clouds and cold winds. It was a freaky day, not just because of the weather, but the events that had transpired. She had woken up to news that her soon-to-be sister-in-law was pregnant. After hours spent over the phone gushing about the good news, her father had called her, telling her they were planning a trip out to Washington to see her and the kids.

Gwen saw no reason for them not to come and gladly expressed her interest in the visit. She could use her mother’s cooking and her father’s calm and reassuring presence. Ever since the garden discussion, which was only a week ago, Gwen had been on edge. She had seen Blake multiple times after that night. Things weren’t tense but they weren’t exactly smooth between them. They had not discussed how the both of them being in love with each other again was going to affect life going forward. As far as Gwen was concerned, she’d love nothing more than to leave love in a corner for the rest of her life and live as if she hadn’t felt any of it in the first place.

“I kind of want another smoothie. You?” Josie turned to her and asked, tilting her sunglasses down the slope of her perfect nose so that she could see Gwen’s face.

The designer shrugged. “Why not?”

That was the other thing that made that day so particularly weird for her. She had lunches with the First Lady, she enjoyed dinners with their families, but she had never relaxed or hung out without any formalities put in place beforehand with Josie. To lay there and pretend like she wasn’t going through an internal struggle with the woman’s husband was something very weird and absolutely crazy for her to live through.

Gwen decided to not dwell on things that she couldn’t fix in the moment and instead returned her attention back to her kids. The children were playing with water guns and Manó was on a team with Jackson while Lani and Teddy partnered up. They were hiding and hitting each other everywhere in the garden. Gwen was very surprised to see her daughter participating, since she was only a fan of joining the rest of the world as a moody teenager.

“Here you go.” Gwen looked up, accepting the offered glass of smoothie.

“Thanks.”
Josie went back to tanning and Gwen went back to thinking. There was so much on her mind that she didn’t know what to do with. Work, home, parents, brother, kids, Blake. But the distraction of yelling and laughter was welcomed even though all she really wanted was peace—no noise and no struggle. The quest for peace was only further disturbed by the arrival of the sole reason she couldn’t trust herself anymore for anything.

Blake walked in his vintage glasgow, brown, tweed, suit across the lawn to them, only to be stopped by a splash of water right at the neck. It was shot by Manó, who thrusted his gun down in surprise and actual fear. Gwen was just about to yell at her son for getting the President wet when Blake leaned down in the grass and grabbed the extra water gun. He shot at the boys first and then to Lani who was surprised to be a target as well. From there, all hell broke loose and the garden was once again filled with screaming, giggling, children and one wet president, racing after each other, trying to get the last shot. Josie and Gwen smiled at the sight.

“He’s so good with them.” Josie voiced.

Gwen agreed. He was good with them. She never had a doubt in her mind that he would be.

“Although, he’s ruining a perfectly handsome suit.” Josie added.

Gwen couldn’t find it in herself to care about that. She was the first one to admit that certain clothes were meant to be for certain things but when it came to spontaneity, when it came to moments like these, no one in their right mind would put something so precious on hold to change into a pair of old jeans and a t-shirt. That was ridiculous.

She looked back to the garden and saw that the water war had turned into a game of tag. Lani and Blake had teamed up together to catch the boys, the former managing to capture Jackson as they fumbled into the grass, laughing. Blake scooped up Teddy in one sweep and then Manó quickly there after, shouldering both boys in each arm. He mimicked fly patterns as he ran around and hoisted them into the air until they “crashed” into the ground. Blake went down first so that the boys landed on top of him, breaking their fall. Teddy and Manó were laughing, uncontrollably, even as Blake got up from underneath them and started a tickle fest. He eventually let up and their sons grabbed onto his legs, preventing him from leaving. Gwen watched as the President leaned down, ruffled their heads, prompting them to let go. He kissed both of them on the forehead when they did and turned around to make his way over to the women. He fake limped over to them, dramatising the act, but Josie nor Gwen, could stop themselves from laughing at the sight.

“You shouldn’t laugh when people get hurt.” He whined as he drew closer, forgoing the limp so that he could make it to the empty chair beside Gwen where a tray of smoothies was left after Josie came back with extra the second time.

“That will teach you not to play in the dirt.” Josie sipped her drink.

Blake made a face at her when she wasn’t looking and Gwen hid her laugh behind the rim of her glass. Blake caught it and grinned, squinting when the sun shone directly in his eyes.

Her heart fluttered. It was the first real moment without any yelling or tension that they had together since the night of the Address and she was ashamed to admit that what he said about wanting her to just walk into a room and be at peace with herself and the entire situation, was really all she wanted for herself as well. It felt nice not to be so guarded with him around.

Blake grabbed a glass for himself and drank out of it quietly as he looked out at their children. “Jo.” He murmured after several minutes.
His wife hummed.

“Camp David is coming up.”

Josie took off her sunglasses and sat up. “Oh my God. I totally forgot and you’re gonna kill me but I can’t come, honey. I’m sorry.”

Blake frowned. “How come?”

“Sicily’s baby shower is that weekend.”

He grimaced. “Can’t your sister just accept our present in the mail?”

“No she can’t because I’m hosting it.”

“Have Grace take over. She’d love to do it.”

“Grace is coming up from Boston an hour before the party. Look, I know it sucks but I’ll make it up to you.”

He sighed. “Then I’m not going.”

Gwen felt a slight bit of awkwardness at having to be in the middle of the two, literally, as they talked to each other.

“No, don’t not go because I can’t. You’ve done this every year and frankly, you need it.”

“I’m not--” Blake was cut off by Jackson calling him over. He put a finger up, telling the boy to hold on for one second but then Jack complained that his gun was jammed. Blake sighed and headed over to fix the problem.

Josie started speaking to Gwen then. “His mother died a few years back. Ever since he’s been in office, he goes on the weekend of the anniversary of her death up to Camp David to rest and relax. It’s one of the few times a year that he actually takes a break.” She explained. “Me and the kids go with him but this year I just can’t make it. I feel bad but that doesn’t mean he shouldn’t go.”

Gwen nodded, understanding, and processing the news of his mother. When they were dating, she had only spoken to the woman a handful of times. She was always so nice and welcoming. You could hear it in her voice, and even though Gwen had never met his mother, she felt like she already knew her. To hear of her passing was strangely a tough pill for her to swallow. She couldn’t imagine how Blake felt. She wondered when it happened and if it was during his first term, and if so, why she didn’t hear anything about it.

Blake had handed off the gun to Jackson and walked back over to them. He sat down and drank some more of his smoothie.

“Blake. I think you should still go.” Josie told him. He shook his head. “It will still be a wonderful time without me. You’ll have the boys and I’ll make sure Valerie looks after them so that you have some time to relax by yourself.”

“It’s fine Jo.” He grumbled.

The First Lady sighed and then gasped. “Why don’t you and your family go too? That way the boys have somebody to play with and you won’t have to go by yourself.”

Gwen didn’t say anything for a second because she wasn’t aware that she was being talked to.
When Josie’s words caught up to her, she immediately dismissed the horrible idea. “Oh no. No we can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because...because I’m not even sure that Wyatt can get out of work. I’d have to take the kids too and that won’t be much of a relaxing vacation for the President.”

Blake shifted beside her.

“Nonsense. Blake loves to take the boys fishing and hunting up there. He’d enjoy all the activities I don’t like to do while there with all of the children. Especially, if your husband does go. And even if he can’t, you should go still. I’ve been meaning to give you a break and you can look at this like a mini vacation. Blake can show you the spa area that I had put up there. There’s a lot to do that you would love, trust me. And since he does do some minor work, you’ll be so busy with the kids, you won’t have time to be bored.”

“Josie, that’s...I really don’t think I could--”

“She doesn’t want to go Josie. Just give it a rest.” Blake said, annoyed.

The First Lady’s face fell and Gwen could really see that she was really excited for her and her family to go, wanting to give Gwen the time off. That genuineness was what always got her and Gwen sighed.

“I can ask Wyatt and see where that goes. It’s not a definite but it’s not a no.”

“You’re gonna love it! I didn’t think so my first time but it’s actually really good to just be out in the middle of nowhere.” Josie chatted to her, excitedly, for the next twenty minutes. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Blake staring at the two of them with a baffled expression.

Eventually, he was called away and back to the Oval. Gwen let out a breath, watching his retreating back. Very soon after that, the kids and them all ate a little snack before Gwen had to head home.

She started on dinner while Lani and Manó watched a television show in the living room. She was just putting the french bread into the oven, the last thing to be made before dinner was officially ready, when Wyatt came through the front door. He greeted her with a kiss to the neck and a soft hello. She smiled.

“Dinner will be done by the time you get out of the shower.” She told him.

He nodded and walked into their bedroom. Gwen poured herself a glass of wine and sat at the kitchen island, watching the stove’s timer decrease by the second. Eventually, when she heard the shower water stop, she ventured into the bedroom and sat on the bed. The bathroom door was open and Wyatt stood in the mirror, combing his hair back with a towel wrapped around his waist.

“So. I need to ask you something.” Gwen began.

He didn’t even jump at the sound of her voice, as if he had already sensed her presence when she walked in. “If it’s about your parents, I already told Lani she’d have to give up her bedroom while they visited.”

Gwen shook her head. “No, that’s not it.”

Wyatt frowned. “What’s wrong? You sound like you’re about to tell me our dog died when we
don’t even have a dog.”

She laughed despite herself. “Josie asked us to go to Camp David on the weekend of the fifteenth.”

“Really? That was nice of her.”

“Yeah, it was.”

“Well, you and the kids can go. I have a post out that weekend.”

Gwen slumped her shoulders. She was hoping he’d be able to come.

“Don’t look so put out. I’m sure you and Josie will still have your girl fun without me.”

She bit her tongue. “Well, Josie isn’t going either. Her sister is having a baby shower that weekend. It’s why she invited us because Bl--The President would be up there by himself if she couldn’t come. She thought you and him could hangout while I looked after all the kids and enjoyed some time off myself.”

“Oh.” He frowned. “Well…”

“Well what?”

He set his comb down and walked out of the bathroom. “Why is it so important that he go if his wife and kids won’t be there?”

“Josie said that he went every year on the weekend of the anniversary of his mother’s death. I guess to just get away for a little bit and relax since he rarely does.”

That changed Wyatt’s entire mood instantly. “Oh. Man, I can’t even imagine losing one of my parents. At least, not yet.”

She nodded. “I feel bad.”

Wyatt sat on the bed next to her and grabbed her hand. “I think you should go.”

“Really?”

He nodded.

“I mean, it would be weird right? Just me and the kids with him and his sons.” Gwen was genuinely looking at the situation from her husband’s standpoint and liking it less and less.

“Yeah but maybe it’s a chance for you to get to know him, at least a little. He is the Leader of the Free World and how many people get a chance to say that they actually know the guy personally? And besides, he seems pretty great to me what with the little conversations that do have.”

Gwen wanted to face palm. “You’re just saying that because you voted for the guy.” She tried for humor to distract herself from the fact that she was an awful person.

Wyatt chuckled. “Maybe but still. It could be fun. I hear Camp David is very nice this time of the year. And you know Manó would love to see the stars out in that open sky. Lani would trip over herself being surrounded by all that nature.”

Gwen smiled. Their kids would love it if they went. She swallowed, trying not to be disgusted with herself for trying to justify spending a weekend semi alone with Blake because of her kids.
“You really wouldn’t mind if we went?”

Wyatt leaned into her and kissed her temple. “Go. Enjoy yourself. You deserve a break.”

“Well, so do you.”

“Honey. The house being empty for an entire weekend? That is a break.”

She punched him in the shoulder. Wyatt laughed as he stood up and disappeared into the closet. Gwen smiled at his retreating back.

She didn’t deserve him. She loved him completely. But she didn’t deserve him. Gwen stood up as well and went back to the kitchen, arriving just in time to turn the timer off and take the bread out.

They ate dinner as a family that night and watched a movie. When it was over, Wyatt carried a sleeping Manó to his bed and Gwen softly woke Lani and walked her to her own. She kissed her daughter tenderly on the cheek and shut her door quietly.

Back in their bedroom, Wyatt was already tucked into his side of the bed, eyes resting and opening when he heard her enter. She stayed by the door and smiled at him.

“You coming?” He asked her.

“I think I’m gonna sketch for a little bit. I’ve got this idea of a ball gown and I want to get it down on paper before I forget it.”

“Okay. Go get it, killer.”

Her heart fluttered. “Don’t wait up.”

“Me? Never.” He grinned.

Gwen blew him a kiss. “Night.”

He gave her the peace sign and rolled over in the bed, his back facing away from her. Gwen smiled, sadly. She really didn’t deserve him.

The designer went to her drawing room and sat down at her desk. She drew for about ten minutes before she gave up. She had the idea but she didn’t have the right mindset to flesh it out. Her brain was filled with too much shit she really could’ve done without. She leaned back in her chair and rubbed at her eyes. The one thing she loved about her little home office was that it had a large window behind her desk, giving her a beautiful view of the city down below. Gwen swiveled her chair around and gazed down at the lights. She could see how many people were still up at the hour and it comforted her to know that she wasn’t the only one with demons keeping her up late at night.

The landline ringing caught her off guard. She picked up the receiver to make the loud noise stop in the otherwise silent apartment but didn’t bring the phone up to her ear. She couldn’t even imagine who would be calling their home at this time of the night and she had half a mind to set the phone back down. But curiosity got the better of her, loneliness got the better of her, and she put the phone up to her ear, saying, “Hello?”

“You should be asleep.”

She rolled her eyes at the sound of his voice. “Then why are you calling me?”
“Because the Camp David situation won’t leave me alone.”

She sighed. “How did you even get this number?”

“Really? How did I get your phone number in Hawaii?” Blake asked, rhetorically.

Fair point, she thought. “Josie was just trying to be nice to me.”

“You shouldn’t come if you don’t want to.” He said.

“...How come I didn’t know about your mother?”

There was a brief pause. “The world watches me when I’m stressed out, when I’m happy, when I’m working, and even when I’m taking a day off. I wasn’t about to let them watch me grieve. Not with that. Not when it came to her.”

She swallowed roughly. “I’m sorry, Blake.”

“I know.”

“I wish I’d met her.”

“Me too.”

She bit her nail and swiveled back around to look out the window, twirling the phone cord around her finger. “It’s shitty of me to think I can go and not feel like I’m betraying Wyatt.”

“It’s shitty of me to love you and not think I’m betraying Josie.”

“So we’re agreeing that we’re both shitty people?” She asked, teasing.

“I’d rather be that than not in love with you at all.”

Her breath caught. “Wyatt wants me and the kids to go.”

“What do you want?”

“I want my marriage.”

His breath was slowed.

“But I also want to go.” She said.

“Then come.”

“I don’t think I should.”

“Then don’t.”

She smiled into the phone. “But you want me to.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes.”

She sighed. “It’s just that easy.”

“Nothing easy was ever simple.” He reminded her.
She pondered his words for a minute, watching as, one by one, lights would go out in a flicker around the city the later it got. She saw the lights go out in the apartment window next to theirs. It was symbolic, a perfect metaphor for them.

Her own would stay on all night, all the time. It was another metaphor. Because when it came to them, all they needed was one.

All it ever took was one.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

long chapter for your patience. things are heating up here. trust the process.

Her heels sunk into the damp grass as she exited the car. Her brown eyes were alight with the sun’s morning rays. All around them were different types of deciduous trees in the woodland. The rolling hills and streams connected into one beautiful scenic vision. She had her reservations but whatever she might still be unsure about would completely be upstaged by the stunning nature that currently surrounded her. She liked it here. The air had more warmth and more fragrance. It was breathable.

“Good morning, Mrs. Howlett. My name is Leila. I’ve been directed to oversee your stay here at Camp David per the President’s orders. If you or your children need or want anything, I’m your girl.” The dark-haired woman smiled prettily at her. “If you all will follow me. This is the Aspen Cabin. It will be yours for the entire weekend. Just above the hill is the main cabin where the President and his aides can be found. Golf carts are available and are a suitable transportation to take you there or anywhere around the grounds that you wish to go. All the staff and security ask is that you clear it with your detail so that they can clear it with the ground agents for safe and smooth travel.”

Gwen nodded along, trying her best to listen as she looked at her surroundings. Manó and Lani were beside her, too in awe to wander off by themselves just yet. Leila held the door open to their cabin and they walked inside to reveal a mediterranean style decor; from the terracotta tiles, to the high ceilings, and the paintings that pictured the Balearic Isles. There was so much light and openness and the colors were straight from a palate of a beach, every shade from golden sand and rich wood.

“There are six bedrooms so I’m sure the kids would love to pick out their own.” Leila informed the family.

Her children looked up at her excitedly and she couldn’t even think of teasing them in a moment like this. She nodded, giving them permission to go running up and down the cabin. They raced each other in an instant.

“This is beautiful.” She said to the aid.

Leila grinned. “President Shelton thought the kids would like this cabin the best.”

Gwen’s eyebrows raised. “Did he?”

Leila nodded. “He’s excited that you agreed to come. While we’re all missing the First Lady…” The aid trailed off as if to convey that the employees of Camp David felt anything other than the loss of Josie’s absence. Gwen couldn’t help but smile cheekily at the young woman. She liked her. “We are also very glad to have some new visitors around.”

“Thank you.” Gwen said, kindly.

Leila clapped her hands. “Well, then. I’ll let you get settled in. A couple more things. Breakfast is
brought to your cabin every morning and lunch is served at noon every day. Dinner is at five and you’ll be eating in the main cabin.”

“Anything else?” Gwen jokingly asked.

Leila smiled. “I know it’s a lot at first but we keep a tight schedule to accommodate the President. That should be it for now. If you have any questions, my number is on the side table over there by the door. My cabin is just down the hill if there’s an emergency.”

Gwen nodded.

“It was a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Howlett.” Leila shook her hand and exited the cabin in a flourish.

The designer took a deep breath and stood where she was to just take in her new environment. She was floating around in a space between past and future and liking the haze-like state the open air provided her. When she heard a crash from upstairs, she came back to the present.

“Lani did it!”

“Shut up, tattle tale!”

Her kids screamed from the second level. Gwen shook her head and ascended the stairs to see what damage her kids had already done.

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“Teddy!”

“Manó!”

“Jackson!”

Lani groaned at all the yelling. Gwen smirked and wrapped an arm around her daughter’s shoulders as they walked further into the main cabin. The First Children had already set up camp in the sitting room. A plethora of toys and a gigantic train set sat in the middle of the floor, encased by plush furniture.

Gwen’s son went running to greet his friends while Lani pulled away from her, eyeing a window seat off to the far corner. She loved to take pictures of nature and the view from the main cabin had a perfect lookout over the roaring river down below.

“You must be Gwen.”

The designer turned around, scrunching her face in brief confusion. The man that was approaching her was unfamiliar, yet recognizable. She thought she knew him from somewhere and figured it out immediately when he introduced himself.

“Beau Williams Bryan. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Blake told me you were coming up for the weekend.”

Gwen shook the Vice President’s son’s hand with a wide smile. “The First Lady invited my family.
It looked to be too good of a mini vacation to pass up.”

Beau smiled. “I know how you feel. Anytime I get an invite I run at the chance to clear my schedule.”

“What exactly are you doing here?” Gwen paused and tried again, “Sorry that came out wrong. I just meant--”

Beau laughed. “It’s okay. I’m here to help The President with his decision on the Carter Bill.”

“Oh.”

The twenty something year old smirked. “You have no idea what I’m talking about do you?”

She shook her head in a bashful manner. “I know enough to make informed decisions about my kids schooling and my taxes but that’s about it.”

“That’s okay. It’s not really in the public eye right now anyways. But the man himself invited me out here to get some work and hunting done. I couldn’t refuse.”

She nodded. “I thought he didn’t work on this weekend?”

Beau shrugged. “I feel like if he didn’t at least focus on one thing while up here then he’d be thinking the country was falling apart. He’s already a couple years away from a heart attack. We wouldn’t want that to be the thing that finally does it.”

It was horrible of her to laugh but she couldn’t help it. Beau was surprisingly easy to talk to with his straight black hair and beautifully light green eyes.

“Beau we found the glasses. They were in the library.” Charlie Young, the Chief of Staff, came walking into the room with two intricately looking stemless wine glasses. He stopped when he saw her.

“Gwen. Nice to see you, again. How are you enjoying Camp David so far?”

“It’s beautiful here. We haven’t really done much but get settled in but it’s wonderful.” She replied, genuinely.

“Good to hear it. Well, I’m afraid we’re in a meeting so there’s not much we can entertain you with right now--”

“We can finish tomorrow morning.” Blake rounded the corner of the house, hands stuck in the pockets of his pants as he leaned against the wall. He stared at her with the tiniest of smiles, clearly happy to see her.

Gwen couldn’t help the nose dive her heart took at the sight of him so relaxed, physically and mentally. He was even wearing a white short-sleeve shirt, and some black boots beneath his dark wash jeans.

“Sir, we only have a little more to get through--”

“And I’m telling you we can do it tomorrow. I want to take the kids out on a hike.”

“But if we don’t--”

“Charlie. I said we’ll finish tomorrow.”
Charlie shut his mouth after that but his face was stuck in some sort of scowl that wasn’t directed towards her but was certainly there because of her.

“It’s really no problem, Bl--Mr. President. We can wait until you’re done.” Gwen reassured him, not wanting to cause any trouble when they just got there.

Blake pushed off the wall and walked toward her. She had the overwhelming urge to take a step back but she held her ground.

Blake looked her over, from head to toe, grinning brightly. “We’ve been at this since five in the morning. You and the kids are my rescue believe it or not. Come on,” he tilted his head for her to follow after him as he ventured into the sitting room where the children were still playing.

Gwen caught Charlie’s confused and exasperated look as the President cut their meeting short. Beau seemed relieved for the break.

“Who wants to go for a hike?” Blake asked.

Jackson popped up from his perch in front of the couch and said, “Let me get my boots!”

He rushed upstairs. Teddy sighed, “Daddy, I’m not done building the track.”

“You can finish when we get back. We won’t be gone that long, promise.”

“Fine.” The eight year old stood up. “Come on, Manó. You can wear my old boots. They’ve got wolverine on them.”

The two boys raced each other up the steps. Gwen’s eyes travelled to Lani. The twelve year old was staring at the two adults with an unimpressed look.

Blake cleared his throat and stepped forward. “Hey Lani. Um, I heard you like to horseback ride so I had the horses prepped for a ride if you wanted to do that instead of the hike. I know being with the boys can be a challenge sometimes. You and your mother can even go together if you like.”

Lani looked out the window, face in deep thought. “I’ll go on the hike. But I want to go riding in the morning.”

Blake nodded. “Whatever you want.”

Her daughter sighed as she got up. “I’m gonna go change into some shorts.”

Gwen ran a hand through Lani’s soft hair as she walked past them to the door. “Thank you.”

She got no reply but it was a typical response from her daughter so she let it go and turned to Blake. The mother of two looked behind him and saw that Charlie and Beau had disappeared.

“You goin’ in that?” Blake asked her, smirking at her tight jeans and dress blouse.

“You said you wanted to take the kids out for a hike, not the kids and me. I on the other hand, am going to take a long nap, eat lunch, and enjoy some peace and quiet.” She smirked.

He laughed, surprised at her honesty. “Leave me to deal with four kids on my own.”

She patted his shoulder and walked backwards to the door. “Just helping you to keep your mind busy. Have fun!”
Gwen rolled over in the soft bed and grabbed for her phone on the side table. She saw the time and groaned. It had only been an hour nap but once her head hit the pillow, she realized how tired she truly was. She could have slept for a couple more hours if she had the chance. Considering she didn’t know how long Blake and the kids would be on their hike, she wanted to enjoy whatever time she had to herself before they came back.

Once Gwen washed and brushed her teeth, she ventured outside with only a bathing suit and a towel on. She travelled around the side of the house where the outdoor jacuzzi sat in all of its steaming glory. A plate of food lay on the wooden deck next to the tub. It was her lunch and Gwen thanked Leila in her head for bringing it out there for her to enjoy like she asked.

The designer set her towel on the other side of the deck and slowly lowered herself into the hot water. The cool breeze just managed to bring goosebumps to the surface of her skin and the water took them away one by one. Once fully immersed, she grabbed her plate and phone, turned some Amy Winehouse on, and ate her avocado and egg, sandwiched on a buttered croissant. The music, full stomach, and warm water helped to lull her into an almost trance like state. Her head would fall to the side, occasionally, as Gwen grew more relaxed, more sleepy.

She was drifting back and forth between being aware and just being completely blissed out for what felt like hours. She was floating between that state of consciousness and slumber when her senses heightened abruptly.

Her nose tickled as much from the champagne as from the hint of mint permeating the air, and Gwen opened her eyes slowly to see a flute of the sparkling liquid held out in front of her. She looked up and over to see who the outstretched arm belonged to. She should have known it’d be Blake.

He was sitting on the dry part of the deck, leaning over the water next to her head. She smiled at the one curl that dropped in front of his eyes as he looked down at her.

“Camp David has better service than the Hilton.” She joked, accepting the offered champagne with a wet hand.

“We aim to please.” He replied, brushing off his pant legs. Gwen noticed that he changed out of his jeans and was now wearing dress pants and a crisp baby blue shirt and a dark grey tie.

“Are my kids still alive?” She asked, sipping from the expensive Roederer.

“They are, actually. I had Beau come out on the hike with me. He has them now. They’re swimming in the lake.”

She was impressed. “Lani too?”

He nodded. “She didn’t talk much but she didn’t look like she was having an awful time either so I guess that’s a win.”

Gwen grinned. “Sorry about that.”

He shrugged. “She’s almost a teenager. I get it. Jack will be that age, soon.”
“Boys and girls are different, though.”

He chuckled. “I do feel bad for you more than I do myself.”

She flicked some water at him which he didn’t shy away from, even though it was messing up his clean-cut look.

“You know what’s crazy though? You know that thing I do with my ear? She does it too when she’s nervous. We’ve got the same tick.” He told her, clearly amused at his findings. “Who would have thought. You’re daughter and me.”

Gwen feigned a smile and set her champagne down. “Hey, um, I should probably start getting out. I wanna take a shower before dinner. Not to mention I have to get the kids together.” She stated as she started to stand up.

Blake helped her out of the hot tub like a gentlemen. Gwen was grateful. She stood, dripping water on the deck as her bathing suit adjusted to the dry air. His hands were holding her arms softly and Gwen registered her own hands clutching his shirt. Her eyes had fallen instinctively to his throat, more specifically, his chest as she noticed the few shirt buttons at the top not done. She didn’t know what possessed her to take her hand and move the lapel over just a fraction of an inch so that she could see the black ink that she knew would be there.

The numbers looked like they had thirteen years ago. She scratched a nail over them.

Gwen shivered. Blake, mistakenly believing it to be the cool breeze, reached for her towel and wrapped it around her. He rubbed her arms to create some heat, which brought her closer to his warm body as he continued the motion. Gwen could smell cigarette smoke, feel the warmth of him along her frontside, taste the tinge of his hair gel as he came invasively close. That mint floated through her senses again as he told her why he smelled of cigarettes when she inquired.

“Charlie.” He said in one breath, looking down at her. His finger curled around a lock of brown hair that dangled just above her breast where the towel had parted.

Gwen would not admit it to herself later on, but she was the one to lean in first. She could tell it surprised him, her soft lips moving over his sun-kissed cheek. It was a long kiss. Her lips felt like they had been glued to his face. She didn’t mind as she breathed him in, wanting to smell and taste more.

Blake, to her surprise, pulled away slowly, staring down at her with an open expression.

“I…” She started. Her heart thrilled when his smile curled upward--undeniably pleased. It was that moment that she came back to herself and smoothed her hair back, stepping a couple feet away from him. The distance separated the tension they had created.

“I’m sorry.” Blake said quietly.

Gwen wanted to laugh. She kissed him and he was apologizing?

“I have to get ready.” Was all she said.

He nodded. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

She gave him a small smile and slowly backed away to the corner of the house. Before she left for good, she bit her lip and turned to look at him. His face was hopeful.
“Um. I want to talk. After dinner, if you have the time.” She declared.

Blake stuck his hands in his pockets. “Of course.”

“Great.” She gave him one last tiny smile before disappearing from his sight.

When she got back inside the house, Gwen leaned against the wall and groaned.

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“So you cook, too. Is there anything you don’t do here?” Gwen asked as she walked into the Main Cabin’s kitchen to see Leila stirring some pine nuts with butter in a saucepan.

“I’ve known the President since his first year in his first term. If there’s anything I can’t do by now for him, I should just pack my bags and leave.” Leila smiled at her.

Gwen grinned and drew closer to the stove. “Well, is there anything you need help with?”

“Um...Can you help me knead some of that dough? It’s homemade pizza tonight.”

“Sounds yummy.” Gwen set to work on the flour and wheat.

Before she knew it, her and Leila had started up a little conversation about anything and nothing at all. Leila told her where she was from, how she got to be at Camp David, and where she saw herself in the next five years: married to her high school sweetheart, and working on her Phd.

“What are you studying now?” Gwen asked.

The dough had been dealt with forty minutes ago, giving it the much needed time it had to take to rise and settle properly. Now she was cutting up vegetables for the veggie pizza she and Lani were going to destroy later.

“Arts and Humanities.” She replied.

Gwen hummed, not knowing the slightest bit of what that doctorate entailed.

“So did you go to school for design?” Leila inquired.

“Oh no. I finished high school, stayed at home with my parents for a little bit, learned how to make dresses from this old lady that lived across the street. Eventually, my brother moved to Hawaii and I visited him. I guess you can say I fell in love and before I knew it, I’m living in a tiny little apartment, writing music and designing dresses, living off of the money I made working as a seamstress at the local dress shop.”

“How did you land the White House job?”

“Oh, just dumb luck.” Gwen said, simply.

Leila looked about to say something when the kitchen door swung open. Manó came in with his recorder. Wyatt had bought him the camera as a Christmas present when he kept stealing his father’s. Now, whenever they went somewhere different or tried something for the first time, the nine year old just had to document it. Camp David was no different.
“Manó, not now. Put it away.” Gwen scolded her son.

“Mommy, don’t look into the camera. It messes up the take.”

“Well, put it away. Why do you even have it out right now?”

“I was recording Blake. He’s playing the guitar with Lani.”

Gwen was surprised to hear Blake’s first name come out of her son’s mouth but she didn’t correct him.

“Just take it somewhere else, please.”

Manó rolled his little eyes and left the kitchen just as quickly as he entered.

“Sorry about that.” Gwen said to Leila. The woman just smiled and waved her apology off.

“It’s honestly fine. I’m gonna go grab some more ice from the outside cooler. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” Gwen replied. She was chopping the broccoli and spinach into several pieces when the kitchen door opened again, this time revealing the Leader of the Free World.

He smirked when he saw her and walked over to the fridge, leaning against the door. “Your daughter can already outplay at me twelve.”

Gwen smirked. “What happened to the little impromptu guitar lesson?”

“One of mine spilled some juice on her shirt on accident. She went upstairs to pick out a new shirt.”

Gwen tilted her head in confusion. Blake explained, “Josie’s nieces left some clothes here last summer.”

“Makes sense. Did she freak out?”

He exhaled and crossed his arms over his chest. “Surprisingly, no. It was Teddy and I’m pretty sure that she thinks he’s the cutest thing in the world with the way he hangs off her every word.”

“Somebody’s got a crush.” Gwen teased.

He hummed, smiling. “Like father like son.”

The comment struck her particularly hard but she was saved from replying when the kitchen door flew open. “Mom,” Lani walked in, holding two shirts away from the red stained article already on her skinny frame.

“What’s wrong?” Gwen rounded the corner of the island to get to her.

“Teddy accidentally spilled some juice on me. I need to change but I’m indecisive. You always know what to wear. Which one?”

Gwen smiled down at her daughter before catching Blake’s eyes behind her. She stared at the two options and was just about to give her opinion when Lani and Blake spoke at the same time, saying, “I like the one with the sleeves.”

There was a pause, a shift in the air, when Blake smiled at the twelve year old and Lani attempted
to smile back. Gwen thought it was surreal.

“Sleeves it is.” Lani murmured, turning around to exit the kitchen.

“Man, she looks just like you, sometimes.” Blake breathed.

Gwen’s eyes were fixated on one spot in the room, squeezing shut the moment he made the remark. “Thank God.” She whispered, then turned around to throw him a soft smile over her shoulder. “I’m gonna see if she needs any help.”

Gwen ran into Leila as she was headed towards the door. She excused herself, feeling bad for not helping her with the three ice bags she managed to carry in from outside all by herself. She knew Blake would help her take care of it.

She found the bathroom Lani was changing in and gently knocked. “Do you need help, Lani?”

“No, I’m fine.” Her sweet voice called back.

Gwen nodded, leaning her head against the door. The urge to wrap herself up in a thirteen year embrace was strong yet fleeting. She settled for sitting on the ground, ear pressed to the wall, waiting for her twelve year old to get finished so that she could take another look at her. Gwen didn’t think Lani looked like her at all. It was one of the many things that Gwen had struggled with over the last several years. She felt like there was more Wyatt in her, and that wasn’t a settling thought either.

“Actually, Mom. Can you tie the back of this for me?”

Gwen jumped up when the door opened, immediately pretending like she wasn’t just sitting on the ground like a creep. Lani had her back turned to her anyways as she gestured to the ties at the bottom of the shirt. The mother of two began to tighten it until she reached the top, making a little bow with the strings.

“How’s that?” She asked her daughter as she brushed the lint off of the girl’s shoulders.

“It’s good. Thank you.” Lani turned around and smiled softly. Gwen took that long look that she wanted to earlier and willed her breath to remain the same.

Lani made a weird face at her mother before slowly moving around her. “Is dinner almost done?” She asked as she walked further down the hall.

Gwen nodded even though she wouldn’t be able to see. “Yeah, almost.”

She stood there alone once Lani turned the corner. The comment from Blake had her feeling reluctant to keep on going as she was. It was something that she hadn’t anticipated. She knew she had been running from certain things for years but the thing was, she had finally settled on this. She made her peace a long time ago with it. To suddenly have it thrown back in her face was paralyzing.

But just like she didn’t bother to think about such things in Hawaii, she definitely told herself that she wouldn’t start thinking about them now, not there. Especially, not there.
Gwen watched with pride as her daughter showcased her hula to Leila.

She was seated on the couch, a glass of wine pressed firmly in her hand. Lani and Leila were standing up before her, both moving their hands in motions that Gwen knew were meant to signify nature or emotion. She just didn’t know which ones they were.

Dinner had come and gone. They sat at the table like a little makeshift family and ate and talked to the best of their ability. Charlie and Beau showed up just when the table was being set and Gwen avoided looking at Blake as much as she could throughout the entirety of it, instead focusing on the kids and whatever topic of conversation happened to float up in the air.

After, the men took up shop in the office for a little bit and the younger kids decided to play upstairs in Jackson’s room. That left the women. Gwen smiled into her wine as Lani corrected a hand motion of Leila’s.

“Mom, why don’t you do it? You’re pretty good.”

“Oh, no. I like watching.”

“Please.” Lani pleaded with her blue eyes and Gwen gave in almost instantly.

“What exactly are we showing with this?” Leila asked, practicing a hand motion Lani just taught her. “The problem is my arms, I think.”

“No, they’re not a problem.” Gwen assured her. “Don’t think about your arms. Just address the land, and the sky, and the water.” Gwen told her as she slowly started to move her arms in a fluid motion. “You’re just telling a story. It could be the breeze in a tree or a wave crashing into the ocean. Whatever you want.”

Leila focused on her motions and tried to replicate what she was seeing. Gwen hadn’t danced a hula in awhile and forgotten how calming a performance could be. As she continued on, Gwen could feel a burning sensation in the back of her neck. She looked over her shoulder to see Blake standing in the hallway, hands shoved into his pockets, watching all of them from a distance. But he wasn’t really staring at her. It was Lani that he was looking at and when the younger girl caught the President’s gaze, she gave him a tiny, shy, smile that lifted the corners of Blake’s smile slightly.

Just then, Beau tapped him on the shoulder, beckoning him back to work. Blake took one last look at the women in the room before following after the younger man.

Gwen eventually excused herself to the kitchen so that she could clean up. Leila came in a couple minutes after her hula lesson to help assist and between the two of them, the kitchen was restored back to its former glory. Leila poured them another glass of wine and the two women sat at the kitchen island and talked up a storm once again. She’ll admit that it was nice. Gwen was afraid that she wouldn’t have anyone to talk to up there since Josie would not be coming. But having the younger woman around certainly brightened her spirits.

It was a little over two hours before her son travelled downstairs asking if they could watch a movie in their cabin. Gwen and Leila had gone through almost three bottles of wine just between the two of them. When she finally stood, it hit her like a truck.

She figured she’d better ask Blake before taking his kids with her without his permission. She told Manó to wait while she sought Blake out. He was in his office still, Charlie and Beau with him.
They were all seated around the fireplace, nursing a couple of scotches and moscow mules.

She knocked lightly to get their attention. “Um, the boys want to watch a movie in our cabin. I wanted to make sure you were okay with me taking them?”

Blake shifted in his chair. “Yeah, of course. I figure they’re just going to spend the night there since it’s so late.”

She nodded. “You can check on them when you’re done here.”

“Alright. Thanks, Gwen.”

She managed a smile. “Goodnight Charlie. Beau.”

They expressed their farewells and Gwen left without another look in their direction.

Once she made it back to the kitchen, she told Manó to get anything he brought over and tell Jackson and Teddy to get ready.

“Do you want my help with them?” Leila asked.

Gwen shrugged. “I was thinking of taking another dip in the hot tub after I got them settled. You wanna join?”

Leila’s entire face brightened. “Absolutely.”

Gwen grinned and took their wine glasses to the sink while Leila recycled the bottles. Lani helped them with some last minute clean ups, excited at the prospect of going back to the cabin so that she could facetime her friends back in Hawaii. Because of the time difference, they were six hours ahead. It would still be evening time for them in Oahu.

Once the boys were ready to go, Blake came out briefly to hug them goodbye, reassuring them that he’d be by later on to check on them. Teddy didn’t really want to part from his father but he was also excited to have a sleepover and watch the new Toy Story movie.

“I’ll be around later. Go have fun.” Blake kissed the top of his head and urged the eight year old to put his shoes on.

“We’re gonna be in the hot tub after I get them settled so if you stop by and don’t see us in the house, that’s where we are.” Gwen told him, gesturing to Leila and herself as she did.

Blake nodded. “I’ll just be a couple more hours and then we’re calling it a night.”

“Come on, Mom. We’re ready!” Manó exclaimed, excitedly.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

The six of them filed outside and took the golf carts. Gwen let Lani drive the one she was in along with Jackson. The ten year old had no problem sitting on Gwen’s lap since there was no back seat. It flipped her heart around for some reason but she just held onto him, not too tightly, but tight enough to know he wasn’t going anywhere.

She turned to look back at the golf cart Leila was driving. She had Teddy on her lap, letting him guide the steering wheel as she monitored his movements. Manó was squeezed in tight next to her, hanging on. She grinned and faced forward.
When they got back to the house, Gwen had all of the children change into their pajamas before she helped them make a little fort. It wasn’t like the one Wyatt and Blake made but it would do. Leila came into the room with all sorts of snacks: chocolate, candy, and water because they were already going to be filled to the brim with sugar.

She kissed all three boys on the cheek and turned out the lights as the opening credits began to play. She kept the door cracked just in case of an emergency. Gwen checked on Lani, who was in her room talking on her computer. She wished her a good night knowing she would fall asleep on the damn thing.

Leila met her outside on the deck after she changed into her bathing suit. Another bottle of wine was opened but Gwen was surprised to see the little cheese and cracker platter that Leila must have made with the boys snacks.

“Fancy.” She noted.

Leila dipped her foot briefly into the scalding water,shrugging. “A little bit of r&r never hurt anybody.”

“You got that right.”

Both women submerged themselves underneath the jets and bubbles, sighing.

“I need one of these at my house.” Gwen said.

“Where would it go?” Leila asked.

“We’ll just convert my shower into one. Who needs to be clean, anyways?”

“I just think it’s crazy that you get elected into a position and you suddenly live like a king and queen.”

Gwen sighed. “We can’t all be so lucky. Although, I think Blake doesn’t really care about all this stuff. I mean he much rather go hunting and live on a land of dirt as long as it had water and trees.”

Leila tilted her head. “That’s exactly what he would do. It’s crazy how you got to know him in such little time while working at the White House. One of my friends works in the cabinet and they know nothing about the President other than that he’s a genuinely nice guy.”

Gwen smiled and pretended like that was the truth. “I never thought in a million years that I’d be having lunches with the President and First Lady.” It wasn’t a lie. She never had any intention of seeing Blake and his wife in person. Not in this lifetime at least.

The two women chatted for about an hour before the conversation naturally came to an end and they were content with just soaking and listening to the soft music playing in the background. Gwen couldn’t remember a time where she was this unbothered with life. It was maybe when Lani was first placed in her arms that she last felt no pressing concerns.

It was another hour before Leila decided to call it a night. Gwen wished her a goodnight and proceeded to start heading inside, as well. She turned off the tub and gathered everything that was left that Leila didn’t help clean up before she left. Gwen wouldn’t bother with another shower until the morning. She changed into a pair of pajama shorts and a top, deciding half way downstairs that she would make some popcorn and find a movie on the television to watch.

Before that, she decided to call Wyatt, knowing he’d still be up at the late hour. He answered on
the third ring, and his tired voice made her smile. Gwen decided to take a walk outside as they talked. The couple caught up with each other relatively quickly and before she knew it, the conversation had turned to her parents visit and his family’s upcoming summer reunion that happened every year.

She was just getting to the kid’s schedules for them to make such a trip back to the island when a secret service agent came up to her out of nowhere, politely asking her if she could wrap up the conversation and head back to the cabin. Gwen found the exchange rather odd, considering it was none of the agent’s business but then she caught the sight of Blake’s figure pacing back and forth on her porch. He caught her eyes briefly before looking away. She fought down the urge to tell him and the agent to go to hell.

Gwen told Wyatt that she had to go, making up some excuse about checking on the kids. They said goodnight with a promise of her calling back tomorrow in the morning.

She walked back to the cabin and made eye contact with her former boyfriend. She couldn’t see from her walk but now that she was closer to the house, Gwen saw the little bluetooth device connected to his ear. He was talking on the phone, as well. She was about to say something incredibly snarky before she heard him address Andrea, his secretary. Gwen thought it was Josie. She tampered down her brief anger and went back inside the house.

Gwen thanked whoever stocked the cabins that they thought to put popcorn in it. She popped the bag in the microwave and waited against the counter. Gwen eyed Leila’s forgotten wine bottle opener on the opposite counter. She’d have to remember to return it back to her in the morning, too.

The designer had just poured the cooked kernels into a big bowl when she heard the front door open. “Done with work, already?” Gwen said sarcastically as she ventured to the fridge to pull out the batch of lemonade that was served for lunch.

Blake walked in with a blank face and a vase of flowers, peering over the open door of the refrigerator. Gwen looked up and was surprised to see the contents in his hands. “Where did those come from?” She asked, hand circling around a beer bottle’s neck. She held up the dark brew, silently offering him one.

He shook his head.

Gwen stood up with the container of lemonade. Her eyes went back to the flowers and he handed them to her. “These for me?”

He shrugged. “I meant to give them to you earlier. I remember how much you liked to cook with fresh flowers on the counter to look at. I didn’t think that’d change.”

Her head tilted to the side. “Thank you.” Gwen set the roses on the island as she turned back around to look at him.

He tugged at the bottom of his ear. His tick. “The kids sleep?”

She nodded, watching as he opened the fridge and plucked some sort of lime beverage from the top shelf. He popped the lid off with his teeth, something that never failed to turn Gwen on, which she was ashamed to admit, and closed the door. “By the way, I am sorry for earlier.”

There was too much that had happened earlier for her to know exactly what he was referring to. And she was more pissed about him ending her phone call just now than anything else.

Blake took a sip of his soda and made a face as soon as the carbonated liquid touched his tongue.
He quickly corrected the expression before she could see but Gwen did and rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you just get what you want?”

He looked up at her. “Do you have what you want?”

There was a moment that they were both unclear of his meaning. She looked down at her glass of lemonade and he looked down at his drink.

“Maybe I will have that beer, after all.” He said.

She nodded, letting him pass the moment.

He did the same thing with the beer that he did with the soda, popping the lid off in one fell swoop. He leaned against the opposite counter and watched her stir the sugar she was adding to her drink.

“You know what? I asked the question and I don’t think I want to take it back.” He stated.

She said nothing for a long moment before she realized that he was asking for it by pushing her, but then what came out of her mouth wasn’t exactly what she wanted to say to him. “To answer your question, I don’t know. I like my job but I miss Hawaii and Wyatt wants to work more than he wants to be at home since we moved which means he prefers Hawaii. And that’s fine because it was his home, and his position was there, and his job makes him happy. And he’s a great husband—a great father. I just really want him to be there when I need him. And it’s so frustrating because he’s reminding me a little of you every single day.”

“We’re nothing alike.”

“He can’t commit fully. And once again I’m stuck handling—no, actually, more like juggling all of the pieces by myself.” She took a sip of her drink. “You know I don’t really think I’m ready to talk to you like a girlfriend yet so just stop me if I…” She wiped at her forehead as she stared at the counter, completely frazzled all of a sudden. “He’s a good Dad. You know, when he’s here—or there...You know what I mean. He’s good. This isn’t me complaining to you about my husband. I’m not gonna make myself feel cheap or help us make a mistake that could ruin everything we both have worked so hard to build.”

Blake took a long sip from his beer. “I understand, Gwen.”

“Yeah. You would.”

He gave her a look. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I’m just saying you do understand. You flew to all of these secret locations and you could never tell me and it used to not stress me out but now that my husband is doing the exact same thing and we have kids together it’s like I can’t ask about his day because his day consists of work he can’t talk about. And that’s stressful. I’m stressed out all the time. And this thing now with you isn’t making it any better.”

Gwen sighed, realizing her mistake. “Oh my God, I’m totally girlfriending you right now. It’s like this place is magic. I come here and it’s suddenly like we’re different people and the things that happened before don’t matter...maybe it’s the open air…” She laughed to herself, running a hand through her hair. The mood shifted, like it became a lighter. “I can’t believe I thought it was a good idea to talk about my relationship problems with you.”

“I like it.” Blake teased.
“Uh huh.”
“I don’t even remember why we broke up.”

Gwen scoffed and set her glass aside, looking over to him. “We broke up because you didn’t show up to meet my family.”

Blake’s eyes ghosted over. “Oh, I didn’t mean we actually talk about it--”

“Oh no. I had four days planned in Anaheim. I had things for us to do and things to tell you and you...you flew out to Guam.”

“Guam? Really?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t remember. And don’t make this into a joke. I have been waiting for this moment--”

“If you calm down I’ll try to remember.”

“It’s not funny, Blake.”

He sighed and set his beer down. “Ok. Yeah, I do remember. You said if you don’t show up then that’s it for us.”

“Because you’re a workaholic who creates work to avoid real work.”

“Yeah, well I’m still working on that.” He deadpanned. “But to me...a vacation can’t be an ultimatum.” He pointed at her. “You made it one. How could I have possibly relaxed on a vacation that I was basically gonna be forced on. That was stressful.”

“You just had to show up.” Gwen could hear her voice getting louder and she quickly rectified her mistake and calmed her breathing. “I was just looking for that commitment--a freakin gesture. It didn’t have to be bold. Just something. I just wanted you to show up.”

Blake stared at her until the guilt got to the best of him and he had to look away. He bit the inside of his cheek and nodded to nothing in particular.

“Hey.” Gwen grabbed his attention. “I really loved you.”

It did nothing to persuade him to speak, to reply with an empty declaration back. Gwen sighed, feeling a weight lift from her chest. She rubbed at the corner of her eyes to clear her vision so she could look him in the eyes again to say, “I really loved you and you wrecked everything. All our plans…”

“Loose plans.” He whispered.

“...And I put it back together.” She continued. “By myself. I found a life, in spite of you. And you need to hear this because I’ve waited a long time to tell you--”

“Gwen--”

“You can’t just leave people like that...I was there for you. I was there and you let us go without a backwards glance. How do you justify me letting you back into my life when it was so easy for you to walk out of it in the first place? You can’t let people go and expect them not to cut the cord on you.”
“You gave me an ultimatum. I never gave you one.”

“You left me with no choice.”

“I wanted to be there. I did. And I didn’t not show up for the reasons you think.”

“Give me one reason that you would’ve.”

“Because I love you.”

“Clearly, not enough. Not back then.”

“That wasn’t the only reason.”

“What else is there?”

“Everything!” Blake whisper-shouted. Gwen recoiled and he took a step back, getting his breathing under control. “If you just let me explain.”

“I am.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose with one hand while the other was glued to his hip. He slouched over. “What was I supposed to do when you wanted our life to go one way and mine had to go another? You didn’t want all this.” He gestured to their surroundings. “We talked about it once and you were less than enthusiastic to be First Lady.”

“You were only considering doing this because of your father. You didn’t want all this.” She pointed at him, disgusted that he would try to put their breakup all on her back. “I told you how I felt about it, yes. But you apparently made that decision for us.”

“You think you would have given in so easily Gwen but you’re wrong. You would have stepped foot in that house and tried like hell to get out of it as fast as you could. I wasn’t about to watch you leave me.”

“So you left me instead. Is that right?”

He sighed. “There’s more to it that you’re not getting.”

She scoffed, moving away from him. “No, what you’re not getting is that you single handedly destroyed us because you were too insecure about my love for you. About my loyalty. You had no idea what I would or would not have said yes to. No idea. But if you would have gotten on that plane and met me in California, we would probably still be together right now.” She turned around to look at him, wishing she didn’t when she saw that angered look in his eyes.

“At what cost? My candidacy? Your business? Our kids? You can’t look me in the eyes right now and say that you’re not happy to not be First Lady.” Gwen’s eyes shifted away from his blue orbs and she cursed the reflex immediately. Blake scoffed. “Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

“That’s not fair.” She replied.

“Life isn’t fair!” He threw his hands up and turned to walk back out of the living room that she had led them to in the heat of the moment.

“What is your problem, really?” She asked him, not letting him leave her so easily.

“What is my--?” He whirled around to face her and she had to back up when she realized how
“I don’t have a problem.”

“Really? Then why are secret service agents physically removing me from a phone call I was having with my husband which I’m sure you already knew.”

“Because they do what I say.”

“I don’t do what you say.”

“Why are you fighting me every chance you get? It’s like we take one step forward and you make sure it’s three steps back.”

“Because you expect me to do what you want. I don’t have to defend my actions to you.”

“So don’t kiss me and I won’t.”

“I’m confused. Are you angry that I kissed you or because I had the audacity to call my husband after it?”

“I’m not angry.”

“You sure? ‘Cause it sure feels like it from here.”

Blake sniffed. “I’m angry that you didn’t want to come here in the first place and yet here you are, which leads me to believe that you do want to see me. You wanna be near me but you act like you can’t stand the sight of me. I’m angry that you put your husband on a pedestal when it comes to us when really you know I’m the only one calling the shots at the end of the day.”

“Oh, don’t let your ego get any bigger. I might act like he’s better than you but you’re treating me like I’m somehow a traitor for still loving him. Just because you fell out of love with your wife and your marriage is practically over doesn’t mean we all have the same problems.”

“You don’t want to make this personal, Gwen.”

“I’m standing in a cabin in the middle of the forest in God knows where so you can yell at me? That already feels personal.”

“Then leave.” He shouted.

“I can’t.” She yelled back.

It took a second for them to realize that both their chests were heaving. She took a deep breath and regained her bearings. “I can’t because—” She choked off, feeling those hot tears drain down the back of her throat. She didn’t even know when she had started crying.

“Because what, Gwen? What do you want? Tell me what you want from me.”

“I want you to let me go. For good this time.”

“Anything but that.”

Her breath stuttered. “I can’t leave because you won’t let me go.”

“How do you expect me to do that when you’re standing right in front of me?” It was a terrible cycle. She had to leave him in order for him to let her go and yet she couldn’t leave until he set her free.
She sobered up when the anger that was simmering for thirteen years had started to rise. “Figure it out.” She gritted through her teeth.

“I already have. I figured it out a long time ago. When I met you. When there was a chance for us. I had the house and the land and the garden out back. We were supposed to make a couple of kids together, Gwen. I was gonna hang the pictures and you were gonna hang the stars and you can’t make me let go of all of that by giving you up. Without you, none of that exists.”

“It still doesn’t, Blake.”

“I have the house. We just need to make it a home--make it ours. We have the kids and plenty of pictures and love to go with ‘em.”

She laughed. It was a pitiful sound. “That’s a dream. It isn’t real. It will never be real.”

“Gwen--”

“I get it, Blake. Okay, I do. I see it. That’s the dream.”

“No, Gwen. That’s our second chance. You’re the dream.”

She stopped where she stood, this time it was her heart acting like the anchor instead of her feet. They were too far away from each other and yet not close enough.

She was too weak to understand why the distance was a good thing--great thing even--because she walked the three steps it took to make it to him and kissed him harshly, her inclining lips and the rough movements she made with them to guide his impossibly closer. Blake’s hand lifted to cup her head, tangling his fingers in her hair. The other cupped her waist and pulled her to him. Her mouth opened wider to accommodate his demanding tongue. In a flash she was pulling him closer and in another she was pushing him away until the distance between them was the exact same length of her arms.

“Just wait,” she panted.

He swallowed the taste of her on his tongue, holding her wrists where her hands were planted firmly on his chest.

She hadn’t kissed this man in thirteen years. She hadn’t tasted this man in thirteen years. It confused the hell out of her to suddenly be doing both now. Because being in his arms felt like dying but not being in his arms felt even worse. It was a lose/lose situation and she was sure that he felt something similar.

“Tell me what to do,” he whispered to her then.

Gwen’s head snapped to his. It didn’t occur to her that he would ask. Then again, she understood why he did. She was the one to initiate this. She kissed him first. She pulled away first. She was leading in every sense of the word.

“I don’t--I don’t know.”

Blake seemed to understand because when he stepped into her, arms extended, the next thing she knew she was being pulled against him. Her face automatically tucked beneath his chin to inhale his scent. Besides the obvious spritz of his expensive cologne, there was Blake’s unique smell.

Her hands wrapped around his frame instinctively, rubbing soft lines up and down his spine. He
was so warm. Always warm. Inviting, charismatic, charming, calm, even in the face of uncertainty.

“I don’t want you to look at me the way you do,” he started, whispering into her hair. “You have to
know that I love you. And I don’t want you to hate me anymore.”

“Shh,” she coaxed against his throat, a tear slipping down her cheek. She realized why she was
crying. She was crying because she didn’t hate him, even though he gave her every reason too. She
was crying because dying in his arms was a much better fate than not being in them. She had been
kidding herself, all along. She didn’t care about staining the White House with a scandal. She
didn’t care about her job or future at said house.

All she cared about was one night with him. All she cared about was right now. The way his face
softened when she looked at him with anything but hate, the way her desires were slowly making
themselves well-known, the way she finally recognized her unstoppable way of holding a candle
for this man anywhere she went. Because she loved him. She really loved him like the earth loved
the sun. Why else would it follow it so willingly around the exosphere. Blake was her moon,
pushing and pulling the ways of her heart.

Just like it was doing now. She didn’t think about it any further. She pushed up on her toes and
landed a soft, passionate kiss to his lips, cradling his face in her hands. She knew it was selfish,
what they were doing, giving into their urges. But it was just one night. She wanted one night to
forget about all of her problems.

Blake didn’t react, at first, to the kiss. But then, his lips moved, and began to kiss her back, flinging
his hands around her waist in a possessive manner, with all the adoration that he had for her. His
kiss was firmer than Wyatt’s and she hated that she had to compare the two. She was just so used
to his softness that Blake’s solid presence, his solid and firm touch, reminded her that she was not
as put together as she liked to think she was. He was holding her up. He was keeping her together.
It was a good thing she supposed. If Blake didn’t feel like Wyatt, it would be easier to push the
pain out of her head and heart. The last thing she needed was a reminder to choke her up for the
rest of her life with guilt for kissing Blake tonight.

She pulled back at the thought before realizing that she saw no remorse in his eyes and she felt
none in hers. She grabbed the back of his neck and pulled him down into another feverous kiss that
had both of their heads spinning. In an instance, the softness from earlier that he had exhibited, that
she had willfully accepted, was gone and there was nothing but a hurried pace of limbs and lips to
fill its void.

Her free hand went to pull at his tie, tugging him as she walked backward, toward the front of the
couch. Blake groaned against her lips, still letting her control their movements. He didn’t fight her
when she fell back against the cushions, pulling him on top of her. He didn’t say a word when she
loosened the tie from around his neck and untucked his shirt from his slacks. She expected him to
say something when she reached for his belt but he didn’t then, either. She thought she should, felt
like she could, but knew she wouldn’t. She took extra care in making sure she didn’t by crashing
her lips against his, grinding teeth against teeth and skin against skin. He dipped his head,
passionately, low, and took control of the kiss, settling her back against the couch cushion as he
remained on his knees on the floor. Him initiating something convinced her to begin the task of
unbuttoning his shirt.

His mouth was too distracting and she got frustrated halfway down and was surprised when she just
ripped the rest of the shirt apart. He broke their kiss, immediately.

“I’m sorry. Don’t stop.” She apologized.
She knew she was his own, personal kryptonite. That’s how they got to be where they were, now. It wasn’t fair, what she was asking him to do. But she does it anyways because deep down in her heart, she will always love Wyatt, but she will always love Blake more.

Soft lips found her neck and Blake trailed kisses, licks, and tender bites along her throat. Blake had thirteen years to practice loving another woman and it reflected through the ministrations he bestowed on her as he commanded her legs open with one quick tug to her thigh. With her legs now open to him, he found a place between them, pressing the growing erection he had against the heat of her underneath her pajama pants. Gwen grinded her hips upward, relishing in the friction she felt as both of their pelvises moved as one. Her breath caught in her chest as he yanked the fabric of her shirt up, exposing her bra and stomach.

His lips travelled lower, pulling down one bra cup to take her small breast in his mouth. The other hand went to work on her shorts and underwear, discarding them on the floor next to him. Gwen reached for his belt again and slipped it off. It made a sound as it clattered onto the floor, hitting the part where the carpeted rug didn’t touch. The button and zipper were next, undone in a haste, and Blake groaned softly when she tuck her hand beneath his boxer briefs and retrieved him, hard and ready and wanting.

He looked at her and she nodded once, eyes glued to each other as she guided him into her. Her muscles involuntarily tightened around him, and she willed herself to relax as she drew her hands up to the sides of his face. Blake leaned forward to place a soft kiss onto her forehead.

She knew it would be like this. Him by her side through it all. She knew it from the way they made love. Eye to eye, body glued to body, until Gwen couldn’t take it any longer and moved against him fervidly.

Blake sighed softly and it was like a dam had broken. Soon, they were grinding against each other, hands grasping whatever they could, whether it was an arm or a thigh or a strand of hair.

The rhythmic slaps of skin filled the room, along with Gwen’s gasps of delight and Blake’s heavy breathing. It felt good, if only for the night, if only for a moment. Because here, here she was safe in his arms. Here, she didn’t need to worry about the rest of their lives because the rest of their lives were so far out of reach.

Gwen raked her nails down his back, encouraging him to be harsher, firmer with her. Blake understood, immediately, biting at the crook of her neck as he snapped his hips, obeying her silent demand. She curled her legs around his waist and rested her feet on his back, taking every painful, blissful thrust. Her head fell back and her eyes closed. The couch creaked under their forceful union, moving an inch forward and backwards every time he moved inside her.

Gwen could feel the beginnings of an orgasm build up. She didn’t know how she managed to pull him up off the floor, flip him over onto the couch until she was on top of him with him still fully inside of her. She rested her hands on his chest, making eye contact as she began to move her hips against him. Blake tucked one hand behind his head, resting the other on her thigh as she rode him. She could tell he was trying not to groan too loudly with the way he clutched his jaw.

Gwen snapped her hips, picking up speed. Her eyes fluttered closed as she came undone around him. Blake settled both hands on her hips and guided her on top of him. Their eyes never left each other for the time it took for him to come inside of her. He leaned up when he did and captured her lips with a devilishly seductive kiss, causing them both to groan into each other’s mouths.

It was the release she had been looking for and she was helpless to feel bad about it in the moment. Not when his mouth was on hers, not when he felt this good underneath her.
She’d have stayed there for the rest of the night if she could. Because the guilt of her actions didn’t come to her until they were apart. When Blake’s personal cell phone rang with a call from Charlie, she got off of him slowly, her legs feeling like jelly. He had tucked himself back into his slacks, leaving the zipper and button undone as he walked to the kitchen to take the call.

It was work. It was always work. Gwen had retrieved her underwear and shorts, putting them back on as she fixed the couch and rug. She wiped at her eyes when she felt the tears come. She didn’t spare him even one look as she climbed the steps, quietly. She needed that shower after all.

She cursed the time alone. Because her mind wouldn’t let her forget that she was an awful person. That she was a cheater, a liar, a terrible mother. The only thing she was grateful for that night was how the stream of water beating down on her kept the real tears she was crying hidden. No one would be able to tell the difference in here.

She couldn’t even tell the difference herself. She knew she had changed her character going forward. She could not claim to be who she was before, not after what she did downstairs. But one thing was as clear to her as ever.

The condition of her soul was in the hands of God. There was nothing more than that. And nothing less.
She shut the water off and opened the shower door, jumping a moment later when she saw Blake sitting on the toilet seat, hands clasped and head down. Gwen studied him for a moment with uncertainty painted across her face. She had half a mind to think that he would leave after he was done with his phone call.

“What did Charlie want?” She decided to ask, grabbing a towel from the shelf to cover her naked body from his eyes even though they weren’t on her.

Blake sighed, still not looking up. “We just lost some votes on a bill we’re trying to get to the senate floor. Votes that we needed, badly.”

She nodded, not even sure she had the energy to care. Gwen stepped out of the tub and wrapped the cloth around her body more tightly. She didn’t say anything for a time because all of her thoughts were a jumbled mess inside her head.

“What are we going to do?” She asked, quietly.

“I don’t know.”

“What do you want to do?”

Blake rose from the seat, pausing as he tugged at the bottom of his ear. Then he walked towards her with measured slowness. “The simple act of being in love with you is enough for me. You’re everything and then some. And I’ll do whatever it is you want me to do. What do you want?”

Something broke in Gwen’s face, and for a second, she could feel the young girl that ran off to California and expected him to follow her.

“I want to go back thirteen years and wish I never dropped that song.”

He reached out to tuck a lock of dark hair behind her ear, unable to keep from touching her. She didn’t pull away, and it was a small comfort after what she just said to him.

“How am I looking at you?”

“Like you’re about to make me a promise.”

He winced at her assessment before murmuring again, “I’m sorry. I don’t know how else I can convince you that I want nothing more than for you to be happy.”

Gwen blinked in surprise at his words. Her breath caught when he cupped her face between his
hands, holding her gaze steadily. She closed her eyes, tightly. “Don’t say I love you, again. Please, just don’t.” She pleaded.

“Okay.” He relented and Gwen opened her eyes, looking up at him plaintively. He took a breath and she prepared herself for whatever he was going to say.

“I love your heart beat.” He declared fiercely, and she couldn’t help the small grin that was blossoming over her face as he found a way to tell her without actually saying the exact words. “And I am gonna promise you only this. I will always love your heart beat.”

The contentment that swelled on her face told Blake that she still trusted him. He wasn’t sure how much trust was worth after all that happened, but the kiss she brushed against his cheek told him that it was invaluable.

“Can I stay here until you fall asleep?” He asked when she pulled away.

Gwen couldn’t have rejected him even if she wanted to. She nodded and he lead the way to the bedroom. She didn’t bother putting on any clothes as she left the towel on the floor and crawled beneath the covers. He followed after her, fully clothed in his attire from earlier. He was still warm and the fabric felt soft as it brushed against her bare skin.

She laid her head on his shoulder and ran her hand up and down his chest. “Blake?”

She could feel him frown, knowing quite well that she was about to ask him something about his life before her, or hell, maybe even about his life with her back in it. He could always tell with the way her voice would go up an octave.

He hummed.

“Josie.”

“What about her?”

“What isn’t about her?”

“What about her, Gwen?”

She sighed. “Why her?” She asked, looking at him expectantly.

“Why do I feel like you’re trying to draw a comparison?”

“I’m not. I just want to know why you married her.”

“You want to know why I married her or you want to know why I didn’t marry you?”

“Jeez, stop with the questions as answers. Okay? I just want to know. I’m curious. You have questions about Wyatt, I’m sure.”

He sighed. “…What kind of coward was I to marry her and not wait for you?”

She paused. “That’s not what I--”

“I know what you’re trying to get at...I love her because she made it easy for me to love without having to use my entire heart. I feel like she knew that about me, instinctively. I feel like my father knew that about her when he introduced her to me.”
“Do you miss her?” She asked, feeling insecure all of a sudden.

“I’ve thought about her.”

“Did you think about me? These past thirteen years?”

“Not as often as I wanted to.” He placed a kiss in her hair.

“Why didn’t you get on that plane?”

He placed several more kisses in her hair. “I’m sorry.”

Those two words held more meaning behind them than he was willing to reveal. There had to be more. He didn’t not get on the plane just because she didn’t want to be First Lady or because she gave him an ultimatum. But he had told her all he was going to that night. He was done sharing.

Gwen turned away from him, laying on her side, her back facing Blake. He sighed and moved closer, wrapping an arm around her stomach.

“Please, don’t doubt me. I love you and anyone or any thing else only matter as far as they lead me to you.”

“Everything just happened so fast.” She didn’t know if she was talking about before or now.

His arm tightened. “I can’t change the way I feel, Gwen.”

She nodded, knowing she couldn’t change the way she still felt about Wyatt either.

“Try to get some sleep. We’ll talk more tomorrow.” He whispered.

Gwen closed her eyes, feeling for his hand in the dark. She latched onto it, hoping and praying like hell that she didn’t let go of it in her sleep.

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He woke up in the middle of the night to take off his shirt. It was too hot in the bedroom. Gwen woke up for a second before falling back to sleep. The next time she woke was to him exiting the bathroom. Even in the dark, she could see that he got rid of his pants, as well. He came back to her in nothing but his boxers and she smiled at the sight, never knowing if she would see this image again.

In the morning, Gwen was the first to rise. She wasn’t used to calm mornings like this, wasn’t used to a slow awakening with the crack of dawn teasing at the window frame. Today, she had no care of the time, nor the date. That would have required raising her head to look at the clock ticking in the corner, or leaning over the body beside her to look at Blake’s cell phone on the side table. She didn’t want to risk waking the man beside her, and she was too comfortable to roll over and look at the clock herself.

On the side that Blake laid on, his arm was cradling her head, his hand holding it loosely to his shoulder so that his fingertips were resting against the lines of her straight hair. Thanks to her shower the previous night, her hair was still soft to the touch, and unbeknownst to her, one stray strand was tickling the very tip of his nose whenever he exhaled.
Her ear was pressed tightly against his shoulder, though she couldn’t tell if it was from his cradling or the fact that both of her arms were curled around his other arm. Her nose was pressed against him, as well, and he could feel each breath on the contours of his arms, even in his slumber.

The arm she was holding was wrapped around her torso, settling on her lower back. If his hand placement was any lower, the morning would've ended in one way. But the hints of dawn spreading into the room told her that anything other than laying there would get interrupted before it truly began, and that was something they both could not afford, considering the consequences and the little faces just down the hall that belonged to them both, respectively.

She took a breath and her body pressed into his. It reminded her of the previous night once more, and she told herself that she had to stop thinking of it because it would never happen again. This would never happen again.

Unconsciously, he tightened his arms around her and she moved with him, nuzzling her face against his shoulder a little more. She could feel it this time, her mass of hair covering his face. The moment was starting to end, this blissful early moment of stillness and brushing skin would be no longer once he woke up fully. She could feel him beginning to wake as it was. His breathing started to change, and then he moved ever so slightly at the feeling of eyelashes brushing against his skin. His muscles stretched out and breathed their first breath of a new day, pulling parts of him away from her.

Blake let out a yawn and she began to get up but his arms pulled taut around her. “Not yet,” he murmured, his voice still gruff and filled with sleep.

“Blake…”

“Not yet,” he repeated, his face settling down in her hair once again.

They were silent as the sun raised higher in the sky. Their sleep-filled breaths mingled with the afterglow of a few hours resting after a long night of intimacy, fighting, and love. But Gwen couldn’t let them stay there like that for much longer. Her arms pulled away from him.

“Gwen.” He protested again.

“The kids.” She reminded him.

“They’re sleeping.” He told her, eyes still closed and arms still wrapped around her small frame.

“Blake.” She scolded, disapproving of the way his hand drifted lower, tugging her against him in all the ways to make her putty in his hands. “We can’t.” She managed to get out.

“Oh, we can,” his voice was a deep rumble in her ear. He shifted closer and she felt his morning wood. “And we should--”

“We should get up. They’ll be awake any minute.”

“Then we’ll be quiet.”

He wasted no time reclaiming her lips with his, slowly at first, then passionately the next. Her hand travelled to the back of his neck and tangled in the soft curls that grew there. His arm trailed from her back to the back of her thigh, lifting her leg up over his. Blake’s lips moved to her neck and then to her collarbone, slowly dragging his tongue down the middle of her chest while Gwen’s hands found themselves in his hair.
“Blake, come on,” she whispered, trying to get his attention back on her eyes so she could tell him to stop, once again.

And as if God was on her side, there was a knock on the door suddenly. Jackson’s sleepy voice was muffled through the wood as he asked, “Gwen? Can we have waffles for breakfast?”

A groan came from Blake as he rolled himself off of her. Gwen smirked for two reasons. The one because she had told Jackson and Teddy to call her by her first name instead of Mrs. Howlett or Miss Gwen and she was happy that he remembered and decided that he was comfortable enough to still do it when he did. The other reason because of Blake’s reaction at them being interrupted, like she knew they would.

She stole a kiss from Blake before she got up, finding a shirt and a pair of pants to put on. She opened the door just a fraction and Jackson’s handsome face greeted her. He stepped back, shyly.

“Sorry if I woke you.”

She shook her head and wrapped an arm around his shoulders as she closed the bedroom door quickly so that the ten year old couldn’t get a glimpse of his father half naked in her bed.

“I’ve been up for awhile, don’t worry.” She reassured him as they reached Manó’s bedroom. Teddy and her son were inside watching a transformers movie. “You guys ready to eat breakfast?” She asked.

The two boys nodded and got up. They followed her and Jackson down the stairs. When they passed through the living room, Gwen made sure to keep her eyes away from the couch. She had the boys sit at the kitchen island while she started on the food. The three of them played a video game on their individual handheld game consoles.

It didn’t take long for the smell of chocolate chip and waffle mix to waft up the stairs, waking Lani up. The twelve year old walked into the open kitchen with a sleepy face and a small grin.

“Waffles? With chocolate chips? Who are you and what have you done with my mom?”

Gwen smirked. “The boys asked for it and we are on vacation.”

She sat at the only other empty seat at the island next to Manó. “Yeah, okay.” Her daughter looked on at the boys’ screens as they continued to play a racing game.

Gwen served the kids first before she made a plate for herself. She was just pouring herself a glass of orange juice when the cabin door opened. Blake walked in holding a bouquet of flowers. Gwen was surprised to see him considering she thought he was still upstairs, unable to leave until she got the children back into their rooms or out of the house so that he could leave out the front door.

She was even more surprised to see that he had changed into a pair of old jeans and a flannel shirt. His hair was semi-wet, as if he had taken a shower.

“Daddy!” Teddy exclaimed as swiveled around in his chair.

Blake walked over to his sons and kissed them both on the head. He squeezed Manó on the shoulder and stopped just in front of Lani. He held out the bouquet of lilies. Lani paused.

“For you. I gave your mother some yesterday. I didn’t want you to feel left out.”

Gwen could barely see the smile that was on her daughter’s face from where she stood. “Wow.
Thanks Blake.” Lani took the flowers and smelled them.

“I figured we’d go horseback riding today.” Blake offered.

Lani turned to look for her mother’s permission. Gwen nodded, still too choked up by the display in front of her.

“Sounds good.” Lani replied.

Blake smiled, looking around the kitchen at their breakfast. “I see you guys already ate. You know there’s staff that will do that right?” He told Gwen.

She grabbed another plate from the cupboard and shrugged. “Jackson asked for waffles. I figured why not.”

“Hey, Dad. Can we call Mom when we’re done eating?” His oldest asked just as his name was mentioned.

Gwen, accidentally, dropped the silverware that she grabbed from the drawer. “Sorry.” She apologized.

Blake watched her reaction to hearing his wife’s name. He tried to reassure her with his eyes but she was avoiding looking at him. “Yeah, we can. You can probably talk to Grandpa while you’re at it. He’s been meaning to convince you to go on a hunting trip with him and Uncle Nate.”

“But Grandpa is super old. He can’t hunt anymore.” Teddy said, stuffing a large piece of waffle into his mouth. Gwen smiled at him.

“Don’t say that in front of your gramps.” Blake warned him, running a hand through the boy’s curls.

“Mom, I’m done.” Manó announced, handing her his plate.

“Me too.” Jackson stated.

Theodore tried to say that he was too despite the other untouched waffle in front of him, covered in syrup. Blake gave him a pat on the back. “Go. I’ll eat the rest.”

Teddy hopped off the chair and waited as Blake retrieved his phone out of his back pocket, handing it over to Jackson. All three boys went to the living room to watch tv, while Jackson dialed his mother’s number. They sat on the couch and Gwen grimaced for what felt like the hundredth time that day.

“I take it you don’t want this then?” She gestured to the food in her hands.

Blake waved it over and he took it from her hands, setting it down in front of him. He ate Teddy’s waffle in three large bites before digging into the two she had prepared for him. Lani watched in fascination as he practically inhaled his plate.

“That’s disgusting.” She decided before getting up, her own finished plate now sitting in the sink. Blake poked her in the side as she walked past him, exiting the kitchen. Lani laughed and swatted at his hands before going to the window seat to take some more pictures of the rising sun.

Gwen walked around the counter to Blake. He put his hand on her hip briefly, squeezing the flesh gently before he picked up his knife, again.
“How did you leave this morning?” She asked in a near whisper.

His eyes sparkled as he looked up at her. “The back door.” She paused. “You didn’t know the cabin had a back door?”

She hit him in the arm when he started to laugh. “It’s not funny.”

His hand returned back to her hip, kneading softly. “It really is.”

Her hand found his and she slowly moved it back to the counter. “Not in front of the kids.” She murmured.

He nodded and went back to finishing off the last of the scraps. “Did you eat?” He asked.

She shook her head. “I will.”

“How about I take Lani out for a ride while you do. You mind watching the boys?”

“I got it. But I can go with you guys if you want. We can all go, in fact.”

“Jackson hates riding and Teddy isn’t old enough to handle it. I asked Manó yesterday but he said he wasn’t interested.” Gwen bit her lip. “We’ll be okay if that’s what you’re worried about. Just around the lake and back.” He stood up. “Unless, you really want to go? I can ask Leila to babysit. I just remember how sore you got everytime we went.”

Gwen suddenly remembered that too and didn’t really want a repeat of that particular trauma, even though she liked the horses and loved riding them. “No, that’s okay. You two go. I think I’ll just let the boys play outside for a little bit while you guys are gone.”

“You sure?”

She nodded, grabbing his empty plate. “Lani.” She called to her daughter. “Go put some riding clothes on.”

The twelve year didn’t have to be told twice as she started up the stairs.

“Gwen.”

She hummed as she started on the dishes. She startled when she felt his chest press against her back and his hands on her hips. “Blake--”

“Are you upset with me?”

She sighed. She didn’t know what she was. She wasn’t sure about anything anymore, least of all Lani and Blake spending all this time together. “No, I’m not.”

She turned around and moved him a couple of feet away from her. He tilted his head and asked her with his eyes again. Before she could say anything else, Teddy ran into the kitchen asking for some milk. Blake blinked before he turned and got his son a glass from the cabinet.

Gwen exhaled and turned back around to start on the dishes. Once Teddy was taken care of, Lani strode downstairs, proclaiming that she was ready. Blake had no time to continue his interrogation as he lead Lani outside. The designer was almost thankful for the space as she set about cleaning up.

If there was one thing she knew, is was that they were treading on thin waters here. She wondered
how in the hell they were going to survive beyond Camp David’s gates.

Gwen smiled as she stared out the window at the boys. They were playing a game of baseball with little makeshift bases that Gwen had helped them make with some slabs of firewood and some white paint they found in the closet (apparently by the backdoor). Jackson had pitched a strike against Manó and the nine year old cursed. She would have scolded him for the use of language but she didn’t want to be that mom. She decided to top off her mug with the last bit of coffee she made and go and sit on the couch. She had stopped shivering every time she looked at it, which she guessed was a good sign. Gwen decided to call her brother and see what he was up to now that he was engaged to be married and a soon-to-be father.

“Elena bought us tickets to see Hamilton.” Dash said as soon as he answered the phone.

“How’d she manage that?”

“Her friend knows a guy who knows a guy who knows a girl.”

She smiled down at her toes.

“So, how’s Camp David?” He asked.

Gwen shrugged, still preoccupied with her feet. “It’s going good. I’m assuming Mom told you where I was.”

“Who else?”

She smirked. “She can’t keep a secret to save her life.”

“I didn’t know it was a secret. Now you going with just the President...that’s a huge secret.”

“Dash...just don’t.”

“What’s he like? I mean, I haven’t seen the fucker in thirteen years.”

“He’s a gentleman. He’s still smart as ever. We’re having a good time.”

“That’s all? No first kiss as married people to other people, yet? Come on, give me something. My sex life is dryer than the Sahara desert right now with Elena pregnant.” Dash complained.

Gwen laughed. “You are ridiculous. She’ll be having mood swings here shortly and you’ll be intimate with each other again.”

She could hear him smirking. “You know it’s still gets me that you’re old and a mother with two kids and you still can’t say sex.”

“I can say it,” she scoffed. “I just choose not to when I’m talking to my little brother.” Gwen expressed, pointedly.

“Whatever you say, Mama.”
“Shut up, Dash.”

“This is why Dad calls us the Haynes sisters. I wanna be Judy if we’re talking White Christmas at this year’s Christmas party, though.”

“Why am I Betty?” Gwen asked, mildly indignant.

“Because you love Bing Crosby.”

“Well, I don’t love Rosemary Clooney.”

“Complain to someone who cares.”

Gwen shook her head. “I just called to say hi and now that you’ve insulted me, I can hang up without feeling bad.”

“Wait--”

The phone clicked and Gwen laughed somewhat evilly to herself as she left the device on the table, heading upstairs to change. There was a large sized mirror in the living room that she noted last night when she and Blake were making love. It was the perfect size for her to practice some of the ballet that Lani had forced her to learn with her when she was first giving dance a try.

She went back downstairs and made a little dance space for herself. Her eyes followed the reflection in the mirror as soon as she started, critiquing her every move. Gwen’s supporting leg, the left, was on point as she rotated the right. She could feel her toes on the inside edge of her thigh as they were pointed straight, just above the knee of the left. Her arms were extended outward in the air, keeping her balance in tact as she posed her chin to the side and up. Gwen held it for several seconds before going back to third position.

She repeated emboité. This time, her eyes strayed to the dark fabric of her leotard. She had brought the garment for other purposes, intending to use it for her workouts. It hugged and traced every single crease and muscle of her lean body. As she splayed her arms, the strength she transferred from one limb to the other could be felt in her legs and feet, all working perfectly in sync with the smooth planes of her chest, the graceful curve of her back.

She continued on in this way until the boys wanted another snack. She cut them up some fruit and cheese and gave them some crackers with juice before sending them back outside to play. Gwen returned to her “dancing” and didn’t stop again until her limbs begged her to.

She broke position and returned to first before relaxing entirely. While stretching her neck, she walked over to the tiny, wooden, dining room table to retrieve the half empty water bottle from one of the kids. As she drank vigorously, brown eyes moved back to the antique mirror in the living room, admiring the sweaty angles of her face.

She needed a face lift, she thought. And more sun. Her stomach growled. And apparently, food.

The cabin’s door opened then. Gwen didn’t have to turn around to see that it was Leila entering with a ton of bags of groceries from God knows where.

“Since no one is aware of the time around here, lunch has passed so I guess we’re moving right on to dinner.” She reminded.

“Sorry. The kids ate a big breakfast and they had a couple of snacks for lunch to hold them over.”
“That’s alright. But we’re having dinner here. President’s orders. Go take a bath.” She ordered.

Gwen nodded, stuffing the cap back onto her bottle. “I’m not filling the bathtub up twice. The boys will need one.” Gwen wiped at her face and neck with a towel as she moved to help her carry some of the bags over to the kitchen area.

“Go take a shower then and I’ll run the boys a bath.” Leila said while she unpacked a bag of fresh fruit, bananas and maja. Gwen hadn’t seen maja since she left Hawaii.

“That bathtub did look nice... Maybe the boys can take a shower just this once.”

“You should wear that white dress you were talking about yesterday.”

Gwen shrugged. “If you let me borrow those heels.”

Leila laughed and Gwen admired the way her eyes crinkled in the corners, somehow only heightening her attractiveness.

“You can wear them. Now, go! I’m starving.” Leila shooed her away upstairs. Gwen went right to the guest bathroom, if you could even call it that, and walked right in. The room was just an open space with a single white bathtub in the center of the floor. It had a view of the river and she was sure whoever decided to put the room here had every intention of soaking and looking out at the incredible scene down below.

She played some music on her phone as she started the water, humming some Bruce Channel. Once the bath was finished, she stripped hastily, too busy dancing like an idiot to care where her leotard and tights landed or how far in disarray they looked off of her sweaty body.

Sinking into the lukewarm water, Gwen sighed. She laid her neck back against the edge and closed her eyes as she nodded and sang along to the next song. Eventually, she landed on an artist she didn’t know and the lyrics escaped her. It let Gwen’s mind rest for a couple of minutes while she laid there, completely relaxed.

Eventually, there was a knock on the bathroom door, startling the brunette.

“Mom! Dad called! I told him you were taking a bath.” Lani called to her.

Gwen was surprised to hear her daughter’s voice, not knowing when she and Blake would be back. Gwen just now realized that she promised to call Wyatt this morning yesterday and she had forgotten. Too busy having another man sleep beside her. She felt that familiar feeling of guilt rise up in her throat.

“I’m getting out!” She shouted back.

The only part Gwen liked about taking a bath in less than hot water was that she never felt that rush of coldness after she stepped out and dried off. She wrapped herself in a towel and travelled to the bedroom. Lani was already in her shower, no doubt sweaty from her ride, singing loudly for everyone in the house to hear.

Gwen pulled out the white dress from the closet and slipped it on easily. She stood in front of the mirror with her thigh-length dress and did a twirl to regard her backside. She was always self-conscious about her looks, but being there at Camp David, where the only people who knew her where either her kids or Blake’s, Leila, who she now considered a good friend, and Charlie and Blake, Gwen relaxed. The only one that she was unsure about was Beau but she didn’t think he cared much about her as far as the looks department went.
Gwen towed her head one last time, put on the heels that Leila retrieved and let her borrow, grabbed the blow dryer, and some of her makeup and foundation, before walking the length of the hallway to meet Leila down in the kitchen. But as she got to Lani’s room, the only other bedroom besides her own that had a shower, she saw Blake trying to dress the boys inside. He stood in the center of the room, shirt half open and jeans half done. He looked like he needed a shower while their kids were already finished with theirs. Teddy was shivering while wrapped in a towel, his red and brown curls sopping wet. Jackson had underwear on and was busy toweling his head off. Blake was helping Manó button his blue dress shirt while her son tried to put on his jeans at the same time.

“Dad, when are we going fishing?” Jackson asked.

The father of two finished with the shirt buttons. “Your mom brush your hair?” He asked Manó. The nine year old nodded.

“Teddy grab me the comb.”

The eight year old scurried over to the bathroom counter in his towel and retrieved the hair tool, handing it over to Blake.

“We’re going tomorrow, Jack.” He finally answered his son as he ran the comb through Manó’s blonde hair. “Teddy, put your boxers on.”

“I want to go commando.”

“Where did you even hear that?” Blake asked his son, perplexed.

“Grandpa.” Jackson answered for his brother.

Blake shook his head. He had finished with the comb and used his fingers then to get the rest of the kinks out her son’s hair. “Alright, one down, two more to go.” He declared, rubbing Manó’s head.

“Blake, can I go watch tv?” Manó asked.

“Yeah, go for it. Teddy I’m not gonna tell you again. Start getting dressed. I’m checking for underwear when I get out of the shower. Jackson you too.”

Gwen left the door frame before she could be spotted. She beat her son downstairs and went straight for the kitchen where Leila had already started on the casserole. Gwen connected the blow dryer to the second outlet near the window. Gwen looked on as Leila cut up some broccoli as the designer brushed her hair out and then blow dried the ends first.

“You look beautiful.” Leila complimented her when she finally looked up after the blow dryer stopped.

Gwen blushed. She’d always thought she was attractive in a classic sort of way. Like Marilyn but less outgoing. Audrey but with none of the grace she possessed. Almost like a queen and yet she felt every bit a commoner. She was the spitting image of her mother at this age with just a hint of her father. Gwen had those trademark, deep, brown, eyes and thin lips. She had high cheekbones and a perfectly round chin. She wore red like it was black and carried herself in such a way that was subtle, yet, timeless--at least that’s what she’s been told. Come to think of it, Blake had said something similar to her all those years back.

“Thanks. What are you going to wear?” She asked Leila.
“That red dress with the slit.”

“That’s cute?” Charlie asked as he and Beau entered the kitchen.

“Where have you two been?” Gwen asked.

“Working.” Came Charlie’s gruff answer.

“You think what’s cute?” Leila complimented.

“You too look handsome.” Leila complimented.

“The boss wanted everyone to dress up.” Beau stated.

“You have any idea why?” Charlie asked the two of them, eyes lingering on Gwen longer than she liked.

The two women both shook their head. Gwen started applying her makeup, looking at her reflection through the window in substitute for a mirror. She vaguely paid attention to everyone as she worked. She thought she heard Leila say she was going to change once she put the casserole in the oven to cook. Eventually, Gwen finished with her face and sat around the kitchen island with Beau, Charlie, and Leila as Charlie poured them all a glass of wine, and one for Blake after he finished a phone call.

The kids were in the living room playing a game of twister and whatever card game Lani decided to teach them. Beau was telling the adults a story about his recent ex girlfriend, Eleanor, that he thought was going to be his wife. He was nearly at the end of it.

“I don’t know. I guess the lesson was that women are a rare form. Men will never understand them.”

“I certainly never did. I think that’s why God made me gay.” Charlie joked.

The women couldn’t help but laugh.

“She read it in one of those marriage books she tried to get me to read all the time.”

“That’s funny.” Blake said, and Gwen felt the air shift next to her as the President stood at her side, grabbing for the only untouched wine glass on the island.

“What? That she actually pays attention to that bs?” Beau asked.

“No. That she thinks you can read.” Blake replied.

“Fuck off.” Beau flipped him off with one long middle finger.

Gwen shook her head as the laughter started up again. Finally, Blake glanced over to her and smiled, chuckling softly underneath his breath. She smiled at him and bit her lip. He was especially
handsome in his crisp white shirt and dark washed jeans. His hair had some product in it and rested neatly on top of his head.

“Hi.” He greeted her.

“Hi.” She murmured.

“You have fun with the boys?” He asked.

Gwen nodded. “I did. They played outside for the most part but we ate lunch together. They’re a riot and incredibly funny. I see you in them so much.”

“That’s a huge compliment. You daughter is amazing. And an excellent rider.”

“Did she beat you in a race?”

His eyes lowered. “What gave it away?”

She smirked. “She beats everyone in a race.”

He laughed. “Good to know.”

“So, everyone wants to know why we’re all dressed up.” She mentioned.

“I wanted to take pictures before we eat. I can’t remember the last time I had this much fun up here. Thanks to you and your bunch.”

Gwen’s heart warmed. “You’re such a sap.” She murmured so that only he could hear.

“You know it…Come on everyone. I want to take pictures.” Blake announced.

The entire affair didn’t take as long as she thought it would. They separated the ordeal into seven pictures in total with a few funny ones thrown into the mix. The men went first, and Gwen couldn’t keep her laugh in as Charlie and Beau lifted Blake by his legs and proceeded to make awful faces before putting him back down and taking a serious picture.

Gwen and Leila were next and they stood side by side, grinning beautifully into the camera, a vision of white and red. She called Lani over and they got their funny/cute girl picture that Lani was dying for.

The boys took a picture by themselves, and everyone shook their head as Jackson, Teddy, and Manó stuck their tongues out and pointed to their butts. The next picture was all males and the girls watched on in fondness as Beau picked up Teddy, Charlie picked up Jackson, and Blake picked up Manó, all three holding each kid in their arms for a handsome photo.

Blake then requested that Gwen and her children take a picture with him and his kids. Blake was holding Teddy in his left arm while his right was wrapped around her waist as she stood next to him. She held Manó on her waist, thinking how big both of their kids were getting to still be picked up. Jackson and Lani stood in front of them, with Lani hanging an arm around Jack’s shoulder and Jackson’s arm wrapping around Lani’s back. They smiled happily as the picture was taken. It wouldn’t be until later that she realized what life could look like if she and Blake ended up together. It would never happen, and could never be, but she still could look upon that photo and think of happier times.

But what really threw her for a loop was when their kids left them and Lani suggested that they
take a picture together. Gwen and Blake.

“How many people can say they have a picture with the President by himself?” Leila reminded her.

“Without being in a formal setting too.” Beau piped up from beside her.

“They do have a point.” Blake murmured to her.

“You’re pushing it.” Gwen gritted through her teeth as she started to smile at the lens.

Blake pulled her closer to his side and she dug her finger nails in the back of his shirt.

“Allright. All done.” Leila said as she lowered the camera.

Blake squeezed her backside before letting her go, clapping his hands the next moment. “Let’s eat! Who’s hungry?” He asked the kids, picking up his sons and tossing them over both of his shoulders.

He was lucky that the casserole only had five minutes left on the timer, Gwen thought, still recovering from his bolden ass-grab.

Dinner was a joyous occasion. They stuffed their faces to the tune of whatever Taylor Swift album Lani decided to play that evening. They talked about Lani’s victorious race, the boys baseball game, Leila’s tremendously funny story at the market, and Charlie’s encounter with a deer he saw in the woods.

The food was amazing. Gwen almost wanted to take Leila with her when they left this place for good. To think it was just a day away. Gwen tried not to read too much into the sadness that she was feeling.

Once the table was cleared and the dishes were cleaned, they decided to put on a movie and pop some popcorn. Gwen tried to call Wyatt while Leila and Blake got the kids settled but he didn’t answer. She figured he’d call again when he could.

Beau stayed with them until his ass couldn’t take sitting on the floor any longer and excused himself for the night. Charlie had already left before the movie began, wanting to talk with his husband for a couple hours before calling it a night, as well. Leila stayed right where she was nestled in between the loveseat and the coffee table.

Eventually, everyone fell asleep right there in the living room. Gwen was the first to wake up in the middle of the night. Blake had his feet in her lap, his head at the other end of the couch. He was snoring quietly. Jackson was on the floor in front of the fireplace, snuggled underneath several blankets. Teddy managed to stuff himself between the cushions on the loveseat while Manó slept on the floor in front of it. Lani was sleeping in the papasan chair in the corner, her limbs folded in a position that looked mildly uncomfortable.

Gwen slowly got up and shut the tv off, picking up the empty kernel bowls and mugs of cold hot chocolate. She left everything in the kitchen for the morning and walked back to the living room. She decided to wake Lani and Jackson up first. The two sleepy kids ventured upstairs with murmurs of “Goodnight, Mom. Goodnight, Gwen.”

The mother of two leaned over Blake and woke him up gently.

“Blake. Come on, I need your help carrying the boys upstairs.” She shook him until he slowly opened his eyes. He groaned as he stood up and clutched at his back.
He took care in putting out the fire that was still crackling in the fireplace before he picked up Manó, leaving her with Teddy. The eight year old was smaller than her son so she thanked Blake in her head for carrying him up the stairs. The boys stayed asleep as they set them both down on Teddy’s mattress. Jack was fast asleep on the top bunk.

“I’m gonna wake Leila up and tell her to lay on the couch instead of the floor.” Gwen whispered as Blake shut the door. He nodded and walked with her down the hall, checking in on Lani before closing her door, as well.

He really was such a good father.

Leila moved onto the couch without protest at being woken up. She didn’t ask any questions about where everyone had gone, probably assuming her and Blake took the children to their beds. But she didn’t inquire where Blake was or why he wasn’t sleeping on the couch, probably too tired, too. Gwen was grateful. He would have to sneak out much earlier tomorrow morning.

When she made it back to their bedroom, Blake was brushing his teeth. She joined him and for a moment, she had another insight into what their lives could be, what they should have been.

They were too tired to bother with anything else and just ended up stripping each other and falling into bed. Gwen closed her eyes with a sigh as she felt Blake plaster himself to her backside. He was always hot, like a furnace that ran all day.

She felt warm lips kiss the back of her neck. But they didn’t stop there. He ran his mouth down the length of her side, pressing into her ribs and hip bone.

“Blake.”

He gave her no impression that he heard her. He continued his exploration until she was on her back and his head was between her legs.

The lovemaking that night had been satisfying, pleasant, comforting. There were no massive fireworks like last night, but her toes curled, and her heart raced at the sight of him. It felt like coming home and she was content.

In the morning, she was almost looking forward to seeing him softly snoring next to her but when she opened her eyes, his side of the bed was empty. She frowned before remembering that there weren’t just a house full of kids that they had to worry about. Leila was also there, too.

Gwen got out of bed and took a quick shower. By the time she got dressed, there was a small knock at her door. This time, it was all of their kids, eyes still sleepy but stomachs groaning. She smiled at the noise.

“Come on. I’m making eggs and oatmeal today.” She told them.

“Can you make bacon, too, please.” Teddy asked in a soft voice. The boys nodded while Lani made a disgusted face. Even in her tiredness she hated the mention of any meat.

“Yes, I’ll make bacon, too.”

They set up camp in the living room again as she started on the eggs. They had to be relatively quiet since Leila was still asleep. Gwen figured she’d make all the food this time since the aid was always doing the cooking for them.

She was just making there plates when there was a knock at the door. Gwen frowned considering
no one knocked, except maybe Charlie or Beau but then they would walk right in afterwards. Blake and Leila entered her cabin whenever they felt like it.

The designer went over to the front door and opened it with a smile, which dropped as soon as she saw who it was.

“Gwen! Oh my goodness, you look great! I told you a vacation would do you some good.”

The First Lady stood on her doorstep, smiling brightly, arm and arm with none other than the President of the United States.
This was not a romance.

It was the first thing that Brad thought when he saw Blake and Gwen together for the first time.

His oldest friend had invited him down to the beach for some party that happened every two months or so, no matter the weather. He had never met the woman in person but from the conversations that Blake and him shared over text message, she was apparently the best girl in the world.

He had found them down by the little tiki hut that served as a modest drinking station and a bar all in one. It was from the moment he sat down, when they had just bloody met, when Gwen had her fingers running all around the rim of a bottle, looking at him instead of Blake, when he thought that this wasn’t just some romance his friend had found. That gaze that Brad had witnessed held everything that he was trying to find in a woman; sincerity, warmth, eccentricity, and loyalty. She was incredibly smart, vivacious, and sexy. Brad even thought himself in love with the girl.

But what fascinated Bradley was that Blake’s eyes, that incredible swirl of azure and teal, shined brighter than any sapphire the world could find. One look in Gwen’s warm, ginger, orbs and any man would be smiling ear to ear for all of eternity.

Brad congratulated his friend out loud for waiting until they hit the beach before grabbing Gwen’s ass, and her smirk in response was brilliant. Brad had tossed his beer in the sand, following after them like the world’s best third wheel. Gwen wanted to dance. The music was loud, some pop song that Blake and him couldn’t give two shits about. But the little dressmaker took both of their hands and led the two men down by the shoreline. She pulled Brad in close, the humid air whipping past them as a breeze rolled off the ocean.

They had stumbled over some forgotten beach towels and fell on top of the other, kicking up large sums of damp sand onto their clothes and into their hair and mouths. Brad had spit, and Blake had laughed at the sight of his best friend and best girl. Gwen’s infectious laughter cut threw him and Brad chuckled at the dribble of grit running down his chin that Gwen wiped away with a soft thumb.

Blake helped the two of them up and right away, this perfect specimen ran her fingers along the bracing points of Blake’s face, right along to his open mouth as she parted his lips further. Brad imagined that his friend tasted water and sand as her hands were covered in them. He watched him swallow a few fine grains and was rewarded with a sweet kiss not a moment later. Gwen tasted of sweat and watermelon margarita and a full life that hadn’t yet been lived. Or so he was told later that night when him and Blake walked back to his flat after dropping Gwen off at her small apartment.

Blake had crashed at his place when it was all said and done. And Brad had gone downstairs in the middle of the night to grab a cold glass of water like he had done every night since moving to that
fair island they called home. He stopped to check on Blake. The taller man was sleeping on the pull out couch, and where he once had frown lines covering his forehead, betraying his worries, Blake slept peacefully through the night. Brad thought, once again, this was not a romance.

That peace would last for as long as it could. The second it started waning was not when they fought over some girl in Blake’s unit or when they broke up over a weekend for some reason that Brad for the life of him could not remember. There short lived peace broke off in one of the happiest moments in their relationship.

It was the housewarming party. Gwen’s brother moved out onto a large property up in the mountains, and left her the house that he had been occupying for the last five years. Gwen moved in, while Blake had a place to put his clothes and shoes, a place to make coffee for two. He still had his flat but when he came home from a mission, he went straight to Gwen’s. That house was theirs. That house was acquainted with his friend already; it had watched Gwen be kissed by Blake. It had watched the two fight, fall asleep on the couch watching old black and white films, eat vegan dinners that Blake silently hated but very much adored because Gwen had loved it.

But that was after the housewarming party. The housewarming party was so late but very much needed, nonetheless. They only invited him. Brad understood why Blake had not introduced her to anyone but his friend but it was a mystery as to why Gwen was so comfortable with keeping their relationship so private. He would come to find out later on that Gwen wanted the Oklahoman and Arizona native to meet her family from the beginning but Blake thought it best to wait.

Bradley had showed up with a bottle of wine and some fresh salmon that he bought from the local market. They accepted him with warm smiles. He chatted with Blake in the kitchen as he prepared the meat for the grill. Gwen hung around them, making herself a salad as they talked shop and everything under the sun.

It was a small moment that he caught between the two, when he went for a leak and found them in the living room. They had eaten, swam, and drank until the sun finally went down. He knew his friends were affectionate, exchanging kisses at the window, in the glow of the stars, with that house and their only friend--him--bearing witness. But when he walked in on the sight of Blake sitting on the couch, the firelight playing across his skin, highlighting the increased pace of his breathing in the rise and fall of his chest, Gwen standing before him, stripping her bathing suit cover up until it pooled around her bare feet, Bradley thought what a lucky man his friend was. Blake had watched his girlfriend disrobe with the focus he usually only applied while shaving with a straight razor or cooking any piece of meat.

“Might be my favorite thing about living together.” Blake had murmured, his voice hoarse, rough.

“Technically, you don’t live here.”

“We gonna have this talk again? I need my flat.”

Gwen had dropped to her knees at Blake’s feet. “In my experience, men who keep their own place when they’re with a girl intend to entertain others just like her.”

“I only have eyes for you.”

She tapped one of Blake’s knees gently. Blake spread his legs to admit Gwen between them. She slid into the open space, laying her entire torso across his own chest and stomach.

“You promise?” She asked, teasing but oh so serious. “Because if you leave me in the dust, I’ll be so heartbroken.”
Blake raised his hands to Gwen’s shoulders, rubbed down the length of her back as far as he could reach, tensing slightly as he drew his hands back up to cup the back of her neck.

“You want me to promise something I have no control over?” He asked her in response.

She shook her head. “I want you to promise me something that you only have control over. Breaking my heart.”

This was not a romance. He kept telling it to himself over and over again, each time he saw these small moments between two humans who were undoubtedly slaves to the facts of life. He knew his friend. He knew that he was not a bad person. And so to save him from something that he didn’t have to give up so soon was Brad’s pleasure. He walked into the living room just then and both of their heads turned to face him. Neither of them moved, just smiled as he entered their little orbit once again. Never in a million years did he anticipate falling back into it.

He told Blake that night on the terrace. No affairs. No cheating. No mistresses. He told Blake not to trust the universe. He told him not to trust the facts. Just because they were the truth didn’t make them the right thing to live by. But here he was, standing in the master bedroom in the main cabin at Camp David, seven in the morning, staring at a bed that should have been turned down, should have been slept in, but wasn’t because his best friend was the biggest fucking idiot to ever roam the face of the earth.

Blake walked past Bradley to relieve himself and brush his own teeth, having just come from Gwen’s orbit, no doubt. Brad stood there for a minute, frozen between getting into the untouched bed himself, burying warm limbs under cool sheets since he got no proper sleep, having been roused at three in the morning to even make this lousy trip, or going to the bathroom and punching the leader of the free world in the dick. He chose neither option and instead ventured downstairs when he heard the start of the shower running.

Brad made himself at home, going to the kitchen to fetch a couple of beers and turning the television on to whatever golf match was playing. He only needed to wait fifteen minutes before his friend joined him down in the living room, knowing he was running on borrowed time with Josie’s impending arrival. They stared at the screen and drank their beers for awhile before Brad had what he finally wanted to say lined up in his head and mouth.

“Will you tell me something?”

“Anything, you know that.” Came Blake’s reply.

“You told me once, about Josie, about sleeping with her that first time. You told me it didn’t mean much of anything to you, but it meant much more to her.”

Blake stood up and took their already empty bottles to the trash in the kitchen, turning his back as Bradley formed the question he was really asking.

“What did it mean to you?” He asked, following after the president.

Blake turned, leaning back against the counter, legs crossed at the ankle, hands gripping the edge. “I don’t know.” He sighed. “I never really bothered to think about it, fully.”

“Try to think about it now, then.”

“Why? Why does it matter?”

“You hold some affection for your wife. Yet you just betrayed her in a way that most people, most
marriages don’t come back from. What does she really mean to you? That matters here, Blake. She matters here. And considering she’ll be here in two hours, I might think you’d want to figure it out sooner rather than later.”

“You want me to feel guilty. I do. I just don’t feel guilty enough to hate myself.”

“That doesn’t bother you?”

Blake shrugged. “I can’t help it. Or change it.”

“Do you like it? Feeling this way?”

Blake paused to blink several times. “No. I don’t but that’s what I feel.”

“What about Jack and Teddy? You hated your father for having a mistress. You saw what that did to you and your siblings. You want to put them through that kind of pain?”

“I want to be happy so that my kids can be happy.”

Brad winced. Blake had made an excellent point--a diplomatic reply. His friend had learned the art of spinning bad shit into gold because he was a great politician inside the office and most certainly out of it.

“Josie is perfect. She is beautiful. She’s smart and kind and caring. She’d take a bullet for you. She has taken bullets for you. You love her. You may treasure Gwen in that sad way we treasure anything we’re never going to have again. But you worshiped Jo. I know you think this is for the best, giving up what you worked so hard to gain, but it’s the wrong move, Blake. I’m telling you this because I love you. And because you don’t see how fucked it is to give up something you gave up everything for at one point. I know she was. Gwen was everything to you. But you made the decision to leave that behind. For her and for yourself.”

“What if I made a mistake?”

“Josie is not a mistake. Josie is perfect.”

Blake closed his eyes. “Will you stop saying that, please?”

“She is. What is wrong with you that you can’t see that?”

“I see it.” Blake told him, vehemently.

“You can’t appreciate it.” Brad tried again. “You want to leave your marriage, your entire life with your tail tucked between your legs like a coward for a woman who you don’t even know will leave her family for you, too. You’ve got the perfect life, why can’t you see that?”

Blake pushed off the counter. “I see it every damn day!”

“Then act like it!”

Blake sighed, flatly. “My wife is the most beautiful woman that I’ve ever known, ever loved. And I do love her. Is that what you want to hear? She is perfect. But she’s...Josie alarms me, Brad. In that perfect way of hers. In the way that would drive any man crazy because why want for another woman when you have the only girl in the world that is honest to god, flawless? It makes it hard to walk away, unless…”

“Unless what?”
“Unless you find a woman that disarms you.”

Brad stopped in his tracks, seeing the way his friend’s shoulders fell into a slump. “Blake--”

“Unless you find a woman that starves you, takes your breath away, steals your sleep.” The president continued. “Gwen strips me down to nothing. I have nothing to do anything with. Do you know how gratifying that feels? To be the president of the United States, to rule the country and by definition, the world, and barely sleep at night, barely eat through the day because I can’t. Because of her. Because she hasn’t allowed me to. She doesn’t even know how much power she has over me. I mean do you know how I live my life? My entire day--hell, my entire week--is carefully thought out down to the second I can close my eyes for the night. I have a schedule that tells me when I can take a fuckin piss in between meetings with the prime minister of Canada and the president of China’s Republic. Gwen is the only variable in my life that I can’t anticipate. That I don’t want to. I want the unpredictability that comes along with being with her. And when I gather the courage to leave, it won’t be with my tail tucked between my fuckin legs. It’ll be with the balls to go after something that you could never be sober long enough to appreciate.”

Bradley flinched. “Blake, I’m--”

A phone rang--the president’s. The father of two sighed and dug around in his jeans pocket to retrieve the device. “Yeah?” He answered.

Brad watched him nod to whoever was on the other line before hanging up with a perfunctory, “I love you, too.”

Blake tossed the phone on the counter and rubbed at his long face. “Josie will be here in twenty.”

Bradley wasn’t sure what he was and wasn’t allowed to say. It was the first time since Blake’s candidacy that he truly felt like anything to come out of his mouth would be insulting the president instead of his best friend. He was also trying to recover from the drunk comment Blake had made before.

“Listen…” Blake began. “I appreciate you coming out here. I want you to stay until tomorrow morning when we fly back.”

“Stephanie won’t want me gone that long on such short notice.” Brad said, not unkindly.

“Please, Bradley. I’m...I’m sorry about what I said. I knew it would strike a nerve and it was petty and childish and it won’t happen again.”

The dark haired man could breathe a sigh of relief at the apology he readily accepted. His friend wasn’t completely lost. “What are you going to do?”

Blake licked his lips and tugged at the bottom of his ear. “I’m going to greet my wife on the tarmac and bring her to see the kids. And I’m gonna pray like hell that I don’t lose Gwen over it, forever. ‘Cause that would break my heart.”

Brad flashed to the living room in Hawaii, to Gwen’s similar words, as if Blake could read and see his thoughts. And maybe he could. Maybe he knew this wasn’t a romance, too.

Maybe he knew this wasn’t even love. It wasn’t lust, either. Blake couldn’t tell the world, and he couldn’t give it up, and he couldn’t let it lead him anywhere that he had not already gone. He was stuck.

So, no. This was not a romance.
It was a call to arms, a battle and a war fought tirelessly. It was a wall coming down. It was a lie and a hand held out that went unnoticed. It was a drunk trying to get sober and a poor soul falling off the wagon, again. It was a sea of casualties bleeding in the streets. It was a blue heart, and a red heart, and a heart that pumped too fast and a heart that didn't pump at all.

This was not a romance.

It was a heartbreak.
Chapter 17

Gwen was proud of how quickly her smile came back in full force after Josie greeted her with a couple of sweet words and a perfect smile.

“Josie! Hi! How are you?” She asked, moving aside so that the couple could enter the cabin. “How was the baby shower?”

“My sister came down with some kind of stomach bug.” She said, sadly. “We did some minor festivities but she was too ill for the actual party today. I figured I’d surprise the kids.”

As if on cue, her boys leapt from the couch and attacked their mother with a series of hugs and kisses. Gwen’s eyes moved away from the reunion to see Blake smiling softly at the scene before they moved to a third figure entering the cabin after them. Gwen’s eyes widened when she saw Bradley Tobias Dylan there in the same place as she.

Memories flooded her mind instantly and she wanted to drown every last one of them. She had seen him at that White House dinner, when she saw Blake for the first time in thirteen years. But he was a fleeting sight. She was too busy trying to avoid the president and get through the night without any sort of trouble.

When Bradley saw her, his eyes looked away in a quick flash. Her insides tightened and she sniffed, looking away to her own children as Josie told Teddy and Jackson how much she missed them over the weekend.

“Something smells wonderful.” Josie said just as Leila joined the land of the living. When she heard the First Lady’s voice, she hopped up and tried to make herself look presentable. Gwen wanted to laugh.

“I made breakfast.” Gwen said, as politely as she could muster. “No one’s eaten, yet. But the food is done.”

“Oh, good. I only had a muffin and a coffee on the plane.” Josie replied, heading for the kitchen with two handsome boys on each of her legs.

“Lani, Manó, let’s eat.” Gwen ordered. She smiled at Leila, trying to tell her with her eyes that it was okay for her to stay but the older woman could clearly see that the aid didn’t have the same relationship with the First Lady that she had with Gwen. She slipped past them quietly and exited the cabin.

Josie went right to making plates for all of the children. And while she was completely occupied with the task, Blake leaned in close to whisper.

“Gwen--”

She put a hand up, effectively stopping him. She met Brad’s eyes and they were solemn for her, because of her, and in spite of her. She looked into Blake’s eyes one last time, memorizing the blue so that she could have it for the next thirteen years, because she was leaving. She had decided it the moment she saw him smile down at his wife and kids. Gwen and her own family were going to leave for good.

The message must have been received because Blake’s eyes shifted back and forth almost desperately, all over her face, begging her not to, to change her mind, to hear him out. It was the
most painful conversation she ever had, and she didn’t have to utter a single word to have it.

Gwen left the two men standing there as she went to the kitchen to help her employer. She made herself numb for the remainder of that morning. They ate breakfast, she was silent as she sipped a cold ice tea. The kids wanted to swim in the lake, she was silent while she watched them, sunbathing with Josie on the lawn. The most anyone got out of her were a few one worded answers. She kept a small smile on her face, a mask, but also a reminder of how she vowed not to let anyone wipe that smile away permanently, not even Blake. She kept smiling as they ate lunch, as Blake excused himself with Bradley to attend a meeting in the main cabin with Charlie and Beau. Gwen even kept a smile as Josie asked her about the last couple of days. Flashes of Blake on top of her, underneath her, inside her, rose like a dam and were drowned like a fish. But she couldn’t help but exaggerate how nice the people that worked there were to Josie, how amazing the camp shined at night when the lights came on, how her husband had been eager to spend time with not just the kids but herself, as well.

Gwen regretted her taunting words, immediately, when she saw Josie’s face crumble for a half a second. The next thought Gwen had was...this wasn’t her. She wasn’t the kind of woman that cheated with another woman’s husband. She wasn’t the type to cast doubt on another relationship. She just wasn’t the type to take someone’s happiness away like that. So she backtracked the best she could. Covered up her scathing words with other ones that painted Blake in nothing but a faithful light, telling the First Lady that her husband was just curious about Gwen. Curious about where she had come from and how she got to be in Hawaii. Curious about how she got started in dressmaking and how she met Wyatt. She told her how much Blake appreciated Gwen’s talents and her presence because it made Josie happy, and he was always overjoyed when his wife was, too.

That brought Josie’s smile back. Her face had shifted into that perfect place and it was like Gwen hadn’t soured her mood at all. The dressmaker breathed a sigh of relief when they cleaned up the benches and tables outside after the kids were finished eating. The two mothers allowed their kin to play some more in the lake as they sipped at some wine coolers. Gwen begged Josie to tell her about her family and she sat there for another hour just listening to the woman speak, all the while thinking of this woman’s husband’s words, his hands, his mouth and his tongue.

She wanted to throw up, and nearly did as she finished her fifth wine cooler. Josie’s two sat on the ground next to her, a perfect amount. She couldn’t help but think how everything this woman was, everything this woman did, was perfect. Who was she to compare herself? Who was she to think that Blake didn’t want that? Perfection. What man didn’t? Despite his words, his treacherous words, words that gave her hope and confused the hell out of her, he brought this perfect woman to her doorstep and made her a proper fool. He called her unperfect. Not to her face but to her heart. For words hit her there and actions hit her within.

“What do you think we should have for dinner? It is the last night anyone will be here. I’ll have Leila prepare something.” Josie said after a couple moments of staring out at the lake. Her storytelling had ended several minutes before.

The older woman shrugged. “Whatever you want.”

“I’m thinking of a roasted chicken, tonight.”

Gwen hummed, lacking the proper energy to keep up her disguise. Her face was starting to hurt from all of the forced smiling.

Eventually, they rounded the kids up and took them to the cabin—the main cabin. Gwen tried not to be irritated. It was nice having everyone come to her and her own. Blake, Beau, Leila, even Charlie
didn’t have a problem with being in the lesser cabin.

Before they got up the hill, she asked Josie kindly to look after Lani and Manó as she went to her own cabin to retrieve a change of clothes for her and her kids. When she entered the main cabin, Josie had already started baths and showers for the children. Gwen changed her clothes in the downstairs bedroom before going to tend to her kids. As she left one of the guest bathrooms with Lani in the shower and Manó playing video games with Teddy until the next bathroom was free, Josie asked her to check on Leila to see if she needed anything before the First Lady occupied the third shower herself.

Gwen nodded and went back downstairs, joining the aid in the kitchen. Leila smiled when she saw her.

“Come to help the help?” Leila asked, somewhat serious.

Gwen winced. “That how she make you feel?”

“Everytime. But I start to ignore it the moment she does. The president is the exact opposite and that usually helps.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’ve made this visit one of the better ones.” Leila smiled as she chopped some celery to cook along with the chicken.

“I wasn’t expecting her.” Gwen admitted, needing to at least tell someone about how she felt about Josie’s unexpected arrival.

Leila shrugged. “I’m surprised the president didn’t say anything last night.”

“Me too.” Gwen said quietly, knowing why he didn’t. If there was one thing that was wrong with the leader of the free world, it was that he was a coward when he wanted to be--needed to be. Gwen shook her head, ridding herself from painful thoughts.

“Did you want any help?” She asked Leila.

“If the First Lady sees you, I’ll have to have my resume ready and in her hand by the time the chicken is done.” She joked but her tone held a serious note underneath the teasing words.

Gwen felt depleted as she sunk into a island chair and watched the girl work. She tapped her nails along the countertop before a thought popped in her head.

“Do you know Bradley Dylan by any chance?” Gwen asked.

Leila nodded, stirring something inside of a pot, perhaps gravy. “I do. He’s President Shelton’s best guy. I was surprised to see him here, too. They look like they’re at odds with each other.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, when they came in here earlier for the president’s meeting, they were arguing in the hallway. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop. I was coming in from outside. I had to grab more ice.”

Gwen tilted her head. “What did you hear?”

Leila stopped stirring and leaned over the counter to say quietly, “They were talking about some woman. Blake looked like he didn’t want to talk about it but Bradley kept insisting, saying that it
“was for the best.”

“What was for the best?”

Leila shrugged. “I’m not sure. But the president mentioned the name Stella, and how he couldn’t let her be mad at him.”

Gwen’s stomach dropped. “That was it?”

Leila shrugged. “Apparently, this woman loves him. Bradley said that if she didn’t love him anymore, all of it wouldn’t go to shit. Then the president said it already has. I mean I have my suspicions about what they might be talking about by how the conversation ended.”

Gwen couldn’t resist twisting the knife inside of her chest any further. “Tell me.” She demanded softly.

“Bradley said that the president shouldn’t have gotten involved again in the first place and then President Blake said that he agreed after a moment.”

Metal struck artery. Gwen took a deep breath and pushed back the wave of hurt that had travelled to every organ and every vein. Leila arched her eyebrows as if finding the entire situation scandalous, not knowing Gwen’s part in it, not knowing the entire truth. When the aid turned back around to tend to the food, Gwen clutched at her heart, only finding cloth, coming up short with unbreathable air.

She excused herself, saying she had to go to the bathroom. Leila told her she’d pour them some wine for when she got back and Gwen forced the last smile she would make for the night as she left the room. She stumbled down the hallway, catching herself on the wall. She made it as far as she could before she stopped and let a couple of tears fall. The mother of two wiped them away quickly, not leaving any evidence behind of her broken heart.

When she felt strong enough to walk again, she found her feet carrying her to his office door. She didn’t want to be there, she didn’t want to see his face, but something in her soul made her stop outside that office. Something in her bones made her open that door. Something in her blood made her step inside. She was grateful and miserable that that something did.

The voices stopped as she stood there. Four pairs of eyes stared at her and she only had the heart to stare back at him.

“Gwen? What--Do you need something?” Blake asked, eyes wide with surprise. He had his back facing her where he was sitting. He had to look over his shoulder to see her.

Do you need something?

That something was in her eyes and once he stared long enough in them to fully understand, his face changed, his eyes dulled.

Blake stood up, limbs tired. “We’re gonna need the room, please.” He said, looking at the men in the room. His voice was quiet, resigned.

Charlie looked from Gwen to the president. He stood up, as well. Beau and Bradley followed. “Sir, you have that phone call with the Prime Minister of Israel in ten minutes. Maybe you can find another--”

“We need the room.” Blake cut him off.
Charlie bowed his head, shaking it mutely for a second before obeying, leaving with Beau and Bradley on his heels. Gwen walked away from the door to allow them to pass, standing off to the side of the furniture in the center of the room, behind Blake. Her president looked down at the floor as feet shuffled out of the room, and when the door closed shut, Blake glanced to the side at her feet with sullen eyes.

“Gwen…”

She looked at a vase on the far side of the room, holding back the water she felt in the backs of her eyes. Licking her lips, she managed to look at his jawline. He was still staring at the ground.

“Stella?” She repeated the nickname, tasting it as a insult for the first time in her life since she met him. He finally managed to look her in the eyes. “Stella?” She repeated, feeling the disgust take over her face. “Stel--” She choked then, the tears coming hot and fast but never falling. “Stella?” She raised her voice slightly, when the strength filled her again. She was stopped by one finger pointing up.

Gwen extended her neck back and saw a device on the ceiling. It looked like a camera. When she looked back to Blake, he had one finger against his lips, then pointed that same finger to the table beside her. She looked down at a recording device.

Wyatt had told her one night in bed how President Reagan and his successors had several meetings videotaped. How there was a number of reasons why presidents might want to have their conversations recorded. The first being that the primary intent of taping conversations is to protect the president from convenient lapses of memory of his associates. It was also useful for valuable reference material for the president’s own use.

Gwen looked back to Blake and his face looked like it hadn’t seen a good night’s sleep in days. She thought he slept just fine next to her. Another lie.

The president tilted his head to the far side of the room, where a giant oak desk was sitting beautifully by large floor to ceiling windows. It paralleled the oval office. He started walking over to where he had gestured. “Come here.” He said in a low voice, quiet as ever, his arm brushing hers as he did.

Gwen followed slowly, mirroring his unhurried pace. She stood by one of the windows as he stood next to the other.

“You’re leaving me.” He said, just as quiet.

“You walked her to my cabin door.” She whispered, fiercely.

“I had no choice.”

“You could have told me she was coming.”

“I only found out this morning.”

“You should have warned me, then.”

“You’re leaving me.” He echoed again, stronger this time.

“Because you’re married.” She hissed. “Because I’m married. Because we should be dedicating ourselves to our partners. Because you’re the leader of the free world. Because I don’t want to be the other woman.” He moved, walking closer to her as she continued, “Because I don’t want to lose
my family and my husband. And because it’s for the best--do not touch me.” She pleaded as his movements backed her up against the window, his hand moving to her side. “Don’t touch me, please--” Her whispered voice died as his hand wrapped around her back, as he pulled her close.

She kept her gaze firmly on his throat as her body froze. Her head moved involuntarily as he crept closer, as his mouth came closer. She licked her lips, feeling his breath fan across her face. It was several minutes of feeling him pressed against her front, tasting the burboned scented air around her, hearing her heartbeat out of her chest, begging to be set free.

His hand came up to rest against the window, trapping her in as the heavy curtain draped along the other side. His face never stopped inching closer to hers. Not until his nose rested along her eyelid, and her cheek rested against the curve of his mouth.

“Look at me.” He whispered. Her breath came out in shallow puffs, keeping her choking on what little air she could get in. “Look at me,” he repeated. She gave one firm shake of her head. His hand moved from the window to rest along her flushed neck.

“No,” she whispered, moving her face to the side.

“Look at me.”

Her gaze remained on his shoulder, his chest, anywhere but in his eyes as she said, “Did you wish it never happened?”

“Stella.”

Her gaze snapped to his and her brown eyes bounced back and forth between his blue, gazing everywhere she could along his face. “Did you wish it never happened?” She asked with much more conviction.

“I. Love you.” He replied.

Gwen’s face filled with disbelief in a second. She looked away from him, the tears running back to her eyes, to drain down her throat, to choke and kill and leave her a pale mess of limbs in front of his feet. Gwen pushed him away roughly, removing herself from his clutches. She looked back to his face when she managed to escape and seeing his begging eyes caused a fury to rise up inside her so quickly that she barely had time to stop the slap before it came.

His head moved to the side, resembling whiplash. Blood rushed to the skin immediately, purpling the side of his face and neck. He looked back to her stunned.

“I believed you!” She yelled. “You clouded my judgment--you made me mistrust my gut ‘cause I wanted to believe that you loved me! I cheated on him! I destroyed my family--”

His mouth cut her off. His hands trapped her face. His body trapped her indefinitely.

The kiss was deep and passionate, slow and intense, comforting in ways that words would never be, painful in ways that wars have only ever been. His hand rested below her ear, his thumb caressed her cheek as their breaths mingled, as their tongues tangled. She reciprocated the same amount of want and passion that he gave her to begin with.

“I just want to say that we can hear you screaming--”

The door opened, Charlie walked inside, closing it as soon as he saw the sight before him.
Gwen ripped her mouth away from Blake’s, turning her back on the two men in the room. The president looked from her to his chief of staff, looking for all the world as if he had just come from a funeral.

Gwen glanced briefly Charlie’s way when the man spoke nothing for several minutes. She fixed her hair and glanced out the window, wanting the floor to swallow her whole. She heard his quiet footsteps across the carpet eventually. He did nothing but stare as he neared his leader.

“Mr. President. You wanna go clean up.” It was not a question.

“Charlie--” Blake sighed.

“No, you have lipstick...on your mouth.” Blake looked down at the ground, a slow hand coming up to wipe at his lips, staring briefly at the red stain. “You need to clean up.” Charlie repeated.

The president looked like he wanted to say more, either to Gwen or Charlie, but he thought better of it, breathing a deep sigh as he moved to exit the room. Gwen heard the door open and close but her gaze remained outside, past the dark bushes and trees.

Charlie sighed. “Mother of God.” Gwen couldn’t help but steal a look at the older gentlemen. He met her eyes. “He tells me everything.”

She swallowed.

“I knew things with Josie were...strained but I didn’t think he’d actually--” Charlie sighed. “He didn’t tell me.”

He looked for all the world like the country had just been called into war. All her walls already felt like they were blown down. She felt like she was just another casualty lying bleeding in the streets. Charlie probably thought she looked like one or even worse, wished she was one. He certainly was not going to give her a hand out. She was screwing with President Shelton’s legacy, no doubt in his mind. Like a democrat and a republican fighting on opposite sides of the war. He was a red heart. She a blue. They were on opposing sides in Charlie’s head.

“I don’t think he would have ever told me.” Charlie’s voice rang through the air, breaking her from her thoughts. He looked hurt and confused now.

Her face twisted. “Because it doesn’t matter. I don’t matter enough. I never did.” She stated with a finality that came from the hardest part of her that she could find.

She stalked past him to the door.

“Oh, no, Gwen. Gwen, don’t go.” He sighed, wrapping a hand around her upper arm.

She shrugged him off. “Don’t. I have to go.”

She exited the room, thanking whatever God that still wanted her as a child that Beau and Bradley weren’t standing outside the door.

As she walked back down the hall, she touched the wall beside her. It physically put her and Blake on opposing sides. His red, her blue. His lies, her truths.

One thing she knew for absolutely sure…

Romance was on the losing side with her.
Heartbreak for the win.
“Mom, someone called saying it’s about Dad.”

Gwen pressed her hands to her face, feeling the heat underneath her skin. She nodded at Lani, running a hand through her daughter’s hair as she passed Gwen the phone.

“Oh, Gwen, good you’re still here. I figured we could make some brownies for the kids, for our last night.” Josie said, having finally come downstairs.

Gwen wanted to roll her eyes. By *them* she meant *Leila* would make the dessert and they would sit around and watch as she did. The mother of two managed a smile as she looked toward the living room. The kids were all done with their showers and were sitting around the coffee table drawing. The men were nowhere in sight. Gwen shook her head and thumbed through her miss calls, seeing a number she didn’t know. They had called her six times. She frowned, calling back the number.

The person answered on the second ring.

“Mrs. Howlett?”

“Yes? Who is this?”

“Mrs. Howlett, I’m Officer Clearmont from DC’s Metropolitan Police Department. I’m calling about your husband, Wyatt Howlett. He’s been in automobile accident just right off of Bladensburg road. He’s headed over in an EMT as we speak to George Washington University Hospital.”

Gwen tried to speak but her throat suddenly went dry. She tried to blink but her eyelids wouldn’t move.

“Mrs. Howlett? Are you still there?”

Her lips moved but nothing came out.

“Mrs. Howlett?”

“Gwen, what’s wrong?”

She vaguely registered Leila’s voice as the aid came to stand in front of her, a look of concerned painted across her face.

“Is he--what--is he still…” Gwen tried and instantly recoiled at the officer’s sigh.

“He was in critical condition when paramedics arrived at the scene but that’s all I know, ma’am. I’m sorry. Truly.”

She nodded even though he couldn’t see it. “Okay...thank you.”
“I wish you and your family nothing but the best. Goodbye.”

The dial clicked. She wondered how the police man even knew Wyatt had a family and then a thought of the picture of the four of them in his inside pocket in his wallet flashed in her mind.

“Gwen? Gwen, hey. What happened?” Leila asked, eyes still full of genuine concern.

She looked up and saw Josie staring at her in trepidation. A quiet fell over the room, and she realized the kids had stopped drawing. Six pair of eyes were glued to her rigid form.

“Wyatt got into a car accident.” She whispered, not wanting the kids to hear.

“Mom, what happened?” Lani asked when she couldn’t hear her mother’s reply.

Gwen turned to regard her, sniffing back old tears and the new ones that threatened to arrive.

“Everything is gonna be okay. Just give me a second and I’ll tell you. Go back to drawing.”

The children were hesitant in obeying her command but eventually, Manó turned back around to his crayon drawing of the White House and Teddy and Jackson followed him, each coloring a page from the toy story coloring book they found in one of the upstairs bedrooms. Lani stopped coloring altogether but she didn’t press her mother for anymore information, which Gwen was grateful for.

“I can have Blake bring the helicopter around in five minutes.” Josie said, walking around the kitchen island to be by her side.

“And I’ll watch the kids if you don’t want to take them to the hospital, right away.” Leila offered.

She shook her head. “They should be there. I don’t know how bad--the officer wouldn’t say. If something happened and I kept them from seeing--” She choked off, not even able to finish the sentence.

Both Josie and Leila ran soothing hands over her back.

“I’m getting Blake right now. Stay put, we’ll be right back.” Josie reassured her and left the room in the direction of her husband’s office. Gwen didn’t even know if they were still in the house. She didn’t know anything, anymore.

“Let’s sit down. You can’t do anything until the helicopter gets here.”

Gwen nodded and allowed Leila to lead her over to the loveseat. Lani watched in silence as Gwen took several deep breaths, trying to calm her accelerated heart beat. Manó, as well as the other boys, tried to pretend like they didn’t notice her shallow breathing or the grey cloud that suddenly loomed over all of them.

“Mom. Please tell us.” Lani eventually said when her mother stopped clutching at her chest.

Gwen tried to look both of her kids in the eye as she began to speak but she couldn’t bring herself to. “Your dad...he got into an accident and he’s at the hospital.”

Lani right away stood up and started pacing the length of the room. Manó remained where he sat on the floor, crayon dropped somewhere by his feet, forgotten.

“But everything is going to be okay. You hear me? You dad is gonna be just fine.” Gwen said, moving to sit on the floor next to her son so she could wrap him up in her arms. The tears began to fall almost immediately.
Gwen looked over to Lani, still walking the entirety of the floor, only stopping when Josie emerged with Blake on her heels. She startled at the look on Blake’s face, not able to read anything he concealed within his eyes.

“Let’s go. It’ll be on the lawn in a minute.” He said, helping Manó to his feet and then her.

“What about our stuff?” She asked.

“We’ll have it shipped.” Josie helpfully provided.

After that, it was a mad scramble to get all of the belongings they had with them now in the main cabin. They rushed out to the helicopter when they were finished, and Blake and Beau helped both of her kids inside, putting on the necessitated headphones for them while they simultaneously buckled the two Howlett children in their seats.

“Call us when you find out anything.” Josie told her just as she and Leila put the last of their bags in the compartment by their feet.

“I will. Thank you. For everything.” She told both women, catching Blake’s eyes as she did.

Josie hugged her and Leila squeezed her hand. Gwen gave them a shaky smile before pulling herself up into the aircraft. She felt hands hold her hips and give her an extra boost. She knew they belonged to Blake.

As Gwen adjusted her headphones and clicked her belt, Blake yelled over the whirring blades at the pilot but she couldn’t hear a word without him hooked up to his own mic. But the man nodded and saluted the president before warning the rest of the group to get back.

Gwen and her family watched as they retreated to the cabin as the helicopter ascended slightly in the air, it’s ground blades no longer on the plain of grass. Lani had ridden in a helicopter so many times in Hawaii that she never grew nervous. It pained Gwen to think that her daughter would no longer associate the aircraft with good memories.

Gwen closed her eyes and let the low humming and steady vibrations of the helicopter lull her into a state of numbness. By the time they had arrived, she felt like fifteen minutes had passed. In reality, she knew it was much longer.

The inside of the hospital was too bright. She winced as soon as her and her children were lead inside from the roof entrance where the president’s helicopter was currently stationed. It was the pilot helping them navigate the halls now and Gwen thought back to Blake’s conversation with the man. This must have been what they talked about.

As they neared one of the front desks, Gwen steered her kids over to the waiting area, knowing a fair amount about hospitals. They were going to be waiting for a long time.

“Are we going to be able to see him?” Manó asked.

Gwen nodded. “Let me find out where he is and I promise you once the doctor says it’s okay, we’ll all go together.”

“Mrs. Howlett?” The pilot walked up to them.

“Please, call me Gwen. And you?”

“Aaron, ma’am. I checked with one of the nurses. Your husband is on the fourth floor, east wing.
The doctor would like to talk to you before you see him.”

She nodded. “Okay. Are you leaving?”

He shook his head. “President’s orders. I’m to stay here with you and your children until told otherwise.”

Her heart relaxed somewhat at that information.

“Could you watch the kids, then? While I go see?”

“Of course.”

Gwen exhaled and bent down to kiss Lani and Manó on the forehead. “I’ll be right back. I’m just going to talk to the doctor.”

They nodded, silently. She stood back up and faced Aaron. “Thank you,” she said. “I really appreciate you.”

The pilot looked uncomfortable at the show of gratitude but nodded his head, nonetheless, managing a small smile.

Gwen walked to where the nurse and doctor were waiting. The doctor was a tall man, with a short white beard that looked like scruff more than anything else.

“Mrs. Howlett, I’m Dr. Stark.” He held out his hand for her to shake. She did so unsteadily.

“How is he?” She asked.

“Let’s walk and talk.” He guided her with a deft hand over to the elevators on the far wall. The nurse stayed back as they walked into an open one, empty save for another doctor.

“Mr. Howlett has a few minor cuts and bruises along his face and neck. His right hand is broken in five different places along the palm, but that is an easy fix. His left pelvic bone has a tiny fracture that can be dealt with in surgery, as well. But what concerns us the most is the broken rib that’s punctured one of his lungs. Now normally, we would put a chest tube in to let the excess air out. But in Wyatt’s case, we discovered one of the lobes has some scarring. Now this looks like pulmonary fibrosis. It’s not caused by the accident but we caught it in time to maybe schedule a living transplant.”

“What do you mean it wasn’t caused by the accident? Wouldn’t he show signs of whatever this is.”

“The severity of symptoms vary from person to person and case by case. Some people become ill very quickly with this severe disease and others have moderate symptoms that worsen more slowly, over months or years.”

“So what do we have to do?”

The elevator stopped and they walked out into a dimly lit hallway.

“Living transplants are easy and simple. I simply take a part of a donor’s lungs that matches your husband’s blood type and transplant the lobe into Wyatt’s lungs.”

They arrived at a closed door with the curtains drawn. Dr. Stark slid the door open and allowed her to enter first. When she saw Wyatt lying there asleep, her heart constricted. He looked so frail, weak, battered, unlike the man she knew who flew planes over war zones for a living.
Gwen drew near and grimaced at the sight of his blue tinted skin. The doctor had informed her that it was due to the fibrosis. She was glad that Dr. Stark warned her about his cuts and bruises because there wasn’t enough bandage in the world to hide the imperfections that littered her husband’s face like a road map.

She took his hand softly, and swallowed back tears and mucus. He wasn’t dead. He wasn’t going to die either. She would not cry.

“How soon can you do the surgery?”

“Well, we would have to put him on the donor list. But if we can find a match without it, maybe two hours tops. It isn’t an emergency surgery, yet.”

The words were meant to be comforting but all Gwen heard was that this was the potential calm before the storm, and it already looked like a war zone. Wyatt looked every bit of a casualty. And she shuddered for thinking of the analogy. It would be like God to punish her this way. Fight with Blake and drag her husband into the middle of it until she was confronted with his wounded body.

“You need tests, right? To see if I’m a match?” She asked, quietly.

“Do you have kids?”

She nodded, eyes still glued to Wyatt’s sleeping face.

“The kids will most likely be a better donor. Siblings or children.”

She sniffled, “Whatever you need to do.”

She couldn’t see his nod but she felt it. “I’ll have a nurse start running the tests. In the meantime, you and your family can stay here until we know more.”

Until they could do more, Gwen thought.

That was how she spent the next two hours, waiting in a room, consoling her children, holding her husband’s hand, watching as the nurses took Lani and Manó one by one out of the room for testing, and thinking that not a damn soul could do anything more than what the universe was stringing together already.

“Gwen.”

The designer looked up from her place on the small couch by the window. Lani had her head in her mother’s lap and Gwen was running her fingers through her hair.

“I bought some sandwiches from the subway downstairs. Manó mentioned he was hungry earlier and that you guys didn’t eat dinner.” Aaron said, walking further into the room.

Just then, as if they all had forgotten their hunger, the Howlett family’s stomachs moaned in unison. Manó cracked a smile as he hopped down from the edge of the hospital bed and went right over to Aaron and the food. Gwen tapped her daughter’s head, making her sit up.

“You have to eat.” She told the twelve year old.

“Dad needed to be in surgery by now.” She countered.

“He will. The tests are almost done.”
“If I’m a match then I can’t have anything for the surgery.” Lani replied.

Gwen sighed, knowing she was right. Her mind had gone completely out of the window ever since she got that phone call. She was remembering things that she didn’t want to and forgetting the ones that she needed.

“How’s it going? Gwen ordered her son. The nine year old sighed.

“Sorry, Gwen.” Aaron apologize.

“No, that was really kind of you. Thank you, again.”

He smiled.

A knock sounded on the door and Gwen looked up in hope and anticipation, thinking it was Dr. Stark. But the man that stepped foot in the room was not wearing a scrub outfit or white coat. He was in an all black suit and he wasn’t alone. Several more secret service agents came and inspected the hospital room before declaring the space clear. Gwen’s blood rose in temperature.

Blake walked in a second later wearing nothing but a blue sweater and some dark washed jeans. He looked immediately at Wyatt and Gwen’s defenses rose like tides. His eyes then darted to Aaron’s.

“Thank you for staying, Ronnie. You can head out, now.”

“Yes, Sir.” Aaron saluted. He turned to her. “I wish him a speedy recovery.”

“Thanks, Aaron.”

The pilot shuffled out of the door just as the first lady entered at the exact same time. Gwen grinded her teeth. How dare he?

“Gwen, how are you? How is Wyatt?” Josie asked right away, coming to settle down in the open space right next to her.

“He’s fine. He’s gonna be fine. He needs surgery. A lot of it for the broken hand and pelvis and the punctured lung. He needs some kind of transplant the doctor said. They tested the kids to see if they would be a match but then the nurse said even if Manö was that he was most likely too young and so it’s up to me and Lani.” She exhaled, rubbing her hands together, nervously. Hearing it out loud really allowed the severity of the situation to set in.

“I’m so sorry.” Josie squeezed her hand and as much Gwen wanted to hate her, she just couldn’t.

“Knock, knock.” Dr. Stark poked his head into the room. Gwen expected him to be surprised at the sudden appearance of the president and first lady but the surgeon didn’t even blink. “President Shelton, it’s such an honor to see you, again.”

“Hey Greg. I hope you’re taking every step to make sure Lieutenant Howlett sees this through.” Blake responded.

“Of course, Mr. President. And speaking of…” The man shuffled a couple of papers around in folder before continuing, “The tests came back. Now your son is a donor match but hospital policy is very strict on a surgery this size and the age this small. Your daughter wasn’t a match, in fact, her blood type doesn’t match either of her parent’s. But Gwen you are the best candidate believe it or not. It’s rare we come across spouses with similar blood types and sizes of organs we want to transplant. But if you’re ready we can start prepping you for surgery now.”
“What do you mean my blood doesn’t match my parents?” Lani asked, clear as day.

The doctor paused. “Well, it’s not uncommon for a child to have a completely different blood type than their parents. The most common scenario is AB and O blood. The child could have A or B blood if that was the case. But you’re blood type is AB- and that’s extremely rare for your parents to have--”

“Lani, why don’t you ask the doctor about it when Dad and I get out of surgery? I don’t want to wait any longer.” Gwen interrupted, rubbing her daughter’s back.

“Right. Let’s gets you set up in the next room over.” Dr. Stark said.

Gwen nodded and avoided anyone’s eyes that weren’t Josie’s. “Can you watch them for me?”

“Of course, Gwen. We’ll all be here when you get done.” Josie pulled her into another hug and for the first time that night, Gwen welcomed the embrace.

The mother of two kissed her children both on the forehead and then gave Wyatt one in his hair, the only place on his body that didn’t look like she might break it some more.

She was lead to the next room over, given a gown, given some papers to sign, given some air to breath without eight other people wanting to share in the already sparse molecules. And before long, she was being wheeled off to surgery the same time as her husband. He wouldn’t have known but she was right there. She knew it and that was enough for her.

While under anesthesia, the only thing Gwen’s mind managed to think up was the missed phone calls in Wyatt’s phone. She wondered where he could have been, who he was with, why he never got around to calling her back. She never did get the full story. Where was he driving to? Home was the other way. Home was nowhere near where they had discovered the accident. Home had to be where he was going. It had to be. She got the distinct impression that it wasn’t.

She wouldn’t have known it, but her heart raced underneath the knife, causing a moment’s panic for the doctors and scrub nurses all working hard to keep her and her husband alive. To keep their home from falling apart. Her heart hoped that there was such a place to go back to when all was said and done.

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She woke to beeping and the unmistakable antiseptic smell of a hospital.

Her throat was raw, her head ached, and her chest was a raging bundle of pain. With effort, she opened her eyes. The dark room was lit by the machines hooked up to her arms and chest, and by a faint white glow from the hallway.

Lani was asleep in a chair, her head cradled in her arms against the bed. Josie sat at the other side. She too was asleep.

Gwen closed her eyes and pushed the back of her head deep into her pillow. Her son must be with his father and Blake in the other room. Gwen was just relieved that she wouldn’t have to face him just yet.
She closed her eyes and let the pain medication pull her under.

It was the following afternoon when she and her kids would hear the news of Wyatt’s recovery. His lung had not rejected the piece of her own, and Gwen couldn’t help but see it as a sign. They were still good. They could be better, things would have to get better, but right now, he still loved and accepted her, still wanted her, at least his body still thought so.

Gwen had remained in bed for the entire day, healing, recovering herself. The nurse urged her to only stand when she needed to use the bathroom. Lani and Manó had only left her side once to go back to the apartment to shower, change, and eat. Josie insisted the kids stay at the White House where she would have her own to keep them company during the night and the next morning. They left her that evening. Wyatt was still heavily medicated, between his hand, his hip, and the transplant. But she was well assured that his skin returned to its former, healthy, pink, glow and his breaths had evened out, finally.

She rested easy in her hospital bed knowing that they both would return home soon--together.

There was a soft knock on her door. Gwen glanced over briefly to the glass, expecting it to be one of the nurses again. She was surprised to see Blake behind the frame, asking permission to enter. The vague jerk of her eyes seemed to be an invitation, or at least, not a refusal.

He walked in empty handed. And Gwen averted her eyes from his sharply tailored suit. Her gaze remained away from him, even after he sat down on the bed by her side.

“Shouldn’t you be at work?” She asked, uncaring.

“I couldn’t think with you still in here.” He revealed, quietly, looking down at his hands.

Gwen glanced his way. “I wasn’t the one in a car accident.” She reminded him.

Blake inhaled. “You’re angry with me, still.” It wasn’t a question. He looked up at her. “I don’t know how else to show you. I get the best surgeon in this goddamn state to cut your husband open. I would have donated my entire lung to make sure he got through this.”

“You say that like it means something to me.”

“What does Lani mean to you?”

Gwen’s body froze.

“Better yet,” Blake continued. “What does she mean to me?”

Gwen gave him a piercing look. “You can go.”

“You don’t dismiss me.”

“I don’t want to talk to you. So why don’t you just--”

“I love you--”
“Stop saying that. My husband is ten feet away from me in the next room, fighting to be here for
his family and you are throwing yours away for some pipe dream that ended when you chose not
to step foot on that plane.”

“You have to understand. I did it for you.”

Gwen couldn’t hear anymore of his bullshit. She stood up on shaking legs but held her ground.
“You think I wanted you to do anything for me? I wanted you to do it for yourself. Everything was
for you. I knew that going in. I knew I would have to sacrifice. I did it for you. And you couldn’t
ev even be bothered to see it.”

Blake stood up, facing her, nothing but the bed between them. “You didn’t want this life. You
made that clear to me and you know you did. I thought you saw me--”

“I did see you--I do see you--”

“No, you didn’t. You still don’t. I didn’t have a choice, Gwen. All of this,” he spread his arms out.
“I had to do it. I had to be this.”

“No, you didn’t.”

“I did.”

“Why!”

“Because I couldn’t be anything else!”

Their chests heaved up and down. Her heart raced and his ran. His eyes never strayed away from
hers as he began to speak, softer this time.

“I couldn’t be a good husband. I couldn’t even be a father. I was terrible as a son. The only thing I
knew how to do was run for that office. I was born for that office. That’s all I’ve been told, ever
since I was a little kid. I didn’t say I wanted to become the president when I grew up, I said I was
going to be the president. And when I met you...for the first time in my life, I didn’t want that
anymore. You made it a possibility for me to walk away from it, from everything that I learned,
that I studied, that I trained so hard. The night before you left for California, I called my dad and
told him that I wasn’t that man anymore. And he asked me what man I wanted to be. And I didn’t
know the answer. I didn’t have an answer, Gwen, because all I know how to be, is this. And I do it
well. And I’m sorry that I left you in order to be who I am. I truly am sorry. But now that I’m here,
doing this, I see that I can have both.”

She scoffed. “You’re even more delusional than I thought.” She said it with no malice nor ill intent.
“You had both. You had me……and you had our daughter. And you threw them both away for an
office you got to sit in for eight years...by yourself.”

His face distorted before her very eyes. What was once a recognizable canvas of flesh had turned
into something only strangers could possess, and pain could have drawn.

“So, she’s really mine?” Blake asked, his voice a low rumble.

She didn’t need to speak to give him an answer.

He paused and sighed, but for once, he did not tug on the bottom of his ear. His casted his gaze
onto the ground and his eyes darkened. He glanced back up at Gwen. “Why?” His voice sounded
more pained than anything she’s ever felt.
“We were supposed to be a team. You walked away.” She answered simply.

“You said you’d never break my heart.” He revealed.

“You said you loved me. I guess the two are on even playing fields when it comes to us.”

“I guess so.”

“I guess you’re the one that’s angry now.” Gwen said, feeling the mood shift to a plain of hostility.

“I am angry that you kept this from me but I am even angrier that you’re so intent on destroying us.”

“If you’re so angry then why are you still here?”

“I’m here because I love you.” He said, exasperated.

“And how does that change anything that has happened between us? What’s the point?” She half yelled.

“Do you still love me?”

Gwen drew a breath in, staring him down.

“Do you?” He asked, again. “Still love me.”

Her eyes fell to his throat. “Does it matter?” She asked, herself.

“It matters. Do you still love me, it’s a yes or no question.”

Her eyes fell to the side. She couldn’t believe how good he was. This was how he was going to win the war. He was exactly right when he said this was all he knew how to be.

“Gwen--”

“I do.”

It was the closest she was ever going to get to marriage with this man. Just those two little words.

“But I can’t do this anymore.” She said, walking past him to the door. Her only escape was Wyatt’s room and she somehow felt sicker going to the man who wore her wedding ring when she just confessed her love to another who wore her entire body, skin, blood, bones, and all like a victorious flag waving in the wind after everyone else had already fallen.

“Wait.”

“Blake--”

“Wait, just wait. Just wait one second with me.”

Gwen stopped, her back still turned away from him. He sighed.

“I know I’m not good enough...I just--can….can you let me love you? Please. Please. Please, let me try again.” She felt his breath fan the side of her neck as he leaned down, closer to her face. She hadn’t even heard his footsteps approach. “I need you to give me another chance...I demand another chance. We’re worth another chance.”
His words were the best weapons. And just like the rest, she succumbed to them without a moment’s hesitation, turning around and grasping his face with her hands. Their lips meet in an all too familiar dance but this time, Gwen noticed the urgency behind their movements. It casted a dark cloud over them. His lips were soft, hers were chapped, and his bones rattled inside of his body while hers ached. She could taste the metallic tang of blood as they both bit at flesh. The liquid warmth coursing through her veins was supposed to be blood but it was something darker, something less honest that had quickly spread throughout her entire body.

He didn’t touch his ear.

The thought came to her so abruptly.

So, she’s really mine?

As if he had another thought.

I couldn’t even be a father.

Right after he tells her he couldn’t marry her.

Loose plans.

He didn’t think...

There’s more to it that you’re not getting.

The thought slammed into her body harder than a hammer nailing the last coffin into the ground.

Gwen ripped away from him, eyes staring at Blake’s confused face.

“You knew.” She murmured, afraid that if she shouted it that it would become true either way.

“You knew that I was pregnant. That’s the real reason why you didn’t get on that plane.”

If she thought his words pierced like bullets, she should have been paying more attention to his eyes. They flashed in an instant.

“You knew.”

“That wasn’t the reason--”

“But you knew.” Her voice rose.

“I thought…” That you were pregnant. “I didn’t think you’d…” Keep the baby after I left. “I hoped she wasn’t mine when I saw her.”

Gwen sucked in a breath, feeling as if someone was doing surgery on her again but this time, she was awake to feel every poke and prod, every cut and slice, every stitch and staple.

This was not a romance…

Gwen’s eyes darkened when she could finally manage to stomach looking him in the eyes, again.

“At least you got one thing right here. She never was yours. And this...lets me know that she never will be.”
This was war.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

At the end of this, you'll have questions. Be patient my lovelies, all part of the plan.

“Honey, do you need any help?”

Gwen whirled around. Her mother sat at her kitchen island with a small glass of lemonade in hand. She was surrounded by Gwen’s attempt at cooking a roast.

“No, I think I’m good. If you want to grate some cheese I’m sure Dad would appreciate it.”

Her mother shook her head. “I told him he’s lactose intolerant but he doesn’t believe me. I think he can eat that salad without cheese, don’t you think?”

She smirked. “I’m outing you the minute he starts complaining.”

Patti laughed. “No loyalty. You’re just like your brother.”

Gwen smiled, stealing her mother’s glass and taking a sip of the homemade drink. Her eyes strayed to the living room where her father and husband sat watching some sports highlights. Dennis was sat in one of the recliners while Wyatt laid on the couch. His hand was in a cast, and his rib had healed, but his pelvis was still in bad shape. He had finally started going to physical therapy and could walk short distances with the help of a cane, but for the most part, Wyatt stayed in the house and on the couch until it was time to go to bed. His body needed time to rest and heal after the surgery. It had been two months since the accident and she was still in disbelief over what her life had come to, how much everything had changed.

Wyatt couldn’t go to work, and would most likely never go back if his injuries didn’t heal the way he needed them to for clearance. Lani was oddly withdrawn, keeping to her room most days when she wasn’t asking to be dropped off at a friend’s house. Manó was mildly irritated every second of the day, and Gwen couldn’t fathom what could be bothering him to such an extensive degree. As for her, she worked from home. Gwen didn’t like the idea of hiring someone to look after Wyatt when she felt like that was her job. Besides everything else going to shit in her life, Gwen was thankful that the designs steadily poured out of her and she had the time to actually start and finish the work.

The White House felt so far removed from her now. He felt so far away from her and she guessed that was the best thing to come out of all of this. She may have been in disbelief over what her life looked like, but she couldn’t even find the words to explain how she felt over everything that had happened between them. The only thing that kept circulating in her mind was that he finally knew the truth. And so did she. And the world didn’t fall apart. She might have lost the war but all of her people made it out in one piece, and that was all that she had to worry about. Him and his was not of her concern. And the more days that passed without a call, without a visit, without seeing him or hearing him or feeling him, the more Gwen could focus on rebuilding what she allowed them to destroy.

“You okay, honey?”
Gwen snapped out of her thoughts and smiled at her mother. “Yeah. I was just thinking of how nice it is to have you guys here. I appreciate you helping out. I know the kids are crazy right now and Wyatt…”

Her mother leaned across the counter and squeezed her hand. “You know everything passes right? This will get better. It may not look like it right now but this too will pass. You just gotta pray real hard and take it one day at a time.”

Gwen’s heart squeezed along with their connected flesh. “You always did know what to say, huh?”

Her mother patted her hand and pulled away, snatching her lemonade back. “You always did know how to bounce back from a tough situation. Remember when you got that staph infection in your leg?”

“Mom, I was twelve and I’m pretty sure the medicine and all of those doctors did all the work.”

Patti pointed at her. “But you stayed strong. You kept your faith. That’s hard work, too. I know you think comparing your leg to this is craziness but you’ve gotta be that little girl I saw in the hospital. You gotta be strong, Gwen. You gotta keep faith. And know that the only medicine for this is time and patience and love.”

She sighed and nodded, the words escaping her.

Time. Patience. Love.

Gwen didn’t think wars were waged nor won with any of that in mind.

Fortunately, she’s no longer being called to battle.

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It was the vomit that Gwen smelled first. It hit her the moment she walked into the apartment. It was sharp, recent, thick. Her hand tightened instinctively on the door knob as she shut the door softly. There was an ache in her limbs as she set the bags on the floor, not caring that her purse and keys fell with them.

She had only gone to the store. She was gone maybe three hours. What he could have done in three hours she wasn’t sure but ever since Wyatt woke up this morning, he’d been aggravated, snappish, and mean even though she could tell he didn’t want to be, at least not to her.

Gwen stepped out of her shoes and moved noiselessly to the bedroom. She found Wyatt there, in their bathroom, sprawled on his back, his chest heaving with each strangled breath. His right arm covered his eyes as she turned on the light, the muscles underneath pale skin standing out harshly as he clamped his fist. His left hand clutched spasmodically at his thigh. His clothes were spattered with vomit, and the floor was a mess of pills. A single bottle of vodka sat half empty in the corner by the toilet.

Gwen only noticed the dried water on his face when she drew closer, going to her knees and lifting his head up with an unsteady hand. He opened his eyes. They were bloodshot and damp with tears he’ll never admit to.
Even with the heaviness in her throat, the hotness behind her eyes, the tears she refused to shed, she asked. “What happened? What’s wrong? Why would you--?” She didn’t have it in her to continue that line of questioning.

There was no reply. She was sure he had a reason but just couldn’t tell her. At least not yet, not there, on a cold floor surrounded in his failure.

Gwen managed to get him back in bed. Without the cane, he had to put most of his weight on her as they walked and Gwen’s aching limbs moaned at her efforts. She dressed him in new clothes, gave him water and a kiss before going to clean up the bathroom before the kids got home from the park.

He called out for her just as she was pouring the dirty mop water down the drain. Gwen came to him, slowly, and sat on the edge of the bed when his eyes demanded her to.

Wyatt swallowed, looking away. “I was in pain.”

“I’ll have the doctor up your dosage. You didn’t need to do that--”

“I wasn’t trying--I didn’t mean--” He sighed. “I just needed more to take the edge off. I can’t stand feeling like this anymore. The vodka helps it work faster, you know that. I turned around too fast and my hip--it just gave out on me and I fell. And the bottle spilled open and the--it just happened so fast. And the pain after the fall was excruciating...I threw up. It hurt so bad, I couldn’t stop vomiting. I’m sorry you had to--”

“Don’t apologize. It was a mistake, an accident.”

Wyatt scoffed. “Yeah, I keep having those.”

She gave him a look. “Things will get better. I know you’re in pain and itching to get back to work--”

“Just stop. I don’t want to hear some speech right now.”

She sighed. “What changed?”

Wyatt looked at her, confused. “What?”

“What changed between last week and this week? You’re moody. You’re mean. What changed? What can I do to make any of this better? Because I’m trying. I’m taking care of the kids, I’m taking care of you...I just want to know if I’m not doing something right.”

Wyatt looked over her shoulder, unable to meet her eyes. He said nothing for several minutes before finally, “I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too, you know. I wish this didn’t happen. I still don’t even know how it happened or why you were on that street to begin with--”

“I told you. I was going to meet a friend for a drink.”

“Who?”

“One of the guys from base.”

She nodded, not even bothering to ask for a name. “Look. I think this place has given us blessings but I also think it’s done more bad than good. We’re just not cut out for this. Hawaii was home. We
know how to be there.”

“Are you suggesting we move back?”

She nodded, biting her lip.

“Where is this coming from?”

“I’ve had time to think about it. Two months really. The house is sitting there empty. I can go back to working at the dress shop and the base would welcome you back without hesitation, even if your injuries don’t get cleared. They need all the hands they can get and you know that. Besides, the kids would love it if we moved back. They miss their friends and their old schools. They’ve been so angry lately that this could be just what they need--what we all need.”

“That’s another huge move, Gwen.”

“But it’s the perfect time. We move by the end of summer and the kids start school back up in the fall.”

“I’m not saying I don’t want to. But we moved here for your job. What you suddenly don’t want it anymore?”

“I do. I do it’s just...our family is more important than some job. I can work anywhere. We can’t be happy everywhere.”

Wyatt stared at her for a long time before nodding. “We move at the end of summer.”

“Just like that?”

“I’ll hopefully be all the way back to normal by then and you still have time to let the First Lady know you won’t be staying and finish up some dresses, I don’t know. But yeah. Just like that.”

Gwen tried not to smile so hard but she couldn’t stop the excitement from spilling over into her voice as she said, “We’re going home.”

Wyatt smiled. “We’re going home, baby.”

=G=

Gwen did not have the heart to personally deliver her letter of resignation to Josie. She had her assistant do it for her and only went to the White House to pack her office and take the rest of it home with her. She managed to do it all without bumping in to anyone she’d rather not see. Koko had tried to tell her that Josie visited three times in hopes of catching the seamstress working or packing so that they could talk but had ultimately expressed to the young woman that she understood Gwen had a lot going on with Wyatt and the kids and that she hoped they could meet soon. Koko had said Blake visited once, and only once.

She decided that she didn’t care and the only thing she owed anyone was at least one last meeting with Josie. She was her employer after all and gave her this wonderful opportunity to have her name be known as a respectable and unmatched dressmaker. She owed her a firm hug and an even firmer “thank you.”
The problem was that she couldn’t find the time to say goodbye. Wyatt’s fall had set his physical therapy back by weeks and Gwen needed to tend to him more throughout the day and even at night. Her parents were wonderful when they had been there and her mother even stayed to help her out with the kids while her father had to go back to California to look after the garage. Lani and Manó were involved with summer sports and other extracurriculars that Gwen either had to make the decision to care after Wyatt or go to their events. More often than not, she ended up doing both, seeing to her husband while stealing an hour or two away to go to a practice or a game or a show. It was exhausting, and by the end of it all, all Gwen wanted to do was curl up in bed by herself and sleep until her body didn’t know the time or place in which it was in.

The only thing that kept her together was knowing that she was going home in a few weeks. It was the best thing she and Wyatt could have done for their family. The kids were on board, excited to get back to their old lives albeit a little sad to leave the friends they did make here. Even Wyatt seemed happier even though he was in worst condition, and there was a tinge of sadness at leaving DC that she couldn’t quite place. She figured it had to do with the accident and immediately stopped that line of thought.

Gwen was only concerned with the here and now. She took it one day at a time, like her mother advised. Today, Wyatt made progress, and Gwen got to see both of her children star in a play down at the community theater. Her mother joined her after she gave Wyatt his meds and made sure his nap was going to be comfortable enough for him to be okay until they all got back. Gwen decided to treat everyone with a walk in the park and some ice cream at their favorite malt shop that they’d discovered from Josie. The small vanilla shake she got reminded her of Blake. He mentioned at that first dinner up at Camp David that it was his favorite. Vanilla malt, four cherries, and a serving of banana slices.

She gave her side of banana to Manó so that he could dunk it in his lover’s chocolate shake and allowed Lani to eat two cherries off of her malt before consuming the last two herself. The experience was good and the ice cream satisfying and it was the first moment since the accident that Gwen felt like she had some semblance of a piece of mind.

After dessert, they travelled back home and Gwen went to Wyatt as soon as they got through the front door. He was sitting up in bed, tv remote in his hand, a small smile playing across his face.

He turned to look at her and his smile widened. Her heart fluttered and she tilted her head, giving him an appraising look.

“I gotta pee.” Is all he said.

Gwen laughed and walked over to his side of the bed, helping him swing his legs over the side and grabbing underneath his arms to help him stand. “Were you waiting long?”

“Long enough where that feeling of your balls are going to fall off set in about an hour ago.”

She grimaced. “Sorry. We stopped for ice cream. We brought some back for you if you want some after dinner.”

Wyatt thanked her and the two made their way to the en suite bathroom. Gwen closed the door once he was situated, knowing how much her husband didn’t like having to sit down just to take a piss, as he would say. It was emasculating, apparently. Gwen had rolled her eyes.

When he was done, Gwen helped him stand to watch his hands and then lead him to the living room where he could sit with her mother and the kids. Wyatt immediately asked Lani and Manó about the play and the children spent most of the time Gwen spent cooking dinner telling him.
She listened from afar, smiling to herself as she heard their excited voices. They had been so down lately that hearing them cheerfully recount their performances was a welcome change.

The mother of two set the cornbread in the oven and joined them on the couch with a glass of water. The conversation had changed to Hawaii and her mother was telling them about a visit her and her father were planning to go see Dash and his family. The doorbell rang out through their apartment a moment later. Wyatt cocked his head back, frowning.

“I got it.” Lani said, getting up from the couch and making her way to the small hallway and to the front door.

Gwen took a sip of her water and smiled as Manó told them of his plans to build a spaceship once they got back home.

“How big are we talking? Big enough for the whole family?” Wyatt asked.

Their son nodded. “Well, big enough for us three. We’re leaving Lani here ‘cause she’s moody.”

“Shut up, dummy.” Lani snapped, walking back into the room.

Her mother gasped, and Gwen’s heart quickened at the sight of two secret service agents and one president.

“You want us to check the apartment, Sir?” One of the agents asked Blake.

“No, it’s fine.” He said, eyes immediately landing on hers before moving away to Wyatt.

“Mr. President.” Her husband greeted, neck strained as he turned to look behind the couch at the man.

“Lieutenant Howlett. I’m sorry I haven’t come to visit you earlier.” Blake said, rounding the couch and asking permission to sit down next to the pilot. Wyatt shook his hand and smiled.

“That’s alright. You have a whole country to run.”

Blake attempted to smile but it only reached his eyes, eyes which moved around the room and landed on her mother. Gwen saw the way Blake swallowed, roughly.

“You must be Mrs. Stefani. I can see the resemblance.” He stood up again and her mother went to her feet, as well. “It’s nice to meet you…” Finally. Was what went unsaid.

“The honor is mine. I can’t believe I’m meeting the President of the United States.”

They shook hands briefly and this time Blake did smile. “The novelty will wear off, trust me.”

“Hi, Blake.” Manó beamed at the man.

“Hey, Manó. How’s the designs for the spaceship coming?” Blake asked him and Gwen wondered how he knew about that. It seemed like every time she turned around there was more things that she didn’t have answers to.

“Really good.”

“Glad to hear it.”

There was a moment of awkward silence before the oven chimed and Gwen stood up, not moving
to go to the kitchen but not wanting to stay there where Blake’s impossibly blue eyes bore into her.

“Why don’t you stay for dinner, Mr. President.” Wyatt, much to Gwen’s surprise, invited.

“I can’t. Josie is having a small get together with some friends.” He said, feigning disappointment.
“I just came by to see how you were doing and wish you all well. I heard about Hawaii. My wife is devastated to be losing Gwen’s talent and your family’s company.”

Everything was said with so much finality, so much grace, and so very little feeling. It all seemed impersonal. She expected him to be just as devastated at her leaving. She expected anger and raw sadness. He was giving her none of that.

“Can you tell Jack and Teddy that I’ll miss them but that they can come and visit Hawaii anytime?” Manó asked, eyes shining.

Blake grinned. “Of course. They’re sad you’re leaving. But know you’re always welcome to come and visit here, too.”

“We will.” Her son said with no trace of doubt in his voice.

The timer went off again.

“I’ll grab it.” Her mother said.

Blake looked from her to Lani. Her daughter was steadily looking down at the floor, seated next to her dad. Gwen prayed so hard that Blake would keep his mouth shut. The more he looked the more she became afraid until Blake snapped his head away and exhaled.

“Well, I should be going. Gwen...Josie gives her best. And she wanted me to tell you thank you.”

So his wife knew he was here. Somehow, the thought further depressed her.

She wasn’t sure what she was expecting, anymore, from him. Did she want him to beg her not to go? For him to tell her how sorry he was? For things to continue on in their horrible cycle of pain and grief?

Blake bid his farewells and headed for the door. Each step took the breath from her lungs until she thought she was going to burst.

“Mr. President?” Her voice sounded small, and unsure, and nothing like her. But he turned around and for a second, she thought she saw hope flash in his eyes before disappearing altogether. “I have some finished outfits for Josie. If you want to help me get them from my office?”

His mouth shifted. “Tom, come help us.” He said to the agent and waited for her to lead the way.

“I’ll be right back.” She told her family. Wyatt nodded, attention already focused back on Manó as he started up again.

She could feel Blake’s eyes on her as they walked down the hallway, stopping right outside her office door. Once inside, she had no idea why she even kept him from leaving in the first place. All she knew was that she didn’t want him to go like that, a stranger, impersonal, hating her. A thought in her head said she should be hating him, too. Maybe she did.

She had hoped to be alone with him but his agent--Tom--was positioned in the corner, head up but not looking directly at them. Blake was looking around the room and for the first time since he had
arrived, Gwen took him in without fear of being found out.

His hair was longer, frazzled in appearance and yet it looked like it had a ton of gel layered throughout the curls. His suit was freshly pressed, his shoes freshly shined, but his eyes had bags and his cheeks drooped. He looked how she felt most days.

“Where are the dresses?” He finally asked, eyes returning to her.

“Blake--”

He held a hand up. “Please, don’t. You said to let you go. I’m letting you go. Where are the dresses?”

If she thought she could do it, whatever she wanted to do with him here, alone with her, she couldn’t either. So, she did the only thing that made sense. She retrieved the creations and handed them to him, only for Tom to intervene, taking the bags of clothing himself.

“You’ll tell Josie goodbye for me?” She asked him, feeling like a coward that she still hadn’t done that herself.

Blake nodded, eyes roaming over her face. He looked like he was committing her features to memory. “Goodbye, Gwen.”

The air did not return to her lungs like she thought it would. He was finally letting her go. He was giving her everything back, her family, her heart, her mind and body, her free will. And she couldn’t even breathe.

It wasn’t fair. None of it was fair and yet it was everything she wanted.

=

The White House wasn’t known to accept guests or employees during irregular working hours. Even though there was a guard and a gate man as she pulled up to the entrance, it was likely that she wouldn’t be able to get in. So Gwen was mildly surprised when it was Allen, her favorite gate employee, that greeted her at the late hour. She told him about collecting some last minute fabrics from her office and was granted permission to enter the property without any problems.

It was going on eleven in the evening. Dinners were over, bedtime stories were read, and in her case, Wyatt was dead to the world after taking his pain medicine. Her mother was uncharacteristically up, watching some late night soap opera. She had told her she was going to the bar to pick up a drunk friend and drive them home. She was not met with any resistance. Not at home and not at the White House where Gwen travelled along the halls with a help of an aid, venturing into a part of the House that she had never been before.

The halls were silent save for the odd worker here and there. When they reached the West Wing, she was surprised to see a good amount of workers still milling about. It was late, too late, and they were mostly chatting, some typing away on computers, others eating a night snack quietly at their desks.

“When the president stays late, about forty workers stay until he packs up for the night.” The aid had told her. She was a small thing, with blue eyes and black hair and an open face.
Gwen nodded. At least she confirmed that he was still up. She was afraid that she was going to have to have someone wake him up. And wouldn’t that be awful and embarrassing?

They rounded a hall and landed themselves right outside of the oval. There was a woman at the desk. She looked up and straightened her spine, on guard. The secret service agent, the same from earlier, was standing by the door.

“Andrea this is Gwen Stefani.” The aid introduced her and bid her a good night as her job was finished.

“Gwen Stefani? The stylist?”

Gwen nodded. “I was hoping--I wanted to talk to him--to the president...if that’s okay. Is he still in there?”

Andrea looked perplexed, and then she looked unsure. “He is. I don’t think he’s expecting you.”

She swallowed. “Please.”

For some inexplicable reason, Gwen felt like Andrea knew her, or better yet, them. Like the younger woman was privy to their tumultuous relationship and had the power right then and there to end it for them. Gwen almost wished that she had. But instead, Andrea stood and waved her over. The secretary knocked softly and then opened the door, leading her into the office.

“Mr. President.”

Blake was at his desk, writing. His eyes never looked up. “No. I’m not ready to leave. Tell the kiddos they can go home expect for Sam and Greg.”

“I will, Sir. But there’s someone here for you.”

“I’m not seeing anyone from the department.” He continued his writing, sparing a glance at the door and then doing a double take when he saw her.

He dropped his pen, his eyes going wide. “Gwen.”

Andrea sheepishly walked out, closing the door behind her.

“Hi.”

“What are you doing here?” He stood up but didn’t move to walk over to her.

Gwen clutched her bag, feeling the hard photo book inside. “I um...I needed to see you. I needed to know that we--you weren’t…” She stopped after a minute of fumbling with her words.

He looked at her with his head bowed, his hair in its wild cut sticking out at all angles around his face. “We’re finished.”

The words were a statement. A fact. A truth. And to her, something about them was finished. Something gone and damaged without repair. But they weren’t just that one thing. They never were.

“Are we?” She asked.

“Isn’t that why you’re here?”
She refused to look up at him. “I wanted to know why it feels like you’re erasing me out of your life instead of just letting me go.”

“You know I don’t want you to.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“Stay—”

“And do what? Wait for you not to be president? Wait for you to divorce your wife and me to leave Wyatt? For our kids to hate us?”

“Yes. Because this isn’t a romance. We don’t all get to be happy at the end of the day.”

“That’s being selfish.”

“That’s being in love.”

She sighed and moved. He followed her. She took a step back along the wall and knocked into a small table holding a small vase of flowers. It toppled in a clamouring crash, and she turned to survey the damage, wincing.

The door opened and Tom came in.

“It’s fine.” Blake told him, dismissing him with a nod of his head.

“Sorry,” Gwen whispered after he left, bending to pick up the pieces.

She felt a hand on her arm. “Leave it.”

“It’s old and ugly. Leave it.” He said, sliding his arm around her waist as she stood up, pulling her back against his chest. His other arm slid around her, lower, around her hips. They slid over her jeans and under her sweater. He buried his face in her shoulder. She tensed.

Her arms were at her sides, staring down at the floor, at the mess, as his arms encircled her from behind, his breath hot on her neck. It was all happening, again.

“Blake…”

“Don’t go.”

It took a great deal of effort to extract herself from his embrace. She turned around and sighed. His eyes were so full of love that she had to close hers to it. Despite everything, she did not come here for that. He must have read her thoughts because he sighed and backed away, prompting her to open her eyes again, but they weren’t anywhere on his person.

“I know you don’t want my love. So I won’t say it. Fuck love.” Her eyes snapped to him. “I like you.” He continued. “I like you, Gwen.”

“Blake--”

“I like your nose. And your mouth and your eyes. I like the fact they’re brown because every other color is boring.” Her heart picked up speed, her face screwed up into one of confusion as to why he was telling her these things. But he went on. “I like the fact that your hair is the perfect color to fall
asleep to. Even if it’s not blonde, anymore.”

Recognition dawned in her soul. He was quoting his words from thirteen years ago. When he stumbled drunk into the dance studio and walked her to her car and she foresaw what they were going to do to each other. She knew the pain they’d eventually bring to each other’s doorsteps. It was the same night that he thanked her for being the one. He just hadn’t specified which one because the only thing she was good for now was breaking his heart in an effort to protect her own.

“Gwen--”

“Please, stop.”

“I like that I can make you laugh like no one else ever could. That’s what you said. So even if you hate me, even if you leave me, I know how much I mean to you ‘cause I know how much that means to you. Even if you don’t love me anymore, at least tell me you still like me. Then I’ll know I still stand a chance. I’ll know you’re still out there and that we’re okay.”

He stared at her, stared through the haze of the thousand thoughts clogging his head. His gaze was like a physical touch. Everything else faded as they shared this look that probably meant nothing in the long run, but had her heart seizing, had her body heating. All she wanted to do was say goodbye to the Blake that had fathered her child, that had made her the most happy once upon a time, that was a part of her soul, her history, her love. She didn’t want to say goodbye to the stranger that had entered her apartment and spilled empty promises to her family. Not that man. Never that man. Only this one.

“I like you.”

It was as close as to a goodbye that she could stomach. The way his eyes crinkled without even smiling told her that this was as close to him letting her go that they were ever going to get.

They met in the middle. Finally. No one waved a white flag but they had stopped taking shots at one another. The air filled her lungs. She was the one to walk away from him this time.

The only thought in her head was that she hoped it wasn’t another thirteen years before they would meet again. When she gave the photo album to Andrea to give to him, pictures filled with Lani as a baby, a toddler, and a teen, all memories that he never got to make with his daughter, something in the back of her mind told her it wouldn’t take him that long to find them again.

The thought didn’t unsettle her.

It moved her.
Chapter Notes

next chapter has a lot of stuff that I'm sure will answer all your questions and make you think of new ones lol.
below are pictures of the kids all grown up and then an added fella.
enjoy!
There was salt in the air. If Blake were to hold his hand out, the salt would cling to his fingers, just enough to make them feel a little chalky if he rubbed them together.

He did so slowly, as he rested back against the outdoor chaise and continued to peer at the wide expanse of land he’s come to admire as his back yard.

There was a pool, too big for his tastes, and unnecessary considering the ocean was right there, but Teddy and Jackson saw no flaw in the size nor the design as they invited their friends from school over the years. Their house was a hit for the entire neighborhood, although Blake had a sneaking suspicion that it had to do with a former president and First Family living there than anything else.
But the house was impressive all on its own before the Shelton family came along. It was old, built in the 1920s. But it was beautiful. With its nine bedrooms, beautiful gardens that lined the edges of the property, flagstone terraces, and eight and a half stoned bathrooms. It was a dream. Josie certainly had no problem calling the beaux arts inspired mansion her home when they first moved in.

“Dad.” A deep voice floated over Blake’s shoulder. He swore it was just yesterday that same voice was lighter, sweeter, younger.

“If you’re here for money my pockets are empty. Teddy ran me dry yesterday.” Blake smiled to the birds and the trees. It wasn’t exactly true. They always had money, something he was inherently grateful for but he didn’t like giving his kids a portion of the family’s net worth without seeing his sons work for it. Ever since they turned into teenagers, it was like the money never stopped flowing out.

A perfectly, cold, beer appeared next to his right shoulder, a tanned hand slid the bottle onto the small reed table by his bare feet. Jackson walked around until he was stood in front of his father. Blake looked at his oldest son as he sat in the chaise across from him.

Eighteen suited the boy quite nicely. Jack’s golden brown hair had only darkened as he got older. He kept it at a good length, long enough to show it had some curl, short enough to where it wasn’t unruly anymore. His hazel eyes leaned on the green side but still held that childlike glint. With the sun, his freckles had all but disappeared. Blake found it amusing that Jackson looked more like him the older he got. When he was younger, he was almost the spitting image of his mother.

“Can’t a son just enjoy a beer with his father on this fine day in Honolulu?” Jack asked, smirking as he took a swig from his own bottle.

Blake smirked, reaching for his wallet tucked into his shirt pocket. He produced a couple of hundred dollar bills one handed and gave it over to the adult. “Don’t buy prostitutes, drugs, or alcohol with that money.”

Jackson rolled his eyes. “I wanted to buy more film for the camera.”

“Oh, well, then by all means, run the well dry for film.”

Blake was sure his son would lose his eyeballs with how far they went back that time.

“Are you all packed for next week?” Jackson asked, changing the subject.

The former president looked out at the pool once more. “Not yet.”

“Better get on it before Mom picks out your clothes and you’re stuck wearing suits in ninety degree weather.”

Blake chuckled. “Oahu won’t be that hot.”

Jack shrugged. “You never know. Lani checked and said it was clear skies and scorching temperatures.”

The mention of her name made the older man wince. He faked like it was because of the sun shining in his eyes over the canopy because of Jackson. “Yeah, well, let’s hope it doesn’t feel like hell when we’re there.” In more ways than one, he thought.

“I’m kind of excited. In all my eighteen years I’ve never been to a wedding.”
“They’re only fun if there’s an open bar.”

“Mom would never let me drink.”

“She will if she’s drunk herself.”

Jackson laughed, his deep voice matching Blake’s when he was that age.

His son stood up slowly, grabbing his beer as he went. “We can only pray. I gotta get this film before the store closes. I’ll see you at dinner, Pops.”

Blake nodded, watching as Jack pocketed the money and leaned down to give his father a kiss on the head before going back inside.

He didn’t want to think about the wedding but his thoughts could conjure nothing else to distract him from his daughter’s upcoming nuptials. It was bad enough that he didn’t even know she was dating anyone, let alone engaged all this time. He supposed that was the point, though.

Eight years ago, he had the chance to know her, to make an effort, but that wasn’t in the cards for them. When Gwen had left, his connection with Lani went with them. It was understood when that photo album made it into his hands that he was given something only he made sure he deserved. Photographs of memories he would never be apart of, proof that she had lived and loved and cried and hurt all without knowing his existence. Isn’t that what he had done when he got onto that plane instead of going to Gwen and the baby she was carrying? He had lived without ever seeking Lani out. He had laughed and cried and loved and made memories with other children, with another woman.

He had no right to feel what he was feeling now. He made the decision. He had to live with the consequences. Even if one of them was watching Lani get married to a boy he didn’t know, getting walked down the aisle by a man who did not father her but was more of a dad than he could have ever been, starting a whole new life without ever knowing the truth.

It stung but Blake had been through worse. He was just happy that their families were close enough for Lani to invite them or else he might not ever have known anything about the twenty year old’s life. It wasn’t like the kids hadn’t kept in touch all these years for him to ever inquire but this way was better. No one ever visited the other, despite promises from before, but social media and texting kept the Shelton and Howlett children connected. And then they moved to Honolulu after his four years were up. Eight in total and they had not once thought about living in Hawaii until Blake mentioned it one night over dinner. It was met with resistance at first, but then the idea took root and wouldn’t let the Shelton family go until they finally made the decision.

The kids were older then. Able to make choices and friendships without the interference from their parents, though they’d never try to interfere in the first place. The fact that they were all closer, just an island away, only simplified things. Before he knew it, both sets of children were taking short flights over to see one another. Jackson and Lani swiftly became best buds when they bonded over film and photography, each taking careful measures to send their works to each other via mail and email when apart. They were fourteen and sixteen when the whole thing started. Now, they had done numerous projects with each other, garnering attention from the world thanks to Blake’s celebrity and their genuine artistic talents and visions. They grew closer as friends, and remained that way over the years.

Teddy and Manó were a different story. They talked maybe once or twice a year over the phone about something other than games or space. But mostly, the boys played online with one another every so often, keeping that connection alive with so little means until they could see each other in
Blake only knew what his kids felt like sharing with him at the time and what he felt like he could ask when Lani or Manó, sometimes both, came to the house. Despite their children remaining in close contact, Blake and Gwen had not once talked in these past eight years. When the whole thing started with their children, it was Josie and Gwen who did all the facilitating. And even then, they did not visit one another or talk as best friends would. It seemed like that part of their friendship had disappeared when Gwen resigned and fled back home. He had no idea what she was doing, or the state of her life, other than another child having been brought into the fold. He could never gather the courage to ask after that. Just like he could never gather the courage to start a relationship with Lani when the girl was over his house. He always wanted to talk to her, ask her about her life, offer any help he could give and that she might need. But he kept that distance. Somewhere deep down, he knew Gwen was hesitant about letting Lani visit Jackson because she didn’t want things to change between Lani and her biological father. Blake guessed over the years, she stopped worrying because Blake proved to be a coward in that regard.

He didn’t know how his life had become what it was. But what he did know was that their daughter was getting married, and said daughter had invited the Shelton family, of course, and he was pissing himself for more than one reason when it came to the entire affair.

Suddenly, the salty air had become oppressive.

He rose from his chaise and reached for the sweating beer with his good hand, his left, carrying it with him as he walked back inside the house, thanking whoever it was that created air condition.

Sheer curtains flitted about as the wind, turned soft breeze in the house, floated in from the open doors to the terrace. Josie was cooking dinner in the kitchen. Blake decided to settle on the couch beside Teddy, who was playing a game on the t.v. He barely got a hello out of his sixteen year old has he killed some sort of alien looking creature on screen.

Blake sipped his beer and let his head fall against the back of the chair as the breeze slid through his hair like a woman’s fingers. The woman inhabiting his daydreams had never seize to appear, or change. He hoped a similar breeze was caressing her body in Oahu. The thought moved him.

“Mommy, can I go to the gift shop?”

Gwen looked up from her phone, trying and failing to get ahold of Manó. His flight had touched down twenty minutes ago and she wanted to hear his voice, see how far his car was away from the resort.

It had been six months since he decided to travel to Rome over the year. She had heard from him sparingly, and now, being in the same country as him again, let alone the same state, gave her such a jolt of excitement.

The mother of three looked down at her youngest child, only eight, a year that still tickled her insides and sighed. “Your brother will be here shortly.”

“I promise I’ll be quick.” Silas begged her.
Gwen’s heart softened when she looked at him, at his perfect chestnut hair and his father’s perfect blue eyes. He looked so much like Wyatt when the ex pilot was that age.

“Fine. But stay close to where I can see you and don’t talk to anyone but the clerk.” She handed him ten dollars and watched as he skipped over to the small shop.

Gwen’s eyes strayed to the little kiosk desk that was to the left of the store. It was where arrivals could find transportation around the island from the hotel. She was bored sitting there, nervous even with every second her phone didn’t chime with an alert from Manó. Gwen’s eyes busied her, choosing to study the man at the receptionist desk, talking to the resort employee.

He was tall, so tall that he reminded her of someone. He wore snug jeans, dark brown boots, and a close-fitting green button up. His curly hair was a mix of caramel and sand, with the odd lemony highlight and grey streak that came only from being a natural blonde and older years. It was a bit long, in that floppy way that was handsome, with the slightest tendency to curl around his ears. The long sleeves were pushed up to reveal equally bronzed forearms dusted with light brown hair.

When the man glanced at his watch, she noticed two things: the way his muscles rippled in said forearm, and that the limb held a mangled looking wrist and a hand with scarred fingers that bent gruesomely.

Her heart slammed in her chest, suddenly.

No way.

No way.

And then, as if God was answering her prayer, he turned to glance out the windows, briefly. Gwen caught her breath at the sight of his profile. To that familiar arched brow, firm chin, and sloping nose.

Blake.

She was caught unaware for a moment, and hadn’t noticed when he moved away from the desk, grabbing the leather weekend bag at his feet. She was too consumed with the moment that she almost missed the little party he was travelling with.

Teddy and Jackson.

It had only been a couple of months since she last saw the two boys. And they never failed to look even taller every time they visited.

They were eighteen and sixteen, an age Manó was caught between. Jackson always seemed to look so much like his father, same build, same expression, same walk. She remembered the boy’s hair being lighter, his face being smaller. But he was nothing of the little boy she had met eight years ago. He was always somehow handsomer.

Theodore was not far behind his brother. His hair had darkened as well, though, only a little. It was cut short, so that his hair looked straight, save for the length at the top, which was swept to the side and curling in his right eye. His eyes were that bright blue, his lips pouty, his nose reminiscent of that of his mother’s. In fact, he looked more like Josie than he ever had before. Unlike his brother’s broad stature, Teddy was still skinny, looking like one of those artsy kids that Lani hung out with at university. He was a pretty boy, something that Gwen had never pictured Blake having in all the years she’d known the man.

The kids were standing next to Blake, the oldest talking on his phone, the youngest listening to
music, drowning out the resort noise with his wireless earphones. They each had one leather bag next to them, except for one plush carry on that was a pastel pink. She assumed it was Josie’s although the woman was nowhere to be seen.

Gwen sat back and looked away, hoping she wouldn’t be spotted so easily as they were. She knew she would have to see them, but she didn’t think it would be this soon. She only came to the resort that day to help Wyatt with some last minute preparations for the hula-out they were having right there on the beach in a couple days time. Since the wedding would have tons of celebrations and festivities before the actual event, Wyatt would be needing a few extra hands to help with the guests that were already staying at the resort and the ones that would be coming in for the nuptials. At least this way, she had time to prepare to see her ex and his family, again. She was wholly unprepared for this right now. Was as unprepared when Lani decided to invite the entire former First Family when they were doing invitations.

The mother of three knew that their children kept in touch. She was even supportive when Lani started doing photography projects with the oldest Shelton son. They got along, they made beautiful art together, and she saw how happy it made Lani to find someone who had her same artistic vision. Even Manó’s and Teddy’s relationship, which really only consisted of playing online and talking about space designs, had not bothered her. She had not minded seeing the First Children in these eight years and during the kids’ blossoming friendships. She also didn’t have to talk to Blake, only Josie, when the kids started visiting between the islands. It was just understood that their kids did all the talking and they were background props. It suited her just fine.

The fact that Lani felt inclined to invite the whole family instead of just Jackson had nervèd her. It wouldn’t be right, considering how everyone was so connected with the situation and the kids, this Gwen knew, but it would have certainly made the whole affair a lot easier. Not that her daughter getting married at the age of twenty was anything but easy, but she made do. She always did. Silas was proof of that.

Her phone buzzed in her hand and Gwen looked down to see her son calling. She answered right away. “Manó! Where are you? Me and your brother are waiting at the resort.”

“The flight was early so they held us at the gate. I just got my bag. I’m on my way to you guys, now.”

“Okay. We’ll be here...I missed you so much. I love you.”

Manó chuckled, his voice deeper but still sounding so angelic. “I love you, too, Mom. See you in five!” He hung up and Gwen smiled happily, looking to the gift shop just in time to see Silas running back over to her, a bag flapping wildly in his little hands. The clerk was Mari, and she would always refuse to let the Howlett family pay since they owned the resort, but Gwen was not having any of it and was glad to see proof of purchase when Silas saddled up beside her.

She steered him away from her official guests and over to the deck entrance where a couple of restrooms were located. “What did you get?” She asked, softly.

Silas opened the bag and she took a peek inside. “Chocolate? S.J. we have chocolate at home.”

Silas shrugged. “We don’t have hotel chocolate at home.”

Gwen laughed. “Okay, you got me there, noodle.”

He grinned up at her and leaned into her side, burying his face in her stomach. Together, they waited for Manó. The smile had not left her face, thoughts of anyone and anything else leaving her
so suddenly like a breeze racing the wind.

“They rented out the whole resort?”

Jackson nodded at his brother. “I guess Lani’s fiance’s family is rich and the guy’s dad didn’t want to put Mr. Howlett out for the week.”

“I thought we were rich?” Teddy asked, looking out the window as they pulled up to the resort.

“No. We’re wealthy. Right Dad?”

Blake had his eyes closed, the back of his head leaned elegantly along the back of the taxi seat.

“We have money. Let’s leave it at that.”

Teddy smacked his lips but otherwise dropped the topic of conversation as they pulled up to the front entrance.

They were greeted by friendly employees and even friendlier guests who had recognized the former president and his sons immediately. Blake wanted to get away from the attention quickly and tried to check in as fast as possible. The bags were brought to their respective rooms. Teddy and Jackson shared an en suite while Blake and Josie occupied another.

Blake tipped the boy that brought his and her luggage up and promptly shut the door. He moved to the balcony while Josie went to take a shower, listening for clicks of door latches as he watched the sun swim steady across the horizon. No one came to the room, no one bothered them as he sat there and watched the sky transform, until that giant ball of heat and light dropped into the water where it burned and sank and melted.

Blake went inside only to order dinner and text his children of their whereabouts. He got messages saying that Teddy was eating down at the beach with some young people that he had already met, the social butterfly he was, and Jackson was taking his meal down at the restaurant so that he could take photographs well into the night. Both of his sons were raised well enough to handle themselves, regardless of the environment or situation. He trusted them and went about enjoying his relaxing night before things wholefully changed the following day.

He answered the door after awhile, allowing the waiter to arrange his meal and wine on the balcony table. He passed the young man a single bill, and settled in for more hours of solitude and peace, save for his wife.

They worked through a nice soup and salad that did not require the use of two hands considering he only had the one good one. And when he was finished, he put the ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign on the outside of their door and rested in bed. The heat was unbearable. He hadn’t set foot in Oahu in over a decade. He had not remembered the air feeling like this. His skin was damp, and he was uncomfortable and restless.

When he woke in the morning, he was naked and tangled hopelessly in damp white sheets with Josie laying across his back. They hadn’t slept well, tossing and turning all night.

They ate breakfast down in the restaurant with their kids.
“You guys have to change because we’re going swimming down at the beach.” Teddy told them after he finished slurping down a mango and banana smoothie.

“Are we now?” Josie glanced at Blake and then to his ruined hand.

“ I’m getting drunk and building sand castles. But by all means, go swimming .” Blake smirked.

“You’re such a baby.” Josie teased him.

The four of them traveled back upstairs and Blake led his wife to the room. With promises of being down soon, Teddy and Jackson went out to the beach and found a spot amongst a few guests. Blake and Josie enjoyed a quickie as they attempted to change into their respective bathing suits. True to his word, Blake ordered a pitcher of margarita when they got down to the beach and had nearly downed half of it before Josie and the kids even got to the mid way point of the sea where tides were too rough to swim without gear. He watched them splash and swim together for a long time. Josie had looked so young as she smiled and laughed below and above the water.

It was his biggest regret in his marriage. Cheating on Josie. And when Gwen left him, he turned into a person that was so unbearable to live with and love that Blake was still surprised his wife hadn’t divorced him for that alone. It was his last year in office when he finally worked up the nerve to reveal to Jo that he had been unfaithful. He didn’t tell her who, even though that was the only question she really wanted answered. Part of him thought she already knew it was Gwen. But even so, by revealing that secret, he set not only himself and Gwen free, but Josie as well. He gave her the decision to stay with him or leave after they would leave the White House. Her decision surprised him.

She wanted to stay married for the kids. They were only twelve and fourteen at the time and still in school, still in the public eye. They didn’t need to go through a family separating and the whole world prying and judging them for something that was out of their control. The agreement was to stay together until Teddy was eighteen. By then, both boys would be at college and living their own lives away from their parents decisions and actions. In the meantime, they’d live in the same house, go out as a family, which was at first hard to do. It wasn’t until Josie had forgiven him that things got easier. And then somehow, their relationship had strengthened over the years while living in Honolulu. They talked more, did things just for the two of them, and even had sex occasionally that Josie always instigated. It didn’t seem like they would break up in two years time, but then again, Blake wouldn’t push his luck, and he wouldn’t ask her for fear that her decision and feelings hadn’t changed. He didn’t even know what he wanted, so he wasn’t going to force the issue.

This arrangement worked for all of them. The kids were happy, and he and Josie were fine. It wasn’t bad. Maybe unconventional, but the people who wouldn’t understand were people who weren’t in the public eye 24/7. Besides, it wasn’t anyone’s business but their own.

Josie eventually got out and left the boys to themselves. They started playing a game of who could hold their breath under the water longest without dying. From his perch, it looked like Teddy was the winner.

“I can’t believe we’re here.”

Blake looked over to his wife. She had settled down next to him in a chair. Her profile was perfect. The years hadn’t aged her a bit except for the laugh lines running across her face in all the right places.

“In Hawaii?” He asked.
She nodded. “Yeah, but also here. I mean, I can’t remember a time where we were this happy and we’re not even together.”

He barely flinched. “I think the happiest we’ve ever been was when we first met.” He thought out loud.

“But this is a close second.”

He nodded. “I like it.”

“Me too.”

That’s how conversations went with them now. They were short, pleasant, amicable. The years had changed them but the years to come would only bring them closer, he was sure of it. Josie was his wife, his partner for so many years, the mother of his children. If it couldn’t be Gwen, then it would always be Josie. And Blake was just fine with that.

They stayed at the beach until lunch, which was ate sitting out over the restaurant’s terrace. It wasn’t a quiet affair, with the boys holding most of the conversations and the adults adding in their two cents. When the meal was over, Josie decided to take the kids out on the jet skis while Blake chose to go for a hike. He didn’t like the water sports considering he could no longer swim like he once could. And he didn’t know if he’d have the time to hike into the forest with the impending nuptials. Tomorrow would start the week long activities leading up to the ceremony. From what Jack told them, all the guests were more than welcome, in fact, encouraged, to participate in the festivities. Blake figured it was the groom’s family putting on the entire charade. But helicopter rides, camping, beach parties, and boat outings sounded just fine to him.

He just wanted to take a hike before the craziness settled in and he was forced to see people he had wronged more times than he can count in his life.

Blake went back to his room to change into a pair of cargo shorts and a white t-shirt. He packed a small backpack with water, granola bars, and bug spray, deciding that was all he needed for a couple of hours.

He caught a glimpse of his family all out on the water when he walked to the entrance to one of the trails. He smiled and began his hike.

It was three hours spent, trekking through crawling vines and merciless undergrowth. He felt his lungs burn with the hot air but a little water helped keep the scorching blaze he swallowed every five seconds at bay. But that first breath after a clean swallow made his heart swell. It was all damp heat, misty odors rising from the earth’s floor, and way too many sounds. It was nature and he hadn’t had a taste of it for so long now.

Eventually, he came to the edge of a path as it met a stretch of water, the near surface of it blanketed in nothing but fallen yellow flowers. The water was clear, strikingly so. Blake had to squint against the glaring sun but managed to see how the rays of light poured themselves onto the pond and created a golden plate reflecting stilted shadows of trees and leaves around the rim.

And then he saw them in the water. He was sure it was them. Manó and some other child, a small boy, couldn’t be older than ten. And her. Gwen.

He stood still, blinking the sun from his eyes as he soaked the image in his head. Manó was taller than he last saw him, older, blonder. His hair had always reminded Blake of the waves, a strawberry gold that was so light it reflected angelically off the water. His blue eyes were the same
clear color, holding oceans. He was handsome, with his pale skin that held the slightest tan and his sharp looks. The boy beside him, diving into the water every time his older partner threw some shabby rock into the clearing, reminded him of Wyatt, except darker. His hair was brunette, the color of coffee, but his eyes matched the Lieutenant’s.

And then he focused on her. He examined the bikini top that stuck to her skin. He could see her navel, and thoughts flashed in his head, thoughts that made him want to press his thumb into the dip there, to feel her pulse through the skin. She had a strong artery nearby, the one that made a stomach flutter in rhythm when one was lying down. He would feel her muscles, too, tight and tense and wanting under his hand.

He saw her small round breasts outlined by the wetsuit, and pebbled nipples warning her of inappropriate temperatures as she got in and out of the water on her son’s command and gazes that Blake couldn’t help but bestow upon her form. He wanted to chuckle at the thought of her body knowing he was there before her mind could tell her.

She moved a little, the splashes stopped, and he saw that her body went rigid with anticipation. As his gaze crept higher, he saw that she was looking at him. The milk of her exposed skin turned red, a creeping flush of rose-tinted emotion like the shadow of a retreating dusk. He had gotten more weary, more romantic over the years, yearning and going without. But even so, she was the best painting. She would always be a work of art that only his eyes were best suited for. Any normal man couldn’t take this much beauty, this much age and experience and memories. Only him.

She waded through the water, telling her offspring to stay put, and of course that was her kid. Of course, she had another child. He knew that. Tried to block it out for four years. It was fitting. Her and him. This crazy thing that they decided to embark on in this life. He lost a hand, she gained a child.

Gwen drew closer, walking out of the pond, water dripping from her pale body. He didn’t know how she could be surrounded by sun 24/7 and not be as tan as he was just by sitting out for a couple of hours.

Everything was so amusing to him. Them meeting here like this, completely random. Her looking the way she did at him, his body and soul doing somersaults in his chest. He thinks he has to laugh or else it would all be too much.

She was still blushing as she stood before him. He wanted the blood blooming beneath her skin just as much as he wanted to live out his days on a beach with a vodka sprite in his hands and the sun warming his old limbs.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” Her voice was almost a whisper so low it could barely be heard. He guessed that was the point.

And he wanted to say, because what I am to do but stare at you? And because I want to trail my fingers over skin that never tans and make it blush like this, always.

Instead, “Our daughter is getting married.”

It’s not what he meant to say, but Blake knew he wanted to say it, needed to say it, because it had been weighing heavy on his mind.

Gwen’s eyes widened, and he didn’t think she ever thought as Lani as there’s since the girl came into this world.
There was light splashing, just behind them. The boys were playing again. Blake felt the heat radiate from her body, the sun beginning to evaporate the damp immediately.

“I know.” She said slowly, cautioned as if it would send him running like he had done twenty years ago.

“She’s too young.” He said, because it had been bothering him, as well.

“I know.” She repeated.

“It’s good to see you.”

That caught her unawares again and Gwen’s body tensed. “It’s been eight years. I don’t know what I thought I would say to you when I saw you again…” Her eyes strayed down to his ruined hand and then to where the bullet had punctured his chest, covered by the light shirt he was wearing.

“I’m sorry.”

Blake grimaced. That was probably not what she meant to say, but what she wanted and needed to say, as well. It had probably been weighing heavy on her mind, too. No doubt she would have been glued to the television screen that night, and the day following. Hell, maybe even the week.

“It’s okay. It’s been four years.”

She looked uneasily at him. Gwen was about ready to say something when Manó’s low voice enveloped them like a warm hug.

“S.J. wants to get ice cream at the parlor. Figured we would head back, soon.” The seventeen year old’s eyes landed on him.

“Hey, Manó.”

The boy’s similar blue eyes regarded him. “Hey, Blake. Glad to see you made it, okay.”

A puff of air left his chest at the sound of his first name falling from the boy’s lips. He couldn’t explain it but not hearing any formalities coming from Gwen’s children never ceased to soften his heart. Maybe it was because he didn’t like them thinking of him as other people, as someone they didn’t have to hold any affection or kindness for. It was a selfish way to think and he didn’t like to be that same selfish person he was before, but he couldn’t help what his heart was telling him now.

“It’s only been a couple of months and it seems like you’re the same height as Jackson, now.”

Manó’s face softened. “He didn’t text me you guys were here.”

“That’s his mother’s fault. She said she wanted family time before the wedding festivities. I guess she knew the boys would be hanging out with other people all week instead of us. I don’t think we’ve taken a family vacation ever. Not since they were babies.”

“Well, do you think Mrs. Shelton would let them come to a campfire out on the beach tonight? My sister’s fiance is hosting one for the kids.” He put the word in quotes, rolling his eyes at his mother.

Gwen was steady looking at Blake. It would have unnerved him but he knew he would be doing the same if given the chance.

“I don’t see why not. We go to bed early anyways now that we’re properly old.” The two men
smirked at his joke. “They’re down by the beach right now, in fact, if you guys want to head back together?”

“Well, if you just got here we wouldn’t--”

He cut Manó off gently, “I’ve been out here for hours now. Didn’t think I’d come across anyone this far out.”

“Why don’t we get ice cream together if your family wants to?”

Gwen’s eyes remained on his, but her body didn’t tense. He was beginning to feel like she was so numb to everything regarding him that the shock of his presence would be the only thing to surprise or move her when it came to him.

“If that’s okay with your mother.” Blake replied.

The mother of three shrugged, surprising him. But that was all she gave before her youngest waddled out of the pond and came to her side, burying his face in her side as he looked up shyly at Blake. “Are we going for ice cream?”

Gwen finally tore her eyes away from him and ran a soft hand through her son’s wet hair. “We are. Come on and grab all your stuff.”

Blake stood off to the side as the family packed their belongings up. Gwen remained by her youngest while he walked with Manó. The two men sparked up a conversation about the Arizona Cardinals which he had come to know that Manó was a huge fan of over the years, and made their way back to the entrance of the trail. The younger man pointed out a great rock formation when they were silent for far too long and Blake stopped to admire the stone surrounded by the jungle’s green.

It was a natural pyramid, tall and thin, grey and green from climbing vegetation. He hadn’t seen anything like it. He glanced over and saw that Gwen and her son were looking out too.

“Dad said we should try to see what’s over there one day when we all have a day off.” Manó said to his mother.

“It’s beautiful.” She murmured.

Blake watched her watch the rock. She stepped forward, eyeing a flock of birds circling near the top. Her foot caught and she thrust her arms forward to regain balance but it was too late, and too late for him to block her fall. He tried anyways and managed to keep her face from hitting the floor but not her ankle from twisting at a ghastly pace as she landed on her side.

He let her go once he saw that she hadn’t hit anywhere else and grabbed his mangled hand. It hurt like a bitch from being tensed, unused and weak muscles being stretched awfully quick, nerves that were dead since the accident.

“Mom, are you okay?” Manó rushed to her side.

She glared at her foot, a blooming purple spreading above the ankle. Then she looked at him, to his ragged flesh, “I’m sorry.” She said, repeating her words from earlier.

“It’s fine. Are you alright?”

She nodded and hissed when her son tried to touch the bruised skin.
Blake crouched near her, sitting on the damp earth near her foot and examined the growing injury along side Manó.

“It’s just twisted.” She said, holding out her hand to her youngest who looked frightened at the sight of his mother on the floor.

Blake carefully gripped her calf, and lifted her leg to rest her foot on his forearm. Lowering his face to see more clearly, he shook his head as he saw the blood rush to the site of pain. He placed his middle and forefinger on her uninjured skin and glided them down toward her ankle. She sat up and leaned toward him.

“Blake, it’s fine.”

“Can you walk?”

She nodded and him and Manó helped her up off the floor. They took a step forward and nearly thought she was in the clear before the injury almost had her buckling down to the floor, again. They caught her before she could, Blake’s left arm going around her stomach to keep her upright.

“Damn it.” She cursed.

Her youngest son giggled even though he was still clearly afraid for his mother.

“I’ll call, Dad.” Manó said right away.

“No, you’ll worry him and he’s trying to get the villas together for the hula-out.”

“You can’t walk, Mom.”

She sighed and hung her head down.

Blake tightened his arm around her. “Get on my back.”

Her eyes snapped to his, their faces close.

“What?”

“I’ll carry you.”

“No, I’ll carry her.” Manó said.

Blake gave him an unimpressed look. “Come on. I’m bigger. She won’t weigh a thing to me.”

The boy wanted to help his mother, he understood, but there was no need for him to hurt himself, too, along the way.

“Blake--”

He cut her off. “Just let me carry you. At least until we get to the beach and you can use one of those golf carts or something to get you back to the main entrance.”

She looked unsure, unsure as she once was when she first saw him standing there. And then she let go, perhaps all of it, or maybe some of it, and nodded minutely.

Blake turned to face away from her slowly, shrugging off his backpack, still mindful of the weight she was putting on him to keep her balanced and standing upright, and then he crouched low to
accommodate her small height. Manó helped her up, and Blake grabbed the back of her bare thighs as he hoisted her further into a much more comfortable position for him to carry her and for her to be carried.

It was several minutes later when he realized what a terrible idea it was. It was around the time that she could no longer keep her head up and away from his own, when she allowed her neck to relax as she dropped her face to his shoulder. Her breath fanned the side of his jaw, and he clenched the muscles in his cheek tightly. Her legs were wrapped around him, her breasts pressed to the damp of his shirt.

They made it to the beach and Blake carried her the rest of the way to the resort entrance to much protests from Gwen. He told her it would be faster than waiting for a cart and he was right. By the time they got there, Blake gently settled her back down on her feet and Manó helped her sit down in a chair by the deck. An employee came out with a wheelchair and they helped her into that, as well.

Blake stood there for a good second, watching as she was fussed over. Her youngest had asked if they were still getting ice cream and Blake had to chuckle.

“Not now, S.J.” Manó told the boy.

Gwen waved another employee away and looked up at him. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

They waited there in awkward silence before Blake gestured to the beach. “I should head back.” He looked to Manó. “I’ll tell the boys about the campfire.”

“Thanks, Blake.”

He nodded at the Howlett family and hastily made a retreat to the area on the beach where the jet skis were located. He doubted his family would still be out there but it was better than standing there with them and feeling like he wasn’t needed.

He was almost thankful for Gwen’s injury. It was like an icebreaker. It sounded stupid but if she hadn’t hurt herself, he didn’t think they’d be able to stand in the same space together without thinking of their shit past. This way, he was able to help her, she was able to tolerate him, and his heart didn’t need to feel so heavy.

It didn’t matter that it would eventually become too much. It was a wedding, it was their daughter, it was memories twenty years ago that they thought were put behind them. If he even for a second was naive enough to hope that his heart was safe even for just one week, then he was a bigger fool than he previously thought.

And something told him he had been all along.
This is like part one of a whole chapter. I got excited cause shit is getting good again so I had to post it. second part coming soon. by the way, when Blake wears glasses, he looks like this but less dorky. lol. I like the snl skit glasses he wore but thought he wouldn't wear those in public.

“You got everything you need?”

Teddy nodded absently. Blake sighed and looked at his oldest.

“Dad, we’re all good. Stop worrying. You’re acting like Mom.”
“I just want to make sure you guys are set for the night. No adult supervision, anything could happen. And you both have to remember who you are and who I am. Don’t do anything stupid that can end up reflecting bad on the family. We might be out of the White House but the world is still watching and we have a character to uphold--”

“Jesus Christ, Dad. We get it.” Teddy complained, finally snapping his attention away from the beach.

Blake held his tongue back. Any other night he would have had a few choice words for his youngest but Josie taught him a long time ago to pick and choose your battles when it came to the kids, especially if you were going to be parting from them for a long time. If something ever happened, either to him or the kids, he didn’t want to leave anything on a sour note.

“Alright. Me and your mom will be upstairs if you need anything. We love you.”

Teddy and Jackson gave their parents each a kiss on the cheek before walking out onto the terrace and over to the already lit campfire down by the far end of the shore. There were already several kids sitting around on wooden logs and a few taking a night swim out into the water.

Josie wrapped her hand around his wrist and leaned into his side. “They’ll be fine. They’re good kids.”

“I’m worried about other people’s kids.” He looked down at her perfect face and tried to smile.

Josie leaned up for a kiss and he obliged. “Come on. That bed is calling my name.”

“I was thinking we could get a drink for a little bit and just see that everything is okay out there. An hour tops.”

His wife rubbed his chest and gave him a sympathetic look. “I’m tired, honey. And I think that last margarita at dinner upset my stomach.”

He sighed, really wanting to stay downstairs and watch the boys. It would just be for a little bit, to give him a piece of mind. It was one thing to leave them to their own devices during the day, and even the evening still held the last traces of sunlight. But they were out on a beach, most likely would travel somewhere else if he still remembered how young people thought, and they weren’t exactly on their own island. Blake knew Oahu backwards and forwards but his kids didn’t and bad things happened everywhere.

“Why don’t you just go to the bar and I’ll head up for the night? I’m only going to bed anyways.”

He bit the inside of his cheek. “You sure? I won’t be long.”

“Positive.”

Blake kissed her one last time and let her go. He watched her wait by the elevators and once she was inside, Josie blew him a kiss. He didn’t catch it but he smiled at her like he was in love. He wasn’t sure if he was anymore. He wasn’t sure if he was allowed to be. This was only temporary. Right?

The former president shook his head and began his walk to the resort bar. He passed the lobby desk and made eye contact with the receptionist who recognized him and gave him a small wave and a dazzling smile. He returned it dutifully and glanced at the woman she was helping, making Blake stop in his tracks. As if sensing him there, Gwen glanced back over her left shoulder, alabaster skin glowing too bright from the overhead chandelier above them.
There was nothing on her face as she looked at him. But then she said something to the employee and stepped away, turning back around to regard him. He looked at her mouth as it opened but didn’t hear anything. He blinked.

“What?” He asked in a perfectly even, normal tone. At least he hoped.

“Thank you, again,” she offered, louder.

“For what?”

She almost rolled her eyes. “For earlier. Or did you forget about carrying me for miles to safety already?”

“No...You’re welcome. Again.”

Her lips tried to stretch into a smile but they didn’t quite make it. “Well, I better head back. I only came to make sure the kids were alright with the bonfire.” She turned to leave and it took him a moment to register that she was really walking away from him. A familiar sting was creeping its way up the side of his neck until it reached his head and attacked his eyes. She was always leaving him. He was sure it was the universe’s way of punishing him for twenty years ago. Karma.

“Wait.”

She slowed but didn’t stop. Figures.

“Just...” He scrambled for words that no longer made sense of him to ask of her. “Have a drink with me?” He blurted out.

She halted, then. “What?” She parried.

“A drink? I...I was gonna watch the kids and make sure everything was alright before I headed up for bed.”

Gwen blinked as if not hearing his words. He saw the glint in her eyes as her lashes shuttered over the brown as if opening and closing a window. A window to her soul, surely. She looked at him. He waited. He felt her gaze drop lower, scraping over the length of his body. She saw the ruined hand. She blinked, then swallowed. He could hear the gears turning in her head, the questions forming in her mind.

“Something tells me history is repeating itself.” She vocalized, quietly, a warning in the edge of her voice.

“We’ve learned from our mistakes.” He reminded her. The words tasted like acid in his mouth, bitterness on his tongue. They were better prepared for this sort of thing. Time only taught even though you hoped that it would heal, too.

“And yet many people still choose to make the same ones.”

She was going to say no. She was going to refuse because she didn’t want anything to do with him. This was truly a first in his book.

He took a couple steps toward her, mindful of where they were and who could see them. “Some mistakes are worth repeating.”

She met his gaze for the second time. He couldn’t read her. He used to be able to know what she
was thinking with just one look. What happened to them?

“Why?” She asked.

“Why what?”

“Why do you want me to join you?”

The way Blake saw it, he had two options. He could dare her, call out her hesitation for being seen with a crippled, former president. Or he could plead with her, beg her for her company and count on her sympathy to keep him standing upright.

He settled on another option. “Why not?”

She stared. “I can think of a hundred reasons why not.”

“That’s your argument? I can think of a hundred reasons why.” He countered.

She said nothing, her lips a vale of red lipstick, her body a beautiful canvas. Her limbs relaxed some of the tension that she had been feeling.

“Just give me an hour. We’ll get a quiet table away from eyes. One out on the veranda. You can even go home before then if you need to. Just come find me.”

Her reply was nearly imperceptible, so easily missed if you didn’t know where to look. He knew where to look.

“I need to go home.” She said. But I’ll come back. It went unsaid.

He had maybe thirty minutes to change into a new shirt, freshen up underneath his arms and his face, and grab a table out on the patio.

When she disappeared out the front doors, Blake sprinted up the stairs, dismissing the elevator ride. When he came to his room, Blake nearly forgot about Josie.

Fuck.

He entered quietly, in case she was already knocked out. When she wasn’t feeling well it didn’t take long for his wife to succumb to sleep. When he walked further into the room, he saw her in bed, on her side, breath slow, eyes closed, the television light shining on her almost angelically.

Blake walked to the closet and silently grabbed a new button down shirt. When he turned on the bathroom light, he saw it was a light green. He shrugged off the worn plaid and undershirt and washed with a rag over his neck and torso with some water and light soap. His face was next and Blake scrubbed off the grime from the day. He got dressed quickly and ran some water through his curls. He contemplated taking out his contacts but he didn’t want to wear his glasses meeting her. When they proved to be too blurry, Blake knew he wanted to see all of her without any problems and eventually took them out. He retrieved his glasses from the nightstand, stopping to look at Josie.

She really was perfect. Was he making another mistake?

No. She was the one that decided to stay. She was the one who wanted to leave him in two years time. They weren’t what they once were and even though he knew Josie hadn’t taken a lover all these years despite having every right to, he was not going to be made to feel bad for having one
drink with his ex. It’s not like anything was going to happen. As far as he knew, Gwen and Wyatt were still together. He had no intention of fucking up that relationship just because he fucked his own.

Blake left the room just as quietly as he came in and ventured back downstairs, taking the elevator this time. He got a table relatively easy outside despite it being truly busy. He asked for one in the corner, so that the other patrons didn’t have to stare and marvel at the 47th president dining with them for the evening. It would still happen, but this way, Gwen wouldn’t have to feel odd sitting there with him if she couldn’t see them. He could brave the looks. He always had.

His fingers had tapped a staccato rhythm for the past twenty minutes on the dining table, the crisp white cloth preventing the impact of his bones from accomplishing a satisfying thud on the hardwood. He lifted them and ran them gently through his hair as he peered into the side of a sparkling glass. He had ordered a vodka straight and her a melon spritzer. She wasn’t late. There really was no set time. But he had begun to think that she had changed her mind.

Blake stared at the candle in the middle of the table to keep his thoughts from getting too depressing. Jasmine-scented wax wasn’t his favorite but it wasn’t terrible. The candle’s light flickered soft ochre in a dance meant to dispel the encroachment of the night. Even the lanterns planted about helped to prevent the waiters from tripping into the night.

A throat cleared above him and Blake’s head snapped up. He rose immediately, stepping to pull out her chair for her. It allowed him to be close to her body. Allowed him to watch the candlelight flick over her face, allowed his trailing fingers to skim over her arm by accident as he passed.

He sat back down and allowed is gaze to wander. Her hair was blonde again, he loved it like that. Truthfully, he’d love it anyway. It was shorter, skimming past her jawline.

“You’re staring.” She said, looking down at the menu.

“It just seems like all the women in my life are aging beautifully and I can’t keep up.”

“You think I’m still beautiful?”

“I think my description of you now would be completely inadequate because my medium is not words. Not anymore.”

“You’ll always be a president, Blake.”

“I want to be more than that, now.” He couldn’t say what he wanted, not yet. Mostly because he didn’t quite know himself.

Her eyes finally lifted from the piece of plastic. “Let’s talk about something else.”

Insects clicked and buzzed, and a thick scent of night-blooming flora filled the air.

“You had another kid.”

“His name is Silas but we call him S.J.”

“He’s a handsome boy. How old?”

“Eight.”

He hummed, looking off to the side at the hotel’s storm shutters, awaiting with their tight slats and
iron wills on either side of each long window. “Eight?”

She flinched and pushed herself against the creaking back of the wicker chair. He regretted it immediately.

“Don’t.” She hissed.

“I’m sorry.”

Her fingers wrapped around the chair’s arm in a vice grip.

“It just wouldn’t be the first time that I didn’t know I had a child running around in some parts of the world.”

There was a war in her eyes. She was going to dash away or throw her spritzer in his face. She looked like she was going to cry. She swallowed thickly, shook her head a little, and released the tension of her lips as if to speak. Gwen grasped for her drink and he watched the muscles of her throat ease the cool liquid down. She set the glass back on the table and folded her fingers together, then repeated. She looked at him then.

“You want to know the truth?” She asked, steadily.

He didn't. He really didn’t. It wouldn’t change anything between them. It would only hurt him. It would only ever hurt her to do so. He didn’t want to know.

“I’m many things. But a father to your kids is not one of them.”

The tension did not leave her shoulders, but she leaned forward just enough that she could see him more clearly over the table. “You’re being a coward.”

He closed his eyes. She could feel him staring at him. He swallowed. Hadn’t he always been a coward? He put himself here. He brought it up. He hid from it just as easily. *I don’t want to know.*

“Blake--”

“I won’t be mad.”

A silence fell upon them. Gwen shifted. He opened his eyes to see her free her legs from the confines of the table. He scanned their length as she stretched them until she caught his line of sight and hid them back underneath the table.

Madness. This was madness. She was his undoing and she knew it.

“Is he mine?” *Is he my son, is he my undoing as well?* His tone was almost cruel even though he told her he wouldn’t be angry. Madness.

She sat up straighter. She blinked. She swallowed. “Tell me it would make a difference if he was.” She requested with strange anger. Anger he wasn’t accustomed to. Anger he didn’t know how to avoid or dissuade.

“Gwen…”

“He’s mine.” She said. It was all the answer he needed. He was hers. He was not hers and Wyatt’s. He was not hers and mine. He was just hers. He was my son. But he wasn’t mine. She was the mother of two of his children. He was a father of four. *No he was a father of two. Coward.*
Blake let his eyes wander over her face, down her neck, across her shoulders and breasts. “What have we done?”

He wasn’t aware he said it out loud. What had they done...to each other, to their families, to their happiness, and love and future? What had they done? Why were they still out to hurt each other? Why couldn’t he just pull her into his arms and die with the feeling of her body pressed against his? Because too much has happened. Because it wasn’t written in the stars. Because wars are never truly over. There’s resentment on both sides. Anger. Old wounds being scratched at by new days. Death. There were survivors and memories that would never let the present or future forget its past.

Josie had forgiven him but had Gwen given him her forgiveness? Had he? There was too much to forgive and nothing at all to absolve. He destroyed her. And she would not ever apologize for how she chose to repair what he broke. He knew that now.

“We can’t start over and we can’t forget and we won’t forgive each other, so what’s left?” He asked her.

“We marry our daughter off.” She said simply, at least giving him that. Our daughter.

“And then we go our separate ways.” He finished for her.

She looked out at the beach. From where they were sitting, they couldn’t see their children but they knew they were there. Laughing, happy, ignorant.

“You asked me what we’ve done.” She started, looking back to him. “We brought two amazing kids into this world. We loved each other with something that only novels talk about and we hurt each other with a pain I’m sure hell would be jealous of. We’ve lived. And I don’t regret ever meeting you or giving you my heart. This is what was meant to be. And you’re wrong. I have forgiven you. I love you. I will always love you. But I can never be with you again. Not in that way. And I know you know how true that is.”

“Gwen…” He sighed, looking down at the table, unable to meet her eyes any longer. “Why does some part of me still think that you’re the one, then? That we’ll get past this. That you’ll be able to look at me and not see disappointment.”

“How do you see a future with a heart that’s been betrayed so many times?” She asked, genuinely wanting to know the answer.

“Because time teaches. And time heals. I know it does.”

“We’ve had another eight years. What healed since then? My husband lost the ability to serve. You lost the use of a hand. We lost the use of our hearts. What do you see in me anymore?”

He remained absolutely still. He couldn’t absorb her claim, not there, with his vulnerability tripping into the night. He’d save it for later, when her words held no sting, just a bite.

He cleared his throat as if the sand had gotten caught in it. “Why do you care how I see you or what I see in you? What does that have to do with us?”

“Because there’s only an us as far as there is an opinion of us. What you think of me matters. What I think of you matters.”

“I think you’re the love of my life. I think being together is confusing for me and yet it’s the only thing that makes sense. And that’s what we are. Something that makes sense and doesn’t and the
unknowing is actually a declaration of love. Just be quiet, say nothing, and if you can’t say “yes,”
don’t say “no,” say “later.” It’s why people say “maybe” when they mean “yes,” but hope you’ll
think “no” when all they really mean is, please, just ask me again, and once more after that. I can
do later. I can do maybe cause I know you mean yes you just want me to ask you again.”

“You haven’t asked me.”

“Marry me, Gwen. Marry me and forgive me and let me make you happy like I once did. Let me
fix my mistakes.”

She transformed there in her seat, bit by bit as if she’d shed a skin like a malicious snake.

“No.” She murmured. It was low, permanent in the air, potent.

Why are you doing this, he wanted to mutter. Why are you bent on ruining me?

She blinked. Her eyes were pools of bright stars, a thin film of water filled them as she tried to
reign it in.

She rose from her seat. He did, too.

“Marry me?” He asked, whispered across the table. Eyes would be on them soon if they didn’t sit
back down or leave. Answer me. I’m insane. I know it. But marry me. Answer me. Please.

There was a brow furrow, tightly pressed lips. A blush. “Goodnight.”

It was all she said as she darted away as quickly as she could without physically running. And he
would follow her. Of course, he would. Like a bride running away from the altar because of
nervous jitters. He would go after her, not knowing what he would say, not even completely sure
what had happened. But he would follow her. That “goodnight” was her “maybe.”

Just ask me again, once more. I want to say yes but later.

But she hadn’t said later. She couldn’t say yes but she didn’t tell him later either.

She had said no. He had said come find me.

Maybe it was his turn to find her.
Chapter Notes

The song in this chapter is called Why Do They Leave by Ryan Adams. Give it a listen, it really sets the mood for that scene and it's such a great song.

He found her outside, standing on the veranda, arms crossed, face frowning. She didn’t leave. She didn’t leave and he had to take that for what it was.

“I was an ass.” He said in a rush before she saw him and decided to change her mind. But she didn’t even flinch at the sound of his voice. He took that for what it was, as well.

“You are an ass.” She said but there was no malice in her voice.

He took one step closer. “I will probably always be an ass.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“...I’m not angry you proposed. I should be…” Her voice drifted like a breeze. “I’m angry that I don’t know how to move forward with you. Marriage is not the answer, obviously.”

“I just meant--”

“I know what you meant. You want to start over, start a life together. The problem is we’re already living a life. Separate lives that we can’t sweep under the rug. You do know that right? I mean, why else would you be here with your wife?”

“We’re not really together.”

“Don’t give me that crap.” She snapped then, turning around to face him.

He put his hands up, not wanting to argue. “I just mean that were not what you think.”

“What else is there?”

“I told her I cheated.”

Gwen’s eyes widened. “You didn’t--”

“Tell her it was you? No. I don’t know who she thinks it is. But I told her nonetheless. And I expected her to leave once I was out of the office but she wanted to stay together for the kids, at least until Teddy was eighteen and off to college. Which made sense considering they were still young and a public divorce like that would be awful for a former first family.”

She parted those red lips, considering words, weighing phrases.

“Gwen, we’re not really together. I don’t know what we are. I’m not gonna lie to you and say we haven’t been intimate or that things haven’t been good. They have. They are. But she hasn’t told
me that the plan is off. She hasn’t come to me and said she wants to be with me even after these next two years are up. I just don’t know.”

“Do you want to be with her?”

He didn’t expect that and he was almost amused that Gwen had to even ask.

“You know how much I care about her. That’s why I told her about my infidelity. And I was prepared to watch her walk away. I still am if that answers your question.”

She leaned against the railing, strangely at ease, never wavering her gaze from him. “But if she decides that she wants to be with you?”

“Gwen. It’s a shitty thing for me to say. I know it. But if I can’t have you, she’s the only other woman left for me.”

She turned to look out at the water. “Yeah, you’re right. That is a shitty thing for you to say.”

He nodded half-heartedly and did not speak as he looked upon her form. Eventually, she spoke again, quietly, as if she was about to tell a story.

“Wyatt told me that he was having an emotional affair with a woman while we were living in D.C.”

Blake’s eyebrows shot up at the confession but the rest of his body remained still, knowing how rare this moment was for them.

She continued, “And I couldn’t help but laugh in his face. I don’t know I just thought it was all crazy. He got into that accident because he was on his way to see her. And I knew something wasn’t right there. I knew it. But then I told him about us.” She nodded at the question in his eyes. “I felt I had to tell him who it was. The funny thing is...he didn’t seem so surprised. And I guess that’s where we were. At a standstill. Understanding and not understanding each other at the same time. And then I told him I was pregnant. And we moved and we decided to try and make it work but we just couldn’t. So we decided to separate. And then we got a divorce. And now we’re the best of friends.” She turned to look at him, smiling, as if to say it was true but not quite. Maybe.

“He even has a girlfriend now. I’ve met her a couple of times. She seems like a nice girl. And things are...I’m in a good place. I have been for awhile. The kids are fine, obviously.”

“Does he know?” He knew that she’d know what he meant.

“He does. About both of them. It hasn’t changed what he feels. He raised them. All of them.”

He nodded, not seeing any fault in the statement.

“So, that’s why I’m at an impasse here. Because I know what I want and I’m able to go after it because I’ve handled what I need to. You’re still Blake from eight years ago. I don’t think you know how to be by yourself. Truly. We’re at two different places in our lives, right now. You see that, right?”

He did. He saw now how ridiculous she must’ve found him. He felt governed only by impulse in this place, so close to their past and so close to her. His heart still felt empty after years without her. His soul was twitching against his chest, trying and failing to be with her after everything that had occurred. He’d do or say anything to reverse the last twenty years. But she didn’t need that. Most of all, she didn’t want it. He had to be better. He had to show her that he’d do anything for the next
twenty years to truly make his amends--to make it right--all of it.

“You still like me, don’t you?” He asked.

Gwen smiled slightly. “Yes, Blake. I still like you.”

“Then there’s still hope.” She looked unsure. He continued, “There’s still hope if I prove myself to you. I can do that. I was the fucking president of the United States. I can be a better man for the woman I love.”

The breeze lifted soft blonde strands into her face which Gwen brushed away with a delicate hand. “We have a long way to go.”

“I know that.”

“It’s not gonna be easy. You’re still not my priority. The kids come first.”

“Our kids.”

“Blake.”

“I’m sorry. You’re right. And I won’t get in the way of that.”

She scoffed. “You will. And that’s okay.” Gwen quickly added. “They find a way to gravitate toward you, anyways. Even the ones you didn’t father.”

He chuckled. “But I promise I won’t seek them out. I owe you that at least.”

“Please, don’t. Over the years, I’m not sure my decision to keep them from you was necessarily the right thing.”

He was surprised to hear her admit it.

“I’m not saying my choices didn’t have any justification. You abandoned us the first time around.”

“I didn’t know you were pregnant.”

“But you knew you should have gotten on that plane to find out.” He shut his mouth and let her continue. “And last time...everything was falling down around us. To have you claim a child that wasn’t the product of your marriage would have been cruel to make you do.”

“I would have done it.”

“Your entire presidency would have been made a joke. You worked too hard in that office--you’ve done too many great things for this country to let it all come crashing down in a blazing fire started by me.”

“We slept together knowing it was both of our decisions. It was my fault that we didn’t use protection.”

“We can’t place blame now. That’s not what I’m trying to do. I just meant that I could have told you about Silas when he was four or any other age after that.”

He cocked his head to the side, realizing they were making more progress in these two hours than they’d ever had in the past twenty when it came to their tumultuous relationship. “Why didn’t you?”
“Because as the years passed, it just became easier. I became comfortable with another man raising your kids. And that’s tragic and cowardly of myself, I know that now. It just became apparent that I was never going to see you again. And then Lani went and got herself engaged.”

Blake looked off to the beach where they could now see the large bonfire just off the shoreline. They couldn’t make out any faces but their kids were there. They knew that much. “Her fiance... he a good guy?”

“He seems like it. They met at college and he’s been around for a good three years, now.”

It was crazy how the conversation flowed between them, now. How it changed and twisted and grew in just a matter of minutes. This was what he had wanted with Gwen all along.

“Do you wanna try this drinking thing again?” Blake asked, abruptly.

Gwen tilted her head to the side. “Why not?”

“I can think of a hundred reasons why not.” He smirked.

They called to a waiter that was headed back inside and asked him for an ocean view table. They sat at the very last one that was off the edge of the sand line. They ordered two ciders and drank silently for a couple of minutes, comfortable with the air, their new found truce, and the sight of their children happy but safe.

He watched Gwen’s face as she glanced around the beach. Fondness, amusement, benevolence, sharp pain, all coating her beautiful features. He could look at her forever and never tire. That sharp pain was the most striking thing he’d seen since he left D.C. And even though she tried to conceal it, he saw it nonetheless. The third time he caught it, he could not stop himself from asking. “What’s he like?”

Gwen took another sip from her glass before answering. “He looks like you. The hair, the eyes, the nose. He’s all you in the face and only a little me. But sometimes he looks like Wyatt and I just don’t know how the two can occur at the same time.”

“He raised the boy. It’s natural.”

Gwen hummed. “He’s sweet. And funny and so smart. He’s never sad. He brightens even the lowest of days. He’s a little blessing.”

Blake smiled. “Thank you.” For telling me. For having him. For letting me imagine even just for a second that he’s mine in all the ways that matter.

“I know there are chapters of my life that belong to other people but the whole book is about you it feels like. No matter where I start or end, it’s always you there.” Gwen said, completely out of the blue. The thought must have been weighing heavy on her mind.

“And I think about it all the time.” She continued. “I was here. There was you. Then a child. Then another. You loved me. Then we died.” That was all she said in response, and though bereft of all detail, it was quite enough.

“I’m sorry,” he said, cringing at his own inadequacy.

“Sorry never changes anything. I’ve come to find.”

“I think it allows room for change. Without it, no one would ever start the conversation. There’d
be only one well worn path and it would only lead to retaliation.”

She looked at his hand then, with it’s raw looking flesh and ruddy skin. Then she looked to his face but Blake leaned closer to the ocean because it was safer than seeing that look of pity.

“I was scared you were going to die.” She voiced. “I watched it live. I told myself I wouldn’t. I didn’t want to see your face or the two of you together. But it was your birthday. All those people had come together to celebrate your life and Lani turned it on because she wanted to see the dress I made on Josie.” She took a shaky breath. “And you looked so handsome. The camera went right to you as you exited the car and my heart started hurting and then it stopped a second later.”

“Gwen--”

“Do you know how hard it is to watch someone you love take a bullet? Several bullets. It was like they wouldn’t stop and when you fell to the ground--”

He took her hand suddenly, squeezing fingers that were much thinner than his, much softer. “I’m sorry.”

“The worst thing was having to wait with the rest of the country for any real information about your injuries. I felt like I was just one of the three hundred million people and not the mother of your kids. In that moment I really felt useless.”

“I’m sorry.” It was all he could say.

“They said one hit the chest and the other the hand?” Gwen finally asked what she had been wanting to for four years now.

“The first bullet hit my chest and I put my hand up to reach at it,” he gestured to the area. “A second bullet hit and then I guess a third just grazed my neck as I was falling down.”

She shook her head. “Do you remember?”

He nodded. “Some of it. It felt like fire. Like someone had actually lit a fire inside my chest. The hand just went numb. The doctor said it was because of all the bone fractures, bullet fragments are nasty little fuckers, apparently. They did more damage than the bullets themselves.”

“What else do you remember?”

“Being caught by my agents before I could actually hit concrete. I don’t even remember seeing if Josie was alright. I blacked out and then I woke up in the hospital two days later. A ruined hand, a bullet lodged into my chest, and bandages all around me. I thought I had died.”

“I thought you were going to. I prayed so hard.”

“God heard you.”

“I guess he did. Although, I think it was the whole country that he heard. Maybe even the world. I wonder what that feels like. The world keeping you in their hearts and minds.”

“You may not be in the people’s hearts but your name is definitely in their heads. You styled the First Lady for over a year. And well, I might add. The fashion police or whatever the hell those people are haven’t forgotten.” Gwen laughed. “I remember when she was picking out dresses for that night. She had a ton to choose from that her new stylist had made and then there was the one that you left. She hadn’t worn it yet and I thought of you and where you might be. I told her she
should wear it and then the next day they announced the dressmaker.”

“Lani saw. She was so excited.”

The waiter came back around, asking if they wanted refills or something else. Gwen ordered some coffee for them and after the man left to fetch the hot brew, she realized they were still holding hands. And instead of pulling away like he thought she might, she kept her hand firmly in his. He looked everywhere at his surroundings as they were bathed in a quiet moment.

“Wyatt’s family owns this place?” He asked, knowing the answer already.

Gwen nodded. “His uncle did. When Wyatt was honorably discharged, David let him come and work for the resort. He showed him how things were run and eventually retired. Wyatt does everything now and I help him with whatever I can. The kids have been a big help too when they’re home.”

“Seems like he landed on his feet again just fine.”

“Yeah.” She looked over at him. “Looks like we all did.”

Two clay drinking pots were set down in front of them. The waiter poured small amounts of rich, dark coffee, thick with sugar and a hint of something spicy in the coffee beans. Gwen thanked the man and Blake paid for the drinks, tipping him extra.

“You want to take a walk along the beach?” Gwen asked, suddenly becoming the picture of surprises.

“What about our coffee?”

“We can take it with us.” She stood. “Come on.”

He found himself following her every movement until she had him lying down in the dark sand, close enough to the water that he could feel the spritz of warm ocean but not so close as to become consumed by the rolling tide. They were such a far distance from the fire that he felt safe enough to be there with her without being found out.

The moon was silver, he told her as much. It was a glowing silver sphere speckled with golden scars older than humanity. The water reflected the metallic sky, she told him as much. It was as if drops of molten metal fell one by one from up above and formed a big pool.

Gwen turned onto her side and popped her head onto her hand. Blake was on his back. He looked up at her, seeing a question forming in her mind.

Finally, after finishing the last of her coffee and his, “What do you think your greatest downfall is?”

He blinked and slowly drew his attention back to the dark sky. “Love.”

Gwen inched closer. “How so?”

“...Took me several years to realize it but love isn’t brains. Everyone says how it’s a game and you have to learn how to play. You have to be smart about it. But that’s not it. Love is blood. Blood that’s screaming inside of your veins to work its will. It’s my downfall. For lack of better phrasing, I’m love’s bitch. I just pray I’ll always be man enough to admit that. And overcome it.”
“I was wrong.”

His eyes returned to Gwen’s. “What do you mean?”

“You’re not still the Blake from eight years ago. You might still be living that life but you’re not that same person.”

It was a compliment. He could see that. His face warmed. “What’s your greatest downfall?”

“Thinking I can do everything by myself when I don’t need to. I could have saved myself a lot of stress if I just let people help me. If I just let people in.”

“It’s not always that easy.”

“You’re defending me now?”

“I’m agreeing with you. Nobody likes to depend on anybody.”

She hummed, looking down the path of the beach where there was a large tiki hut that served as a sandbar. There was music playing. It was soft, could barely be heard from where they were. Blake looked at Gwen’s longing face. The last time they danced was at the White House. She hated him, then.

“You wanna dance?” He asked her, quietly.

Gwen’s eyes remained on the music. “I don’t know. Maybe.”

He smirked. “You want me to ask you, again.”

“What you said earlier holds some truth.” She admitted.

He rose abruptly and dusted himself off despite the futility. He held his hand out. She looked from it to his blue eyes and took it, gently. She rose easily and didn’t bother shaking the sand away.

“Dance with me?” He asked, knowing this time, she would say yes.

The hand in the crook of his elbow grounded him as he led them over to the music. He didn’t waste time with formalities or politeness, not even insecurities could keep him from pulling her closer by the arm. His ruined hand touched the back of her spine and he longed to be able to really feel the nerves and indentations there. His left grasped her wrist lightly and Gwen went to him willingly, burying her face in the crook of his neck.

They swayed slightly, not really dancing but feeling like they were floating across the sand, nonetheless. When he was sure she was secure in his arms, Blake allowed himself to listen to the music. It was a soulful tune, the artist’s voice suited for rock, his lyrics suited for pain.

*Simple cards and things. Rose-colored sunsets, no flowers for me.*

Blake inhaled the soft scent of Gwen’s shampoo, lavender and honeydew.

*Lover, why do you leave? On the day I want you for me? Say it ain’t so, that he will take you tomorrow and I will sit here today the worst.*

The lyrics reminded him of when she left D.C. He knew in his heart that he was no reason to leave a life behind. But still, to want her, to *need* her, and then to watch her leave him on that very same day, was a pain he had never felt so distinctly in his life. All for him to possess the knowledge that
Wyatt would have her until the end of time. He was ashamed to admit that it proved not to be the case.

The song drew to a close with the last lyrics reminding him of how Gwen must have felt that day he didn’t show up on the tarmac in California.

*Lover, why do you leave? On the day I want you to be the one.*

It made sense the more he spent time with her. She wanted him so badly, so desperately to be the one. And he left. And now three kids later, maybe he was proving to have some potential.

Gwen pulled away when the last notes of the harmonica sounded through the loudspeakers. Her face was softened by the moonlight, her hair by the light reflecting off the water. “I need another drink.” She announced.

Blake almost chuckled. “How about you order a water?”

She seemed almost amused by the prospect. “Do you want anything?”

“A water.” He said, grinning. Blake took out his credit card and handed it over to her. Gwen took it begrudgingly but didn’t argue with him about paying.

He plopped down in the sand again, not minding the texture or mess, and not wanting to move anywhere else. Gwen came back with a small glass of water for him and a glass of something pink for her. It looked like some sort of fruit martini, with an olive to top it off and a small napkin. She held a tiny pencil in her pinky. He pondered what it was for and that’s when she produced the receipt. He forgot about his signature and took the water gratefully. He signed his name somewhat coherently onto the paper but kept the pencil. Ever since his accident, he’s had to relearn how to write with his non-dominant hand.

Gwen settled into the sand with him, reclined backwards on her elbows propping her up. Blake stole the little napkin from her without Gwen noticing and began to draw on it. It was a common exercise his physical therapist had him try. Basic functions like writing a straight line versus a curve were mastered by just doing some simple sketching. Over the years, he got rather good at it.

Blake eased the soft lead pencil along the smooth texture of the napkin, trying so hard to mimic the curve of her ankle, of all places, that seemed like the easiest to draw. When it proved to be far too difficult, he sighed and tossed the pencil into the sand. It landed near her arm, and she looked over at him.

“Were you drawing me?” She asked.

“I was drawing your ankle. But your ankle proves to be stubborn like the woman it’s attached to.”

“Imagine that.”

He shrugged and looked off toward the darkening sea. The pencil landed in his lap not a second later. He glared at her.

“It’s an ankle.” She chided him.

“I only have the left hand.”

“Draw a left ankle then.” She challenged.
“I’ll stick with the right. Starting over would be too hard.”

Gwen turned on her side, using her right arm to support her head, again. Blake’s eyes went to the curve of her hip as it became more pronounced and the indentation of her waist created a resting place just the size of his palm.

He swallowed, so weary of fighting the pull of her body, and so frightened of its loss if she decided not to have him for the rest of eternity. If she remained that way, looking at him like that, he didn’t think he could take it slow. He didn’t think he could wait for her to love him unconditionally, again. He would rise to his knees and crawl over her. He would press his weight against her, and lower his mouth to her. Anywhere, in any spot. It did not matter to him.

“Do you want me to stand up?” She asked, and did so when he did not give her a verbal response.

He craned his neck to meet her gaze. “The light isn’t the greatest.”

Gwen looked toward the hut, more specifically at the lights shining around it. It casted a shadow there way but if she moved just a little to the left, her right ankle would be in it’s direct light.

“Where do you want me, then?” She asked, almost exasperated.

“Everywhere. Anywhere.”

Gwen gave him a look. He quickly backtracked. “By my knee. There.” He told her, pointing to the spot in the sand. She moved and when Gwen was settled, Blake looked to her dress.

“Pull the skirt up.”

“No.”

He glanced up, knowing his eyes had gone dark. “Just a little.”

She bunched the fabric between her fingers and slowly pulled it higher. His eyes didn’t know where to look. So much was exposed at one time, her half-buried toes, her curved arch, sturdy heel, the outward sweep of her calf muscle. It was just a taste. A taste to hold him over until he could have her in her entirety.

“Draw, Blake.”

He did. A slight drag over napkin and then he was back to staring at skin that was unfamiliar to him and yet the most homely thing he’d ever known. “On my leg.” He pointed to the warm flesh of his thigh, gesturing about the position, grumbling over the lighting.

Gwen eased her toes from the sand and rested her foot on his thigh. He drew a line to appease her. And then another one. And then he had the base of her leg outlined, hoping to bleed it into the ankle lines he had made when he first started. “Move a little to the left.”

She tried but it wasn’t enough. He didn’t know what possessed him to place the pencil behind his ear or wrap his hand around her calf to move her just so. His hand felt like it was glued to her skin. His roughened fingertips gliding along the smoothness of her flesh, his thumb circling that tender place behind her knee.

“Blake.”

He ripped his hand away as if it had been burned. His head inclined down, so that all he saw was
sand and nothing of her body to draw him back into that dream-like state. He cleared his throat, rising from the sand until he was taller than her. Their natural way of being.

Blake crinkled the napkin in one hand and stuffed the drawing into his shirt pocket. “I should go.”

Gwen was silent.

He swallowed thickly and shook his head, stepping closer to her, not enough for them to touch but enough that she could feel his body heat. “Thank you for tonight.”

She nodded. “Are you going because--”

“I’ll see you at the beach party tomorrow, right?”

Another nod. Her eyes roam ed over him uneasily. “Blake, I--this was--”

“Good. This was really good. You’re really good for me.”

Even in the dark, he could see her blush. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then?”

He was the one to nod this time. He was the one to walk away.

He did not turn back around to see if she was still there. And Blake began to wonder if he would ever stop keeping count of their leaves of one another. The thought plagued him. He had to know that it wasn’t about if anymores with it came to them.

Only when.
Guess who's back? This chap is short. I know. But this was a little, and much needed, insight into Josie's mind. I love this woman honestly. Next chapter will have you guys howling. I can't wait. Thanks for not giving up on this fic and me. Like stories, people go through some shit that needs time. I've taken a whole bunch and feel much better about my writing. This is my way of easing myself and you guys back into this tale. I hope you enjoy it! Next chapter is the long awaited interaction with Lani and her boo.

Josie Shelton had felt disappointment--true and honest disappointment--only a handful of times in her marriage. The first time was the night of the election.

Her husband had worked so hard. He had done so much to get where he was now. They had baby Teddy and little Jackson. They almost had America.

Josie looked down at her hands. They almost had it all.

And then there were tears in her eyes and they clung stubbornly to her lashes, refusing to drop. She looked up at her husband, at the next president to be, at his blurry profile. He was leaning against the wall opposite her, his head hung low, his arms crossed. She felt his disappointment from across the room. He was upset, too, for more than just the same reasons as she.

Josie felt lost. She felt anger.

She would have tried to reach out to him but initiating any contact wasn’t going to help them or the situation they found themselves in. In fact, it would cause more problems and she knew neither of them had the time nor energy to deal with. Their friends and family and supporters where waiting for them. Blake and Josie. Two political animals. Husband and wife. Someone’s daughter and son, someone’s brother and sister. Someone’s mother and father. But she saw how inaccurate that was. She was a woman before anything else. Blake was a man. But what made them that, she couldn’t tell you. She hoped it wasn’t all anatomy, because if it was, if she unknowingly expelled their third child that night in a million dollar hotel room, if she killed it on stage underneath white lights in front of a crowd of strangers just hours before their stand off in the bathroom ...then she failed. She failed at being a woman. She failed him most importantly.

She could only hope now that he wasn’t a man, either. And since they weren’t what they should be, what everyone else expected them to be, they’d agree to live as they were.

She was disappointed to find out that wasn’t the way things worked. And then they got over having another child, trying for a girl some years later to no avail. Two boys was good enough.

The second disappointment came with a nosebleed.

He would get this nostalgic look on his face sometimes that told her it had nothing to do with their past.
There was another before her. She knew this. But his lingering pain for this woman, it made Josie ask, “What makes a man really fall for a woman?” “What makes a woman take his hand and hold on even though she knows he’d rather be reaching out for another?”

She remembered it like it was yesterday.

“Why don’t you just tell me what they’re about, really?” She had cried to Blake.

He was putting on his jacket and boots, nose still dripping.

“I just need a minute to myself.” He told her, calmly, despite his state of dress being anything but.

“Can we at least talk about it? You’re always keeping me in the dark.”

“I just need a drink, right now, and then I’ll be back.”

“I don’t think you should leave.”

He sighed. “Josie, I’m tired. I’m a fucking mess. Please.”

“Why can’t you just tell me?”

“Because you don’t really want to know. You think you do but you don’t.”

“Whatever it is, I’m sure I’ll understand.”

“No you won’t.”

She sighed, frustrated. “Stop treating me like I’m gonna break and just tell me so that I can help you--”

“I loved a woman in Hawaii and I lost her.” He cut her off, finally saying what he had been wanting to, what she had been needing to hear. Blake’s eyes glanced around the room as he spoke, “The nosebleeds are from the war. They went away shortly after we broke up...this woman and I. Whenever something happens--whenever I’m reminded of her, I don’t know, they just sort of appear.”

Josie shifted, not exactly understanding what she was feeling. Maybe uncomfortable, maybe jilted, maybe worthless somehow in comparison to this past lover that still had a hold on her husband. Emotionally and apparently, physically, as well.

“When you say lost her…”

Blake’s eyes snapped to hers and he shook his head. “No, not in that way. I let her go. It ended badly.”

She didn’t know what to say that would comfort him. All she knew was what she wanted to hear come out of his mouth. That he loved her more, that these nosebleeds were stupid and didn’t mean anything. That she was his wife and nothing and no one could be better than that.

“It clearly still hurts...and that’s okay.” She added, not believing her own words.

“No, it’s not.” He said.

“No, it’s not.” She repeated, as if she wasn’t even aware that she was agreeing with him but knowing deep down that she did. She shouldn’t. She should be more compassionate. And then
that’s when the words really hit her. “I didn’t mean that.” Josie relented.

He gave a nervous chuckle, wiping the perspiration from his brow a second later. “Yeah, you did.”

The overbearing silence engulfed them. Blake’s hand remained on his forehead, perplexed at the situation they’d found themselves in after all these years. He should be over it by now. But he wasn’t. He didn’t think he’d ever be.

“You should go talk to someone.” Josie suggested, quietly, determined.

Blake looked up at her, face guarded but eyes always so expressive. “Yeah.”

The word came out slowly, and Josie couldn’t help but hear the double edged sword in it. It wasn’t a ‘no,’ but it would definitely never be a ‘yes,’ either.

This was disappointment. Knowing this shadow would loom over them for however long, maybe forever. It was evident in the way she felt a stitch in their marriage come undone, get looser by the minutes that passed by without a word from her husband. And when he couldn’t look at her, when he couldn’t find more words to keep their stitches from breaking, she knew he never could. She would have to hold them together going forward. If she wanted him, she’d have to fight for him. She’d have to take care of him. Every nosebleed, every painful memory, every vulnerable moment he ever had before she came into his life.

That was perhaps the moment that sealed their fate. Even when she held her hand out to him several heartbeats later and he hesitated taking it, she knew. Maybe because deep down, holding his hand right now wouldn’t erase the fact that she would eventually let go of it in the future, for good, forever.

Afterall, he was the type of man that fell for a woman that didn’t need him. Josie needed him, and was ashamed to admit it. Maybe if she was able to be more like his lost love, able to get away and stay away, leaving him with an ache in his chest and warm blood in his nose.

In the end, not being needed was better than being loved. Josie held him captive for years on both accounts. So was she really surprised when he had an affair several years later?

Disappointment. She knew it would follow them around. Even in their best moments, they never rested easy. Not once.

Now they were older. Their children were older. Teddy was almost eighteen. Their farce of a marriage would be coming to an end soon. That’s what they agreed to. And yet...the more time that passed, the more she saw her and Blake lasting until the wagon couldn’t push itself anymore. The wheels had already fallen off, this much she knew about their relationship but they held on this long that it was almost impossible to think that they could go their separate ways now.

Did he even want to live without her? They never talked about their feelings on the subject. She never really considered that Blake would want to leave her. Even after all of it.

But now here they were, on this beautiful island, waiting for a wedding that neither of them had any personal attachment to. Of course, Gwen was her former employee, their children were certainly close, but she and Blake had not seen the woman or her husband in years. It would be awkward considering their parting. Not to any of her fault. Gwen was the one to leave without saying goodbye in person. There was no hard feelings, of course. She got over it eventually. But she felt like she could’ve been a great friend to the seamstress. She never got a chance to and that’s okay. But something about showing up at one of the most important days for a mother for a woman
who had left her life just as quickly as she entered it was somehow daunting. She was nervous.

Even now, as she put on her lipstick and dabbed some perfume on her wrist and neck, Josie couldn’t help the nerves from taking over her body as Blake called last call before they had to come down from the room and join the already boisterous party happening on the beach.

“I’m coming.” She called back, looking at herself one last time in the mirror.

Blake was standing outside the door looking at his watch, dressed in an emerald green button up and dark washed jeans. Her red dress somehow seemed mismatched to his attire. It was telling but she refused to think about it any longer than the second she allowed the thought to enter into her head.

“Come on. Jackson already texted me a picture of his third Sangria.” Blake said, leading the way to the elevators.

Downstairs was a madhouse. If the whole island had been invited to the festivities, she wouldn’t have been surprised. All around them where friendly faces as they passed through the lobby. The beach was an array of color as guests were painted and dressed in beautiful decorations, flowers, beads, and masks.

The wedding theme hadn’t been clear until they arrived at the resort. It was supposed to resemble a grand festival of love. The Wyatt’s were clearly doing a stand up job adhering to it by the scene in front of her.

“Where are the boys?” Josie asked Blake.

“Down by the cornhole games. Teddy is playing apparently. Or at least that’s what it looks like by the picture Jack sent.”

“Do you wanna go watch?”

Blake shook his head. “I’m gonna go get a drink. You want one?”

“I’m okay right now. I’m gonna go check on them before I start to let loose.”

“I’ll be at the bar.” Blake told her. He didn’t kiss her cheek before he left, something that Josie realized right away.

Josie made her way down to the games and allowed the evening breeze to kiss her instead. She saw Teddy right away by a board. Manó was on the other side of it, clearly his competitor. They were playing with some kids that Josie didn’t know. Jackson was sipping a sangria, and watching from the sidelines with a couple of spectators.

She waved over to her eldest to get his attention and when he finally looked up and caught her eye, he smiled but didn’t move from his spot. Josie let out a breath and looked around the beach.

She had to admit that the party was really beautiful. The ocean, the people, the decorations. She could only imagine what it would look like in the moonlight. She guessed she would find out in a couple of hours as the sun started to set in the sky.

Her gaze turned her around to look back to the outside bar. She watched a man spear a piece of fish with his fork as he sat in the corner of the tiki hut. Josie became jealous for a moment. She remembered a time when she had done the same on a hawaiian beach--before kids, before marriage, before the White House--eating fresh tilapia and drinking chilled white wine with Blake,
thinking of all the surreal things she’d experienced in her life, and how this had to be the most surreal of them all.

A flash of movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention. Her eyes landed on the inside bar that had a veranda stretching outside from the back. Her husband stepped out to the edge of the porch to overlook the beach and the water.

He produced a cigar from his pocket and Josie frowned. It was a habit he really picked up in his older age. She wondered where he got it from and then decided that she didn’t care. He lit it, blew out lazily, and sipped from his beer, occasionally. He looked around the porch and smiled briefly, taking another drag of tobacco.

A touch on his shoulder had him flinching, but a moment later, softening under its touch. Maybe it’s because his body knew who was touching him.

It was an inevitability. Something soft-focus and lit like a film.

Her old stylist smiled at Josie’s husband as he took a swig of his beer. He smirked at something Gwen said, stuffing his left hand in his pocket.

Josie watched them converse before the woman excused herself with a touch to his shoulder. Blake stared after her back until she completely disappeared into the crowd. Josie blinked a couple of times until the image of Blake’s soft like smile went away.

There were a thousand ways to describe the woman that had captivated her husband once upon a time in Washington. And the only one that could possibly do her justice was a single one. Muse.

That’s what bothered Josie the most about Gwen and it took her all this time to realize it. She was a muse. She was meant to be chased after and never caught.

Isn’t that what drew Blake to her in the first place? Muses didn’t need their admirers and her husband definitely admired the woman. Anyone could see that much from just one look.

Blake downed the rest of his beer and looked once more around the party. His eyes, by chance, never fate, landed upon his wife. Josie smiled gently. Blake returned it. There was even a sparkle in his eyes, so bright that she could see it from all the way over here.

She didn’t put it there. She knows. But it remained as he made his way over to her. It was still there as he wrapped an arm around her shoulders and watched their son win at a game in cornhole. It wasn’t perfect, but it wasn’t a disappointment, either.

That had to count for something.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

LISTEN TO THESE SONGS. YOU WON’T BE DISAPPOINTED.
First one is Love Is Hard Enough Without The Winter by Luke Sital-Singh
Second is a cover of the song Black Velvet Band by Stayne
Third is Last Of The True Believers by Jessie Ware

Next Chapter coming soon, loves xo

There was nothing to prepare Blake for seeing his daughter in this way.

Over the years, she was Gwen’s. Over the years, she was still this little girl to him, even as she entered her teen and adult years right before his eyes. But this was another thing entirely.

Lani and her fiance entered the party almost two hours after it had begun. Apparently, the boy had taken his future wife out on the yacht for a couple of hours before making it to shore to greet their guests and the festivities.

His daughter somehow looked unrecognizable in her stunning golden dress. It came to her knees and flowed out behind her as she kissed and shook hands with people Blake didn’t know. Her long light brown hair fell past her shoulders. Her skin was tan, just the right shade to match his own when kissed by sunlight. Her blue eyes were dazzling. She was happy. No one prepared him for how his heart would grow several sizes and feel like it was going to explode out of his chest.

Josie stood next to him in the lobby, smiling, clearly affected. She had always wanted a girl. He could never give her one.

Gwen and Wyatt appeared out of nowhere between the parting crowd. The first thing he noticed about the lieutenant was that he walked with a cane. The second was how grey his hair had become. He was still every bit the pilot that Blake remembered, maybe just older, more battered and bruised. He looked the way Blake felt most days.

Lani kissed and hugged her parents with an enormous smile. It was all Blake needed to remind himself that he was not the girl’s dad. He wouldn’t be walking her down the aisle. He had no say in any of it. Even as Jackson and Teddy weaved their way through the masses to greet the girl and her intended, Blake knew he was a bystander in it all. They were the players and he just got to watch from here on out.

“I’m gonna go get another beer from the bar. You want anything?” He leaned down to whisper in his wife’s ear.

Josie looked up at him perplexed. He couldn’t blame her. Wanting to disappear every five seconds was starting to tire even himself.

She shook her head, mutely. Blake clicked his tongue and squeezed past some guests until he made it to the inside bar. The one on the beach reminded him of last night with Gwen and he didn’t like being there if he could help it.
The bartender nodded his head in greeting as he sat down. Blake held up one finger and the man filled a tiny shot glass with a dark liquid, browner than scotch. The bartender turned back around and raised the drink slightly in the air before setting it down right in front of him.

The former president picked up the shot and looked at it, twirling it around so that the liquid swished slightly along the rim. He brought it closer to his nose and inhaled the potent scent. His eyes fluttered, closing for just a moment as he brought his head down and sighed. He clutched the glass in his palm, which fit perfectly in his grasp. He opened his eyes and sent the shot back down his throat.

Blake finally relaxed his shoulders and tapped his now empty glass on the bartop, signaling for a refill. He ran a large hand through his curls and sighed.

He didn’t think he would spend the majority of the night at the bar, drinking everything unpleasant out of his life away. But he did. He was. And no one seemed to want and come and find him.

Was this what life was going to be like without Josie? Was this what life was going to be like without his kids and Gwen and the oval office? For the first time in his life, he was genuinely frightened to be alone with his own thoughts.

He drank more so that he wouldn’t have to think. And the night droned on. He thought he saw a flash of Lani and her fiance outside on the veranda but he was seeing double at that point and couldn’t be sure. When the room tilted, he decided that he’d had enough and cut himself off.

He was on his way to the bathroom when a waft of her perfume--Gwen’s--swept past him on the floor. He barreled on, thinking it was just an illusion but than her small hands pressed into his chest and stopped him in his tracks.

“Blake?”

He slowly rolled his head to the side and there she was, beautiful, soft, a dream, right next to him. The only thing that ruined it was the sight of his wife coming toward them and the man that had fathered two of his children on Gwen’s side.

The only thing that could have made any of it any worse was Lani and as if the fates would have it, she had her eyes set on her mother and father as she weaved her way through the guests.

Hadn’t he just drank himself into a stupor alone all this time without anyone venturing into the bar? Why were they all here now?

“Hey, are you okay?” Gwen asked, hands still on him.

“Blake, there you are.” Josie reached them, settling a possessive hand on his arm.

Gwen let go of him right away.

“Mom, the band is here.” Lani greeted.

“Hi, Lani.” Blake mustered up some sobriety to greet his daughter.

The brunette looked at him and smiled. “Hi, Blake. Thank you for coming.” She said politely.

Blake suppressed the things he wanted to say and instead, nodded like a dumb fool that had ran away from this girl and her mother once upon a time ago.
“They want to know where they should set up.” Lani looked back to her mother.

“How about over by the windows. We can move the chairs and tables.” Wyatt suggested.

Lani nodded. “I’ll tell Dicky and Manó. They’ll handle it.”

She twirled around without another word and Blake hated to see her go.

“Have you been drinking this whole time?” Josie said without any tact.

The question caused an awkward silence to fall over the two couples--Wyatt and Gwen weren’t together anymore, he reminded himself--as Blake just stood there, not knowing what the hell he was doing there in the first place. The more he stayed around these people, the more his future became unclear.

“President Shelton. It’s nice to see you again.” Wyatt decided to break the quiet by addressing his former Commander and Chief.

Blake could hardly see the truth in that. Here he was, the man that got his ex wife pregnant, twice, one of those times while he was still married to Gwen, and it was nice seeing him? And yet, Wyatt sounded genuine. Maybe he had moved on. Maybe he and Gwen were fine and he was happy with his new girlfriend and the children that weren’t his but were every bit a part of his life and soul.

“Just call me Blake. I haven’t thought of myself as presidential in a long time.”

Wyatt held out his hand and Blake shook it strongly. There was a glint in the ex pilot’s eyes. Something that said he understood, something that said they would have their day in the sun, where they could air everything out, man to man, and Blake was surprised to find how much he was actually looking forward to it.

“I’d love to stay and talk but I’m afraid I can only hold off using the bathroom for so long. So excuse me.” Blake said, walking around his wife, his soulmate, and the man who literally stood in between the two.

He pissed in a daze, walked out the restroom in one, too. The band that had arrived was already set up and playing a boisterous song. How long had he’d been in the bathroom?

Blake looked around the room and couldn’t find a single person he knew until a couple of people walked away from a table in the middle of the floor. Jackson’s face appeared, smiling and laughing at something Manó said. They were all sitting together. His kids, Gwen’s kids, and Lani’s fiance. The table next to them held Gwen and Wyatt, with Silas in his mother’s lap, and a woman sat next to Wyatt, who Blake presumed was his girlfriend. There was another person at the table that Blake didn’t know. They were drinking, talking, listening to the music.

Really, how long was he pissing himself?

The only thing missing was Josie.

Why did it seem like she’d never even been there in the first place? Like the only woman he’s ever loved is sat at a table holding his child, smiling like she didn’t have a care in the world, least of all for him. Why did he have to be such an asshole about it?

Where was his wife?
Josie felt like the girl in the movie that didn’t get asked to prom. She felt like the girl in the shows that always had trouble keeping a man in her life. She felt like the woman in the songs that cried herself to sleep because it was safer and less pathetic than crying when the sun was out. And what it came down to was how opposite her feelings were from her actual life. She got asked by three guys to her senior prom and ended up taking the captain of the football team as her date. She got married for christ sake, to a man that became the President of the United States. She never cried herself to sleep. Her tears never saw the light of day. It was always at night, and even then, they clung stubbornly to her lashes. They always did.

But something about seeing the woman that managed to lead your husband astray, made him break his vows, made him hold you and kiss you different and even threaten to leave you, had her emotions on edge. The worst part, the both of them didn’t even know that she knew.

Of course, she did. She had a law degree for crying out loud. She wasn’t stupid. Gwen’s departure from their lives was too sudden. Blake’s interest in her was too much of a temptation from the moment she realized it. The only way it made sense was when Blake revealed to her that he had an affair. Gwen had to have been the only one.

And here she was, with her hands on his chest, with her smile affecting Blake’s mind. Josie had been too naive to think that she could get over it. She had the time, too. But seeing Gwen, again, with her family and kids, reminded Josie of how much the woman could have ended her own. Josie made sure that wouldn’t happen. She’d make sure it never happened.

It was a disappointment. Blake wasn’t strong enough. But she was. And even though it felt like her fault, considering she was the one that hired Gwen and brought her into her husband’s life, Josie would make sure that she wouldn’t make the same mistakes again. They were here for a wedding. They would all leave once it was over.

Sighing, the mother of two went back inside the bar in search of Blake. She had only gone out to the veranda to wait until he was done using the restroom. A quick scan of the bar showed no signs of her husband. Josie surveyed the room and finally spotted him at a table with the boys. But they weren’t the only ones there. Lani, her fiance, and her brother were also gathered around. Blake was sat between their children, sipping a glass of water and eating a piece of bread. He looked like he didn’t belong, desperately trying to sober up.

Josie made her way over but saw that there weren’t any more chairs left at the table. It forced her to look around to find an open seat. She didn’t have to look far since the table next to them had one empty place left. It was Gwen’s table.

The former First Lady took a deep breath and changed her course. When she stopped behind the empty chair, Gwen and Wyatt both looked up at her. She didn’t ask if she could sit down, it was flashing in Gwen’s eyes that she take a seat with them. Josie didn’t trust those eyes, but she trusted herself to stay close to her husband, so she sat down and smiled with false politeness.

Blake looked over at the commotion and caught her eye but didn’t smile. He looked as if he wanted to be anywhere but there. The later the evening got, the more Josie joined in that sentiment.

The night went on at their respective tables. Josie stared at Blake as he remained quiet and observed the young ones as they talked and joked. His gaze, however, always drifted back to Lani.
Maybe he was thinking of the daughter he never had when he saw her. The thought made Josie sad.

Wyatt tried to get her to join in the conversation they were having at their table, even introducing her to his girlfriend. She hadn’t even known that Gwen and Wyatt got divorced. Did he know about his ex wife and her husband?

Josie politely gave short answers and drank her water. She was just about to excuse herself and suggest to Blake that maybe they should head up to the room when the band invited the bride to be up on stage for an announcement that the young girl wanted to share.

The band was going to take a break for a little bit and Lani invited anyone to come up and sing a song or two if they wanted.

“Realistically, love songs would be ideal. But as I’ve come to learn by various family members who have already ventured down this rocky thing we call marriage, life is full of ups and downs. I mean my parents are divorced.” Lani joked, and many of the guests laughed in good faith. “Any song would do. Happy or sad. Related to love or not. It doesn’t matter. All are welcomed. I just want to be surrounded by good music and even greater people tonight.”

A round of applause rang through the air and Lani went back to her table. Some quiet chatter started up again as no one took to the stage. Josie had a feeling that no one would. But then her son stood up, his chair sliding across the hardwood floor making a loud creaking sound, loud enough to alert the almost quiet room.

Teddy made his way to the little makeshift stage that had a barstool and a microphone at the center. The band had left a couple of instruments on the stage and Teddy grabbed for the electric guitar and unplugged it from the amp. Jackson hollered for his brother, playfully, and Josie turned to look at Blake. Even he was surprised that Theodore went up.

Teddy had always been musically inclined, just like his father, and even had a little band back home and everything. But he was shy about his music, and even more shy when it came to singing in front of an audience.

Their youngest cleared his throat and strummed a couple of practice chords before addressing the office. “So, um...this...I wrote this when I was like fifteen. I had my first ever relationship and this—you have a lot of uncertainty when you’re with someone. I have a feeling Lani and Dicky will no doubt experience some of that. This is for you two, lovebirds. I hope you last forever.”

There was a soft applause before their son started to play. And then the lyrics fell out of his mouth and Josie felt an ache in her stomach that she hadn’t felt since her own wedding night.

Good morning, my love. Was I quiet enough? I was trying to make plans. To make you proud, I’m your man.

Are you broken inside? Has the cold taken hold? I’ve been up since half five. To make up for lost time.

I think everything’s fine. But if we’re honest this time. I’d say love is hard enough, without the winter.

Josie realized she’d been holding her breath. His voice had allowed her to let it go.

Good morning, my dear. How much of that did you hear? I was sparring with myself. Spilling coffee from the shelf.
When you see others in love, does it ever feel like a shove. I love that when I can’t sleep, you’re always also struggling with me.

The song may have been about insecurities but it was also about a gentleness to love, a side that gets overlooked most often than not. And maybe that’s were the insecurities lie. People are afraid that gentleness will go away someday. Love is hard enough without the extra bullshit that humans add to the equation. She was living proof of that.

When the song came to a close, the crowd cheered for Teddy. Josie had never seen Blake look more proud at his son. He had stood up and clapped and smirked at the teen like he had gotten elected himself.

Teddy bashfully bowed and made his way back to the table. Lani stood up and hugged him tightly, thanking him with a whisper and a kiss to his cheek.

“Who’s next?” Lani asked, loud enough to be heard over the crowd.

Some girl from the far side of the room stood up and claimed the next spot. She sang a tolerable cover of Amy Whinehouse’s song, *Love Is A Losing Game*. Josie clapped with the rest of them when she was finished. And then to her surprise, once again, Jackson stood up but he didn’t head for the stage alone. He tried to get his father to join him but Blake wasn’t having it.

“I’m still pissed. Go up without me.” She could hear Blake say.


Blake sighed and after downing his glass of water, he stood. Lani and her fiance looked perplexed but not any less excited. Josie looked at Gwen as her boys went to the stage and found the woman’s body to be tighter than a rope.

“Alright, you didn’t think my brother was the only one with a voice of an angel? I gotta introduce to you the man that gave it to us. This is a song my grandfather used to sing to my dad and his siblings. Dad carried on the tradition.” Jackson smiled and waited for his father to get settled with the acoustic guitar before he counted them off. Josie knew the song they were about to sing and smiled because it was always a happy memory for their family.

The song started acapella and Blake and Jack harmonized each of the lyrics together.

*Well in a neat little town they called Belfast, apprentice to trade I was bound. And many an hour’s sweet happiness, I spent in that neat little town.*

*As sad misfortune came over me, which caused me to stray from the land. Far away from my friends and relations, betrayed by the black velvet band.*

Blake strummed the guitar finally and the room was dead silent, just like it was when Teddy played.

*Her eyes they shone like diamonds. I thought her the queen of the land. And her hair, it hung over her shoulder, tied up with a black velvet band.*

*I took a stroll down to broadway, meaning not long for to stay. When who should I meet but this pretty fair maid, comes tripping along the highway.*

Josie hummed along with the melody, knowing it very well. Most people wouldn’t know the meaning behind the song. It was about a man who became romantically involved with a young
woman who steals a watch and places it in his possession, causing him to stand before a court and receive his punishment. Other versions recount the intentions of the woman being more clear. She had met a sailor and wanted to get rid of her lover.

When Josie came to think about it, her life had similarities to the old folk song. Hadn’t she’d been tricked? Hadn’t her lover tried to get rid of her after he met another. It may not have been so cut and dry as the song but the sentiment was surely the same. Only, Josie didn’t think Blake intended to trick her. This type of decievement could only have ever been unintentional.

Either way, she was prepared for the song to end. In fact, she welcomed it.

By the time the band was ready to come back on, again, the guests were having too much fun listening to various people get up and sing their hearts out in honor of the young couple. A few more people played and sang before the hired entirety could get back to their set. But before they were out of the woods, Lani asked if her mother would sing a song. Just one. Just this time. For me? She had pleaded prettily.

Gwen shook her head but it was the kind of refusal that held no real merit behind it and soon found herself taking over the microphone from her daughter.

“I need someone to play the piano for me.” Gwen told Lani just as she was leaving the stage. Lani shrugged her shoulders, as if to say she didn’t know how.

“Dad can. Go on. You’ve already been up there once tonight.” Jack encouraged his father.

“I couldn’t ask him--” Gwen spoke into the microphone but was cut off by a couple of guests hollering for Josie’s husband to go up and help the poor woman out.

Josie watched as Blake knitted is brow. Teddy nudged him to get him up and going and Josie prayed that he refused.

Don’t do it. Please, don’t do it, Blake.

His chair scraped across the floor. Her heart sank.

Blake joined Gwen on stage and she pulled him closer by the arm to whisper something in his ear. She couldn’t hear, but if she was up there with them, if she was able to share the same space as them, Josie would have heard Gwen ask her husband, “Do you remember the song I dropped that day when we met? The one you handed back to me? The one I played for you over and over again those first couple of weeks?” And she would have heard Blake breathe a soft, “Yes.”

Him sitting down at the piano and playing the start to a song she nor the crowd didn’t know would have made a whole lot more sense if she could have heard those words exchanged back and forth between them.

*If we are driving through the streets, past all the lights, that’s when we’re safe, that’s when we know we’ll be alright.*

Josie hadn’t noticed the fire crackling in the corner of the room until now. How it casted shadows across silent faces. How the little shapes and figures danced along to oiled guitar strings that had seen better days. The air tasted like smoke, not like cigarettes but like fire, and just like fire, it burned.

*If we escape the city, no one has to care. That’s when I know I’ll follow you anywhere.*
Josie blinked back the sweltering in her eyes and paid attention to the tresses of silky blonde hair that cascaded over Gwen’s shoulders. To the deep-set, chocolate, brown eyes that ghosted over the room with a sweetness and warmth that Josie would never know. To the narrow nose, and cupid’s-bow lips, and high cheekbones.

Let’s be alone together, where the sky falls through the river. The last of the true believers. Let’s get lost forever. Are you hearing me? Are you listening?

Someone in the crowd whistled out loud. Josie heard another say, “Wow, she’s really good,” and another, “She’s stunning up there. They both are.” She would have tried to look around for the source of the compliments but right then Gwen’s eyes had strayed to Blake. And as if it was some sort of sign, his eyes found her as if he knew she was looking, and his gaze remained on Gwen as she sang the next verse to him.

Only time will tell if we were strong enough. But no we’re older, I am certain of this love. Straight through the mist, would you want to walk with me? Now that we’re here, I promise I will never leave.

It was as if they were the only two people in the world in that moment. To anyone else, she was simply smiling and singing to a friend. To Josie, she was singing for her, knowing the former First Lady was on the verge of losing a lover and a friend, knowing it felt more like losing an arm or some other limb. It was like pieces of her were breaking off and there wasn’t enough glue or music in the world to keep them from falling away.

Pick up on my praise. I throw them back a feet. When the love’s so bittersweet. Can you hear me, can you hear me when I speak?

Josie could. She hated to admit that she could. But she was no longer a believer. This song was for people who had found their person. She hadn’t found anything but a shell of a man to pass through this life with.

Are you hearing me? Would you stay there, stay there? Are you hearing me? We’re the last true believers.

The hardest part was that these two people, Blake and Gwen, looked as if they were the kind of men and women who stitched their hearts back together every night, just dreading the morning when they would have to rip it apart again to endure the day. How could two people look as if all the world ever did was keep them from true happiness and still believe that love would carry them through in the end.

Gwen had painted the audience in muddy colors swirling around like a painting in progress. Josie held on to whatever was left of her heart as Blake played the last remaining notes to a song only he and Gwen knew. But that wasn’t the worst of it. Yes, she knew about the affair. She knew nothing was really ever gone and finished until it lay dead six feet under ground. But what she didn’t know was how far back this whole thing went between them all.

For all his lies, all his silence, and quiet depravity, Blake had a tell.

He sat there at that piano, fingers lifting from the keys as the last notes rang through the air, and stared at nothing in particular.

His nose started bleeding.

He looked at her, and she knew then.
This was the woman.
This was the woman.

It was all she could think of the rest of the night.

This was the woman. Gwen had been her all along.

What the fuck.

Josie had went through a thousand emotions as she sat there at that table, playing the fool, the good wife, the loving mother, but never the scorned woman. That wasn’t her. She’d never allow herself to be that. No matter how far Blake took this.

He at least had the decency to keep his distance from Gwen the rest of the evening as the party went on. Josie kept to herself, not giving away what she knew, or how she felt about what she knew.

Eventually, she was allowed to make her goodbyes after participating in a cornhole game with her sons. It was all to save face, and once she knew the boys would be okay, she headed up for the night. She didn’t care if Blake followed soon after, but was surprised when he said his farewells not even several minutes after her.

The hotel door didn’t even make a sound as he entered. Josie had already dressed in her robe and was headed for the shower when she passed him without a single word.

The former First Lady took her time, needing solitude to find her wits, to collect her thoughts, and check her emotions.

When she was finished, she ventured into the room to find Blake on his side, facing away from her, snoring softly. She sighed. It was as if all the air in her body had deflated and she was left feeling like a forgotten balloon on the floor at a children’s birthday party.

Josie silently changed into her pajamas and crawled into the space next to her husband. It was several minutes before she let the tears fall, staring into the darkness at the back of his head. She quietly reached a gentle hand out to caress his spine. Blake didn’t stir.

Her eyes dried on their own after awhile and Josie closed them. She fell asleep not a minute later.

The morning found Josie waking up just a little past seven.
The bed was empty on Blake’s side and for a moment, Josie panicked. What if he left me, already?

But then the door opened and her husband came in with a tray of breakfast and two mugs of coffee. He was wearing his running shorts and a loose grey shirt that was dripping in sweat. He had clearly gone for his morning run on the beach because his shoes were caked in sand.

“There’s eggs and bacon. I got a bagel for you, too.” He said, placing the food on the small table in the corner. “I’m gonna take a shower. I already ate.”

Somehow, his voice seemed resigned. It nerved her. Everything had her on edge.

Blake took a long, hot, shower as Josie ate by herself. She dressed in a pair of shorts and a tank top for the day, then waited by the balcony for him to finish.

Her husband was already dressed as he exited the bathroom. He was wearing a pair of swimming trunks and a white button up. He didn’t look at her as she sat on the bed and put on his sandals.

“Will you tell me something?”

Blake flinched at the sound of her voice. “Anything, of course.”

“You told me once that you had an affair.”

Blake stood up and went to the dresser to grab his watch, turning his back as Josie formed the question she was really wanting to ask.

“Who was it?”

Blake turned, leaning back against the dresser, legs crossed at the ankle, hands gripping the edge. “Why does it matter?”

She hesitated and then did something she had never done before. She hid behind the truth.

“Nevermind. I thought...I was thinking about moving. How would you feel about moving?”

She could tell the question caught him off guard. It was certainly a world away from his affair. But ever since last night, the thought would not leave her mind.

“What are you--why would we?” He asked, genuinely confused.

“I just think with both boys out of the house soon, it could be good for us.”

“Josie...I don’t want to move.”

“Why not?”

“Because I--” He looked off into the distance.

Josie blinked several times. She couldn’t stand it anymore, and she couldn’t go on pretending. “Did you know her before she came to work at the White House?”

Blake paused. “Who?”

“Gwen.”

Blake hesitated. Josie felt the air rush back in. “Was she the woman you had an affair with?”
Blake didn’t answer the question and it was all the affirmation she needed. She cried out, but it didn’t sound like a cry, more of a pained sound that a wounded animal would make.

“You’re thinking of leaving me?” She asked. “It’s ingenious. Really. The world’s best excuse for leaving. ‘I’ve found someone else.’ End of discussion. What am I supposed to say? You want to be with someone else when I’ve given you all these years, all these sacrifices, your children for crying out loud.”

“Stop.” Blake interrupted.

“Is this when I ask you what Gwen has that I don’t? Or was she always better than me in your eyes? Was she always the one to you?”

“Just calm down.”

“You calm down! You have a lover! I have every right to be pissed off at you!”

Blake sighed and ran his hands down his tired face. “She’s not my lover. We’re not having an affair.”

“But you did sleep with her while we were married?”

“Yes.”

Josie nodded, not believing her ears. “You haven’t slept with her since we’ve been here?”

“No.”

She believed him and yet… “But you thought about it. You want to.”

“Why do you want to put yourself through this?” He asked.

“Because I’m not going to make it easy for you. You made a mistake. You’ve been tied to this—to her—for so long that it’s not healthy. You’re not gonna leave me. I’m not gonna let that happen. Because I forgive you, Blake. Are you listening? I forgive you.”

He shook his head. “I don’t want this.”

“Yes you do.” She walked over to him and lifted a hand to Blake’s face, tracing the line of his cheekbone with fingertips before laying her palm flat to his face. Blake closed his eyes with the caress, perhaps helpless under it, under obligation to it, or in pity in spite of it. “You want her, but you don’t need her.” He opened his eyes again. “You like the delusion of a future with her. I’m sure she’s a happy memory for you. But that’s all she is.”

Josie was sure that memory of Gwen and him together was probably the happiest he’d ever been. She could feel it in her bones. He treasured it, in that sad way you treasure anything you’re never going to have again.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. You don’t know the whole story.” He replied, quietly.

Josie kissed him with no warning, coffee and deceit between them. “I still love you. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?” She asked against his lips.

Blake pulled away, putting a considerable distance between them. “Of course it does. Don’t you think I want to be capable of loving you back in that way? You’re my wife. And I’m sorry if I was weak. I’m sorry if I still am. I’m sorry that I have doubts about my own nature and mind. But my
heart is made up.”

“Blake--”

“You can be assured that you, meeting you and falling in love with you, has rescued me from the worst heartbreak of my life. And I’m well aware that’s the most selfish thing I’ve ever said to you but it’s the truth. You loved me and took care of me and stood by my side. You gave me my boys. And I could never dream of repaying that debt except through doing the only selfless thing I can, something I should have done a long time ago, which is to let you go and hope you will forgive me. Hope that you find someone to make you as happy as Gwen makes me just by walking into a room. I love you, and I always will, and if I have to ask your forgiveness for that, then I do.”

Josie grasped his hands and brought them up to her chest. “I gave you everything. You can’t leave that all behind for her. Not me. You can’t leave me.”

“Josie--”

“You’re not going! Do you understand? You’re not leaving me. I’m supposed to leave you, not the other way around.”

Blake tried to remove their tangled hands but Josie held on tighter. “Let go.” He shouted at her.

She never cried, let alone hysterically, but he was bringing her there. “Stop it.” She yelled at him, trying to hold onto any part of him she could as he headed for the door.

“Blake, please, stop it!”

She grabbed his shirt and tried to pull him back but he turned around grabbed her wrists tightly. He stared in her eyes, his shining with unshed tears. “Josie, let go.”

She shook her head, yelling, crying, “I’m the mother of your children. I’m--”

“So is she!” He finally screamed.

Josie stopped fighting. The air didn’t go out of her right away. Not until…

Blake sighed and let go of her. He ran a shaky hand through his curls. “Lani is mine. I’m her father. It was before I ever met you.”

Josie’s face screwed up. Her mind was racing. A girl. He had a daughter. A girl. Gwen was her mother. It didn’t make sense and yet it was the only thing that did in a long time.

Blake looked at her with nothing in his eyes. “Silas is mine, as well.”

Josie’s head snapped up, and she backed away from him so quickly. The words were starting to come together in her mind. Silas, the child, the product of his affair. Another child. Another child with the woman he loved.

She was well and truly speechless for the first time in her life.

Josie turned away. Her eyes fixed on nothing in the distance, and the impression is of hardness, blankness, slate stone washed clean by a storm.

Blake’s shoulders fell into a slump. “I’m sorry.”

Josie left Blake and his cooling mug of coffee behind in the room as she went downstairs. He
didn’t see the tears that tracked down Josie’s cheeks like a waterfall. She didn’t hear the muted sobs from Blake as he bent over the counter, muffling his mouth in his folded arms.

He straightened up after he choked on his remorse and regret and then followed after his wife who he had wronged for no good reason other than for love and even then, he was starting to see how awful the concept was.

People looked at him strangely as he ran through the resort in search of her, realizing he didn’t have to go too far when he saw her in the lobby, leaning against a wall, bent over as if she was trying to find any air to breathe with.

“Josie.”

She flinched when he came near and put up a hand to stop him from coming any closer.

Blake sighed and watched as she wiped at her eyes. “I’ve hurt you. I’ve really hurt you deeply. I know that.”

Josie straightened and looked at him with nothing but anger in her eyes. “You want to talk about hurt? Sometimes, when you’re not around, I pray to God that he lets me forget what you look like. And you know what? It even works sometimes. You never make me happy. You just sit there...and when I try to be close to you, there’s an unsettling disappointment that grows in my chest, because I know, deep down inside, that you’re the worst husband and father. You want to tell me you have kids by another woman? You didn’t raise them. Not one second were you present for the most important moments in those kids’ lives. You were barely around for the ones you did claim to the world to father.”

Blake flinched as if his whole body was being under attack.

“You never deserved me. You don’t have the guts to make a good woman happy.” Josie finished, coming chest to chest with him. Blake didn’t cower at her words. He deserved them and she was right about it all.

He let her go, didn’t even watch her walk away outside to the beach where the air was less stifling and his presence didn’t have to aggravate or hurt her any further. He was standing there in the lobby, thankful that not many people were around to hear their exchange.

Part of him wished someone had. He was tired of keeping it all to himself. He was tired of smiling and being one person to the world and another behind closed doors. If the people knew what a selfish bastard he was, he could sleep through the night just once. He would certainly lose the most important people in his life, but if he had learned anything as a boy going to Sunday school, is that you get what you deserve one way or another.

And as far as he was concerned, it was only a matter of time.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Next Chapter tomorrow! Have faith! Song here is You're Gonna Break My Heart Tonight by Tom Odell. strongly advise you to give it a listen, even as Blake is "singing" it.

She did not know when she ordered a drink at the bar that she would be needing it. She didn’t know that when she got dressed for the evening, when she decided to take a moment for herself, that that moment would belong to her ex lover’s wife.

Gwen expected to have a moment alone with Josie sooner rather than later but she was not expecting the ensuing flood of emotions that resulted from the first three minutes of the conversation. The former First Lady looked as if she had been told one of her children had died and if Gwen had known it was her marriage instead, she might have been a little less caught off guard.

“So, did your husband divorce you before or after he found out you were sleeping with my husband?”

It was crazy how life found just the right moments to subtly kick her in the throat.

Gwen had harshly swallowed her swig of wine and coughed after the alcohol had finally left her tongue. She turned to her right to see Blake’s wife in a blazing red dress that looked as angry as the woman probably felt. The real kicker, however, was how much remorse and regret Gwen felt in the moment that she was supposed to be the most defensive. Had she not practiced this scene a thousand times in the mirror? Had she not come up with the truth and a million excuses to justify sleeping with this woman’s husband?

But in the moment, caught unawares, feeling the shame and doubt creep back into the pit of her stomach, Gwen had nothing to say. Her face must have showed this humiliation because Josie’s eyes softened.

“I’m sorry. That was below the belt.” Josie apologized.

It made Gwen want to scream through the disgust she felt. Even slighted, this woman managed to be perfect. What woman would apologize to the woman who broke up her marriage?

When the words still did not come, Josie sat down on the stool next to her and ordered a glass of wine for herself. Gwen’s legs itched to stand up and she thought she might when Josie stopped her with a hand to her arm.

“Please, stay. Hear me out.” She said.

Against her better judgement, Gwen remained where she was.

Josie’s wine was set down in front of her and she took a sip from it before looking at her with a precarious gaze.

“You know, when my husband told me he had an affair, the first thing I felt was envy. Not anger,
not sadness, not pain. Envy. And when I found out that he knew you before Washington, that you
were the woman that broke him in ways that my marriage was still feeling the effects of, it was
envy that I felt, again. Because that woman--you--gave him something that I’ve never seemed to be
able to. That woman and him...I used to think, wow, they had a joy in their lives that makes me sad.
A love...that makes me hate. The more beautiful they seem to be, the more ugly I become. You
know what that is? That’s jealousy in its purest form.”

Josie took another sip from her glass and smiled. “You don’t know what it was like when he first
got into office. He was fresh and young and so full of ideas. And before you came back into his
life, he was still riding that high. He was charismatic, magnetic, electric, and lovable.” She
exclaimed, almost fondly. “And then...and then he was tired. And broken. And...it wasn’t the job.
After the affair...it was doing the job and continuing with life knowing he was never going to see
you again, or his daughter. His only daughter. I know that now.” She looked away from Gwen, the
emotion causing a hitch in her voice. “He needed you. I think he still does. He’s not alive when
you’re not there. He doesn’t have the will to love much less be loved if it isn’t you.” Josie takes a
depth breath. “You are everything to him. He needs you. So, I need you.”

Gwen realized she was holding her breath.

“I need you to let him go.” Josie finished.

Gwen’s lungs ached for just that, to let go, but she couldn’t do it, not the air, not her Blake,
anything but that.

“What?” Gwen finally, croaked.

“I have loved that man for almost half my life. I have children with him. We have a partnership.
We made vows and sacrifices and promises. He may have hurt me and I may have not been enough
for him in the past, but that’s what marriage is. You work on it and you do better going forward.
You don’t give up. You don’t let him give up.”

“Josie...” Gwen’s words were finally catching up to her. “Blake doesn’t want--”

“It wasn’t fair to keep me in the dark all these years. How was I supposed to compete with you if I
didn’t know what I was really competing with? But I know now. I know how to handle this going
forward. I know how to love him in spite of you.”

“He cheated.” Gwen told her, perplexed. “He loves another woman. He has kids by another
woman.” Gwen started to argue.

“If you wanted him to be a father to your children he already would be. He’d be walking Lani
down the aisle instead of Wyatt. Silas would call him daddy. But he won’t and he doesn’t.”

Gwen stuttered. “Why would you want a man who doesn’t want you?”

“You don’t get it do you?” Josie asked. “I made him. I consider him an investment. Any self-
respecting, hard working wife, would. I put time and energy and even money into his presidency. I
sacrificed my law career for him. I had children for him. I gave him everything. You don’t get to
love him for one summer and keep him for the rest of your life, not when I was there for every
summer after that. I made him a good man. And he is. Despite his faults, despite the horrible
things he’s done, he is a good man and a great father. The only times he wasn’t were because of
you. And I know you know that to be the truth. You don’t get all my hard work, Gwen. You just
don’t. I will not let you.”
Josie drank the rest of her wine as Gwen sat there, stunned, too afraid to say anything else. When Josie stood up, she collected her purse, fixed her dress, and fixed her ex friend with a look that Gwen had given a thousand times to her children.

“I will try to be pleasant and polite for the rest of the week and for your daughter’s wedding. I would hope as a mother, as a wife, once, that you would understand about sacrifices. About the price you pay for dealing with men, especially, another woman’s. But you and I are not friends. I forgive you for what you did with my husband. But I don’t respect you. I don’t even like you. But you and I want the best for our kids, so putting this behind us is the best solution for everyone involved. What we’re going to do from here on out, is be a team, Gwen. We’re going to make sure our families are happy and oblivious until the day we die. And that starts with taking my husband back. I advise you to stay out of the way from here on out. Because I would hate to ruin a perfectly good wedding with the things I know now.”

There were few people in Gwen’s life that could leave her absolutely speechless. The first was her father, the second was God, and the third was Blake. The fact that Josie was now the fourth, a person she considered an outsider more than anything, had Gwen feeling for the first time in her life, like a well and truly lamented whore.

Josie turned her back on her and walked out of the bar and into the sunlight. Gwen could only watch, a vision of red, blinding and robbing her of her own light at the end of the tunnel.

=G=

“Where have you been? I’ve been looking for you all over. We’re taking pictures out on the boat and you’re nowhere to be found?”

Gwen stopped tinkering with a stitch on her daughter’s wedding dress and looked up. Lani was standing before her, dressed in a bright, peach-colored, halter dress, looking for all the world confused and exasperated with her mother.

Gwen cleared her throat and stood up. They were in Lani’s suite, the one she would use to spend the night in the day before her wedding and get ready in before the car would take them to the church. The dress was finished and had been for some time, but Gwen hadn’t stopped obsessing over it since she started creating it several months before the announcement became public.

The mother of three cleared her throat, “I’m sorry. I just needed a little time to myself.”

“I know you’re still on the fence about me marrying so young but the wedding is two days away. It’s happening. And I want you to come and celebrate and enjoy this moment with me. Not sit up here and reminisce and pout.”

“I am not pouting.” Gwen said, offended.

Lani sighed and grabbed her mother’s arm, leading her out of the room. “You’re coming downstairs and having a good time. End of story.”

Gwen allowed herself to be dragged to the beach party. Another night of drinks and games and laughter, except this time, Dicky’s father rented out a yacht and several more jet skis and floats so that the majority of the party could be held out on the water.
The yacht was already far out into the ocean but Lani took a small boat back to the shore. The mother and daughter piled into that same boat and it treader water all the way back to the party.

The yacht was huge, bigger than any boat Gwen had ever been on, and it was packed, with loud music and bodies everywhere. They walked to the inside deck where the middle wrapped around in one big oval shape and held several rooms. One was filled with a small bowling alley where plenty of the teenagers were hanging out, the other with a movie theater, and a couple with individual bars and lounging areas. Lani lead her past all of these to another outside deck that was away from most of the festivities.

There she found her ex husband and his girlfriend, her sons, Dicky and his parents, along with his siblings, and Jackson. Teddy and the rest of his family were nowhere to be seen. Gwen silently let out a breath of air.

She learned to relax as the night dragged on and the group they had formed had not grown any bigger. The kids played drinking games while the parents talked about their kids’ futures. Gwen even enjoyed jumping from the top deck into the water with Manó. It certainly took her mind off of things that she did not want to dwell on, or even face in the light of day.

Gwen only felt like inquiring after Jackson’s parents once during the night but she fought the urge down. Still, she found it odd that the boy wasn’t with his parents, or even his brother. Her questions were soon answered when Jackson told them that he had better get back to his folks, who were on the lower deck, where apparently, there was a little casino and live music.

It blew Gwen’s mind how much one person could fit on one vessel.

“I’ll join you.” Dicky had said, convincing Lani to go with him.

“Why don’t we all go?” Dicky’s father had suggested.

Gwen wanted to find the nearest boat and make her way back to shore but she followed the group downstairs, against her better judgement.

The lower deck was just as beautiful as the rest of the yacht. There were a lot of people down at the gambling games, and even more at the betting tables. There was a wrap around bar that would put both of the bars at the resort to shame. Farther away from the noise of the slot machines and calls, was a live jazz band. It was impressive to say the least.

They found Teddy relatively quickly, as he was watching a game of blackjack that already had a large audience.

“Where’s Mom and Dad?” Jackson asked his brother, slinging an arm around the younger boy’s shoulders.

Teddy hollered when the ball landed on one of the black squares and shrugged. “Dad went to the bathroom like an hour ago and Mom went back to the resort. Said her stomach hurt from the pasta.”

Jackson frowned. “We’re gonna go listen to the band and grab a couple of shots. You want to join?”

“Yeah, sounds good. Just after I see if this guy loses or not. Hey, before you go. You know what’s up with Mom and Dad?” Teddy asked, finally taking his eyes off the game to look at his brother.

“What do you mean?”
“They’re like barely talking. They have a fight or something?”

Gwen’s body tensed and she excused herself to the bar. Lani gave her a sharp look, telling her with her eyes not to disappear like she had before.

Gwen gave her a look that said she wouldn’t and wandered over to the bar, only to change her mind and creep to the hallway where the restroom signs were located. She entered the woman’s bathroom and went straight to the sink, turning the faucet on so that she could splash some cold water on her face.

She looked up at her reflection and grimaced, seeing something so pathetic and unfamiliar staring back at her. A million thoughts had crowded her mind ever since her encounter with Josie earlier that evening. But the only thing that really mattered to her was how deeply she felt about being with Blake in that way again. Before she saw him, her mind had been made up. Too much had happened between them. Did he really think they could just fall back together like nothing had ever happened, like they hadn’t broken and hidden each other’s pieces from one another too many times to count? But then, it seemed like there could be hope. If he just got away from his marriage and finally left Josie. If he could just be by himself for a time, then maybe, maybe they had a chance to truly make it. And now, after what Josie had said to her, Gwen had found herself wanting to be with Blake in the moment. Gwen didn’t think Josie would ever fight for Blake. And now that she was…

Someone entered the restroom and smiled at her as they went into a stall. Gwen grabbed for a paper towel and dried her face. She exited the bathroom, not wanting to rejoin the group despite her daughter’s wishes. She figured she’d give herself a moment to walk around and get her thoughts in order. That’s when she came across another room off to the side of the bathrooms. The door was ajar and there was a faint sound coming from inside.

Gwen peeked through the crack but couldn’t see anything but empty space. She quietly slipped inside and blinked, surprised. It was a ballroom. There were chairs laid out in rows, circled around a piano. And the person sitting on the bench, playing, was none other than Blake Shelton.

She was only slightly startled to hear him sing. And it wasn’t like that time in the White House where she caught him in the piano room, mumbling, barely pronouncing any of the words. This time, she could hear his full singing voice.

_The cab it is outside. You’ve finished your beer. You’re saying some sweet lines, that I wanna hear. But it don’t take no einstein to see that it’s clear. You’re gonna break my heart tonight. You’re gonna break my heart tonight._

_The old taxi driver, looks down to his feet. The audience sit there in silence and hold onto their seats. For here comes the punchline, so short and so neat. You’re gonna break my heart tonight. You’re gonna break my heart tonight._

Gwen moved closer, silent as ever, never holding a sight again the way she was desperately trying to hold onto this one.

_And girl, that’s alright, if you’ve made up your mind. If I’m too much to swallow. You can’t wait ’til tomorrow. I’m right on the edge, seeing your clothes on the bed. I’ll do what I can, to take it like a man, oh._

_You’re gonna, you’re gonna, you’re gonna, you’re gonna break my heart._

He just kept repeating it, over and over, louder and louder, more passionate each time. It broke her
heart to hear him sing like that, and to realize that he was right. What else were they ever good for when it came to one another?

Her presence had been alerted when her heels clicked on the marble floor. There was nothing to block it out now. No music, no voices, just their breaths, intermingling like they always do.

Blake looked over at her, not even surprised to see her standing there. Any other time, she would have run away, but this time was different.

“Why aren’t you out there?” She asked, quietly.

He looked past her to the door. “I told Josie. About everything.”

Gwen didn’t want to take it there so quickly but Blake looked as if he had just finished carrying the entire world on his shoulders and he wanted to give her just a little piece of it to lighten the load.

“I know. She cornered me at the bar.”

At this, he was surprised. “What did she say?”

“A lot. A hell of a lot. But the takeaway was really that you were unavailable. We won’t be getting our happy ever after because she intends to fight for you. And Blake...she’s winning. She threatened the wedding.”

He stood up and clenched his fists. “I told her that I didn’t want to be together.”

“It doesn’t really matter.”

“How can you say that?”

Gwen sighed, “Because what you want and what we have to do, aren’t the same things. She made sure of that. Actually, no. I’m tired of blaming everyone under the sun for the mess we created. We did that. We cheated. We told them. And we ruined our marriages.”

“We did the right thing by telling them.” Blake countered.

“Will you stop saying that!” Gwen yelled out of nowhere. “Who the hell knows what the right thing is anymore. I managed to keep your daughter a secret from you for twelve years after she was born. Is that what’s supposed to be right? And for who?”

“That’s not--”

“I slept with you while both of us had partners and kids to think about. Was that really the right thing to do?”

“Everybody makes--”

“I got pregnant and decided to keep another child of yours and was never going to tell you, Blake.” That gave him pause. “I was never going to seek you out. Would that have been the right thing?”

“Okay. It doesn’t matter what you were going to do. We’re here now.”

“You don’t get it. I would have burned you to the ground. We can’t be together even now. I could have destroyed an entire legacy that you spent a lifetime forging--not to mention your marriage--”

“I did that. Not you. I did that willingly.”
“You didn’t have a choice.”

“I went over that line with you and I would cross it a thousand times over.”

“And you would be making a mistake, over and over again.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I was the problem!”

Her breath was coming out quicker and quicker and he had finally stopped backing her into a corner. He stepped away, putting space between their heaving bodies. Gwen walked away from him, palms itching to scratch out her heart.

“You saw me. I let you see me and you fell in love. And you got scared and I couldn’t keep you and I couldn’t find you after you ran away and I didn’t want to for a long time. I lost you, Blake. Not the other way around. I lost you to your father and your career and then the world. I let Josie take you away from me. I let her make you into the man that I wanted.” She yelled. “And she’s right. I don’t get to take away from her what she has worked so hard to build. How could I?”

She took a deep breath. “It was me. It’s always been me. I’m your flaw. I’ve kept you on this leash and you think you need me but you don’t. You think you want me but you can’t...because if you have me, if you leave your wife for me, if you do this and break that woman’s heart more than you already have, you will lose everything. And I’m not worth everything.”

“Gwen--”

“No. Before you say anything else. Before you try to argue with me more than you already have, I want you to realize what’s right in front of you. You either hold onto Josie and your kids and your legacy, or you reach out for me and lose it all. All of it ...So. Option A. Or option B. Pick one.”

“I’m not--”

“Pick one. A or B. A or B.”

“Gwen--”

“Make a choice. Option A. Option B.”

He moved closer to her and she backed away. “A or B.”

He shook his head.

“Pick one!”

He winced as she desperately tried to save him from something that no man should ever have to go through in any lifetime. His eyes frowned, his face softened, and his feet remained planted where they were. He looked at her with something so gentle and pure that she wasn’t even sure it came from this earth. When he opened his mouth, her breath trapped itself in her lungs and she waited there until he released it for her.

“B.” He uttered, now only a hair’s breadth away.

Her chest fell. Her eyes fell closed and her lips parted. “Wrong answer.”

“It’s the only answer.”
“It’s not going to happen.” He opened his mouth but Gwen cut him off. “It’s not going to happen because I don’t love you anymore.”

He scoffed. “Gwen, come on.”

“I haven’t loved you for a long time. It’s been years, Blake. What did you expect? When I told you that I wasn’t going to come and find you, I meant it.”

“Just stop, okay? It’s not going to work--”

“Why would I want a man who can’t even keep his own vows in his marriage? Who abandoned me and our child? You run. That’s what you do. You ran when I was pregnant with Lani, you’re running now.”

“Stop--”

“You’re needy. And you’re broken. And you’re not what I want for my life. You’re not what I want for Silas or for Lani.”

“Please, stop--”

“I don’t love you anymore. I don’t even like you.”

It was the final blow, and it landed right where she wanted it to as his face fell into a million pieces that Gwen would step on when she ultimately left him there. And she was made a hypocrite as soon as the door shut because she ran as far away as she could. She cried and she cried and she cried.

She didn’t stop until the morning.

And then she cried some more.
“Can I Mommy? Go swimming with Uncle Dash before dinner?”

Gwen looked away from the window, where she was staring out at the ocean.

She was home, and had been for quite some time. In fact, she had not left her house since that night from the yacht. The only time she mustered up enough strength to show her face was to host the last of the celebrations before the wedding.

In that time, she was both hoping and dreading to be anywhere near people. She was afraid to see Josie, but even more afraid to see Blake. But ever since breaking her love’s heart, she had not seen the former president since. It was unnerving. Almost to the point that she broke down and asked Jackson about it. Much to her surprise, he had been there, at every single party and dinner and gathering. He was just avoiding her, and somehow, that seemed even worse than him not attending anything at all.

It couldn’t even weigh on her mind for longer than a minute because of how crazy everything around her was quickly becoming with the wedding approaching. There was still so much to do and prepare for that Gwen was forced to put his heartbreak and her own, aside, and focus on their daughter’s happiness, instead.

It was the day before the wedding, and Gwen had found a moment to just sit and quiet her mind as she settled in the living room with her family. Most of Gwen’s side had already flew in, along with the rest of Wyatt’s. But her mother and father and Dash had all been in California for some big event for Dash’s wife. She was a music conductor and the concert fell two days before the big ceremony.

Normally, Gwen would be almost too excited to see her parents. Living in Hawaii all of these years had been hard on their relationship considering the distance both parties had to travel to see one another. Moving to Washington for that little stretch of time had been a blessing for her folks and they were sad to see her go back to the island after it was all over between her and the White House.

Gwen sighed just thinking about it. Either she was busy with thoughts of ribbon and lights and vows, or she was right back to Blake and their last encounter. Even now, as she sat with her parents and brother and sister-in-law, the baby sleeping soundly in the bassinet, Silas asking her this question, all she really heard was Blake’s singing in that ballroom.

“You’ll have to take another shower.” She warned him, coming back to the present.

He nodded and raced out of the room to put his swimming trunks on.

Gwen’s mother chuckled. Gwen smiled at her and sighed. “I could use a glass of wine. Anyone
“want one?” She asked.

“I certainly do.” Dash said. “I’ll help you pour.”

Everyone stood up, in silent agreement that they would take the little get together in the kitchen while they readied the drinks.

Gwen pulled out a vintage chateau and the adults helped themselves to a glass, each. As Gwen swirled the wine around in her cup, she thought back to Blake’s piano playing, the way the notes sounded sweet, but the lyrics intended to hurt.

The phone rang, suddenly, interrupting his playing and Gwen excused herself back to the living room to retrieve the device off the coffee table. “Hello?”

“It’s me, Mom. Lani wants to know if we can take the jeep. She wants to take her friends to the berm.”

“She can’t. We have dinner with Grandma Patti and Grandpa Dennis tonight.”

“Oh crap, I forgot about that. But maybe if we go in the next--”

“Please, don’t stress me out right now. They’re only here for the wedding and then they have to fly right back out.” She sternly told her son.

Manó sighed. “What time is dinner?”

“In about an hour from now.”

“Got it. Bye.”

The phone clicked and Gwen made a face at her children’s lack of consideration. The ringing started up again not a moment later and she almost cursed at her son as she answered.

“Manó, I already told you--”

“It’s not Manó.”

Her entire body changed within a second. Her face softened the lines the week had created. Her heart slowed to an almost cathartic pace, and her eyes grew wide.

It took a moment’s pause before he spoke again, voice deep and heavy. “...I wish you had just been honest with me.”

Gwen wasn’t entirely sure what he was speaking of. Honest with him about Lani being his child? Or maybe Silas? Or did he wish that she had been honest when she told him that she didn’t love or even like him anymore? Either way, she made a mistake on all accounts. She hurt him deeply, if only to save him later. She can admit that.

“I already told you, we made a mistake. But I’m not gonna let you make another one because of me.”

“I don’t mean about my marriage.”

The silence took hold of them, again. She exhaled. “What do you mean, Blake?” She asked, frustrated all of a sudden. She could hear her brother’s and parents’ voices growing closer. She tried again. “What do you mean?”
She could hear the static over the phone as he remained silent. Her family was now in the hall. She was consumed with fear and worry and adrenaline as they came closer. “Blake?” She cried out, exasperated, wanting him to say something so that she could breathe normally again. There was a lot that wasn’t being said out loud but she heard it all the same in her head.

*I didn’t know if we could--if we would--last.*

You made damn sure we didn’t.

Finally, Blake spoke up once more. “If you didn’t think I was good enough to be a father--”

“I did think you were--”

“You didn’t.” He interrupted her. “You didn’t. If you had--” He broke off, and Gwen never knew what he was going to say. She knew what she wanted to, however.

*I love you. I was stupid. I wish I could take it back.* And all she heard Blake saying in return was...*You can’t.* Just like she couldn’t undo calling him a terrible father. She hadn’t said it outright, but the words she did use had struck a chord with him and now it was weighing heavily on his mind.

“Yeah, well, it doesn’t matter. I don’t even know why I--” He mumbled the words all together, so unlike him. He paused for a second, and she could hear the breath leave him all at once. “That’s not why I called.”

More footsteps.

“Why did you call?”

“I told myself I was calling to tell you that I’m not broken. That I don’t appreciate being called needy. And that I tried as a father and a husband and even at being the love of your life, which I’m failing tremendously at as of lately, but really?...I was calling because apparently I haven’t kicked myself enough today and I needed a little more misery which only hearing your voice after a fight can always bring.”

Gwen dropped her arm for a second, moving the phone away from her ear. She looked off to the side, wounded, hurt, angry, and feeling like things were extremely unfair on her end of things. He acted like she was doing fine where she was.

She put the phone back to her ear just in time to hear him say, “I trusted you, you know? No matter how bad things got, I thought we would never take it there.” He continued. “You say you wanted me to fight for you and here I am. But you’re letting her win.”

“Blake--”

“You are all I have at the end of the day. You ruined me, Gwen. I’m ruined.”

Her breath felt restricted. Her chest ached. “I’m ruined and--.” She defended herself against his pain.

“I don’t care.” He said, simply.

The wave of hurt she was feeling deeply inside of her bones, the damn of emotions that she had been holding in ever since that night and morning crying her eyes out, had suddenly flooded all of her senses. He didn’t understand. He was her voice and now she could barely speak. He was her eyes and now she was blind. He was her skin and her hands and her feet and now standing up
became too much, reaching out now felt impossible, feeling anything was slowly becoming nothing.

She looked over to the kitchen hallway and saw her family standing there. They had been listening. They were trying not to, but they heard, they saw how affected she was by the words they couldn’t hear on his end.

Her voice hitched. “I--I’m going to hang up, now.”

“Oh, you do that.” He said, his voice uncharastically injured. “That’s a good idea.”

The line clicked before she had a chance to end the call herself. She told herself it didn’t hurt when she dropped the phone on the couch. But the tears welled up in her eyes, and they fell almost immediately after that.

Her mother rushed over and pulled her into a strong embrace. She wept in the crook of her neck like she was a child all over again. She refused to open her eyes and see the confusion and worry on her brother and father’s faces. When Silas came downstairs, bubbly, happy as can be, she heard Dash whisk him away to the backyard and out to the beach.

Patti urged Gwen to sit down and she shook her head, knowing that if she sat and allowed herself to feel the pain, she’d ruin the evening. Instead, she whispered something incoherent about getting ready for dinner and pulled away from her mother’s love to disappear upstairs.

She took the longest shower she could without alarming anyone and got dressed in half that time.

Dinner was eaten at a small restaurant on the landing. Lani and Manó were thankfully there on time. Fortunately, her children’s presence kept most of the attention off of her as her parents and brother bothered Lani about the big day. Occasionally, Gwen would catch her father giving her a concern look every now and then. And even her mother would touch her wrist softly whenever she would reach over to grab a piece of bread. Both were meant to be comforting but they just set Gwen on edge even more.

When they got back to the house, Manó suggested a fire and some smores for Silas’s benefit. Gwen feigned feeling sick and told everyone that she would head to bed early so that she could be well rested for tomorrow. Lani headed back to the resort with her parents, who wanted a room so that they could experience the holiday destination for the first time since Wyatt took over.

Gwen settled into bed with a tired body and overused mind. She had unsuccessfully kept her phone call with Blake off of her mind all day. It was torture to have to be on the most horrible of terms with the father of her child on said child’s wedding day. But she couldn’t fix it. Better yet, she could. She could call him back right now and ask him to come over or she go there or they meet in the middle somewhere but at what cost? The wedding would certainly be off. Their children would be so hurt. Not to mention the turmoil it would bring to everyone they’ve ever known.

Gwen closed her eyes and forced herself not to think about it.

In the morning, she woke feeling refreshed and for a moment, like every morning, she forgot she had slept alone.

Gwen made breakfast for her sons and enjoyed their small talk. She was still deep in her thoughts but she still managed to be herself.

When they finished eating, Gwen had Silas take a short bath so that she could dress him in his suit. Manó got ready before her and took the jeep to the resort to help with any last minute wedding
Gwen and Silas made it to the hotel with an hour to waste. She found Wyatt down by the bar drinking a scotch and greeted him with a kiss to the lips. Silas climbed into his dad’s lap.

“Lani?” Gwen asked.

“She’s getting her makeup done now. Dicky and the groomsmen are at the church already. You look gorgeous.”

“Thank you. You look handsome. Where’s Hailey?”

“In the shower. I figured I’d have one last scotch as a man without a married daughter while I wait.”

Gwen smiled. “I still can’t believe we couldn’t convince her to get out of it.”

“Stubborn like her mother.”

Gwen’s smile faltered. Lani’s stubbornness reminded her so much of Blake’s stubbornness that it couldn’t have been a coincidence.

“Okay. Well, I’m gonna go check on her. She’s probably having wedding jitters.”

“I got S.J.”

She kissed both of them goodbye and headed for Lani’s room. She knocked twice and the door opened to reveal one of Lani’s best friends and bridesmaids.

“Hey, Mrs. Howlett. She’s just about finished.”

“Hey, Cara. I just came to see how she was holding up.”

“Mom? Mom, I’m fine, okay? Remember, I wanted everyone to be surprised by the finished product. You too.” Lani called out from somewhere in the room.

“But Lani--”

“You already made the dress, so you can imagine what I look like in it. Now go find Manó to pester.” Lani commanded her affectionately.

Gwen pouted even though Cara was the only one who could see it and turned to leave. “If you need anything, text me, okay? I love you.”

“Love you, Mom.”

The door closed and Gwen turned to look down the hallway. It was empty and silent and she wished she could just stay there for the entirety of the day but she had to get her and Silas to the church. Wyatt would take care of things with Lani, as far as getting her in the car on time and walking her down the aisle.

Her ex-husband had taken the liberty of buying their son a spongebob ice cream to keep him occupied as the adults scrambled around him. Gwen took a plastic bowl and spoon from behind the bar to make sure he wouldn’t have any accidents eating and bid her goodbyes to some of the employees.
The drive to the church had been one of the most peaceful experiences. Gwen put on a love playlist and listened to the songs quietly, every now and then looking in the rearview mirror at her youngest as he ate his little treat quietly. She smiled.

The church was packed. Some of the guests hadn’t taken their seats yet and were milling about outside, smoking a cigarette, chatting, playing a game of catch with a football that someone always seemed to have in the trunk of their car.

“Mommy, can I play catch?” Silas asked, melted ice cream forgotten on the seat next to him.

“No. I need you to get ready. You’re carrying the rings in remember?”

Silas’s disappointment at not being able to play was quickly replaced with excitement at the mention of his responsibility to his sister’s happy day.

They exited the car and Gwen greeted some of her family, cousins and uncles. The inside of the church was much busier, not overcrowded considering the chapel they had chosen for the nuptials. It was a large space, that was covered in white and beige stained glass and beautiful white and red roses that lined the pews and the top of the altar. Gwen’s favorite thing about the church was the diffused bluish light that beamed through the pillared alley. It was a weird contrast with the white halo that beamed from the brass sculpture where the priest stood with the groom and his groomsmen.

Gwen travelled to the front row where her immediate family sat, nerves and emotions running high. The mother of three kissed Dicky on the cheek before settling Silas in with her parents for the time being.

“Is she almost here?” Patti asked.

“Wyatt will text me when they are. I need Manó to help S.J. with the rings. Where is he?”

“With President Shelton’s kids.” Her father answered, a slight hitch in his voice.

Gwen immediately looked up and around as if she would be able to spot him in this massive church. She saw nothing right away and looked back to her parents. They saw her reaction to hearing Blake’s name. She didn’t have the time to confirm their suspicions or answer their questions.

“I’ll go find him.” Dash said, clearly in on the private discussion that was had about her.

She nodded, not wanting to really see the former First Children, in case they were with their mother and father. Although, for some reason, Gwen had desperately wanted to see Blake before their daughter was married. If she ever had second thoughts, or allowed herself to feel guilty for not telling him about Lani sooner, it was now, right here in this moment.

Her phone buzzed in her purse and Gwen read the message saying that him and Lani were on their way. She wiped some sweat from her brow and asked one of her Uncles if he could tell the guests outside to come in and take their seats.

She felt like she should make the rounds and make sure everyone was okay but she couldn’t make herself do it. She didn’t know were Blake and his family would be sitting. They had to be on her side of the church because they were technically guests of hers instead of Wyatt’s or at least that’s what Lani put on the invitation.

“Gwen, why don’t you sit down.” Her mother suggested.
She nodded, thinking how great of an idea that was. She sat in the second chair closest to the aisle, the seat next to her reserved for Wyatt. Manó and Dash appeared just in time for her oldest to take his little brother and prepare the rings.

After about ten minutes of quiet chatter, the bells rang, signaling the bride’s arrival. In a few moments, the orchestra would start playing and her daughter would be walking down the aisle any minute to begin her new life as a new wife.

The first sound of the violin strings had startled her and she felt her heart race as everyone stood. She needed to find Blake. Before it happened, before he missed the only opportunity he’d ever have to walk his only daughter down the aisle, before he hated her for the rest of his life, she needed to look in his eyes and know that he was okay.

She never got to. The music played, the doors opened, and in came a light so bright that it momentarily paralyzed her. All she saw first was lace. Lani had wanted ivory instead of white, and Gwen found the most beautiful fabric that she could. She embroidered some gold into the dress, just little small details of stars and crescents that Manó had suggested one evening that Lani actually liked. The shape of the gown was worn like a second skin on her daughter.

As they grew closer, Gwen looked at the crown of braids on her daughter’s head. She looked like a Victorian queen coming to take her reign. It was regal and elegant and everything she wanted for her daughter’s big day.

Wyatt winked at her as they passed, looking every bit as handsome and capable, even with the cane he had to walk with, and he gave their daughter’s hand over to her soon-to-be husband’s. He stepped away and came to Gwen’s side. Lani looked behind her just once before the priest started his prayer, and Gwen saw those bright blue eyes. Blake’s eyes.

And in what felt like a second...they were married.

It was a blur of kisses and hugs, bubbles and congratulations, laughter and tears.

She drove back to the resort with Silas and her parents after most of the guests had already left the church. Lani and Dicky were already probably there, sneaking in those private moments between a wife and husband before they had to show face at the reception.

As they arrived to the party room, which was oddly reminiscent of the State of The Union ball all those years prior, the place was buzzing with excited chatter and children running between tables in a good natured game of tag. Silas left them right away and Gwen called after him to be careful.

They found their seats at the table closests to the bride and groom, who reserved one at the front of the room all by themselves. They didn’t want the wedding party to sit with them, and instead, had divided the bridesmaids and groomsmen up equally amongst the family tables.

Servers came around to take their drink orders and provide any small appetizers before dinner would be served.

Then the bride and groom entered thirty minutes later, applause spreading across the room like wildfire. There was the scraping of chairs as folks got up for a standing ovation. Lani and Dicky made their way to the head table, smiling and holding hands like the happy couple they were. They sat in front of a bouquet of baby gold roses and Gwen watched as her son-in-law leaned in for a kiss from his wife. There were cheers and hollers and laughter sounding throughout the room.

After dinner was served and eaten, the dessert table was a free for all. Many of the guests stood
and made their way over to the cake to watch the happy couple cut the first piece. Gwen was no exception as she went to stand in front. Wyatt stood next to her and kissed her on the temple as Lani smeared some chocolate cake all over Dicky’s cheek.

Gwen squeezed her ex husband’s shoulder as she turned in the direction of the bar. She had kept her eyes down, trying to slide her way through the many tables and chairs and guests. When she looked up at the counter, her feet had slowed as if on instinct.

Blake was talking to her brother and a couple of Wyatt’s closest friends. She had not seen him since that night on the yacht. And here he was, chatting amicably, wearing a light grey suit and a white shirt with one single golden rose in his left breast pocket. He matched Lani so well that she would have thought it was intentional if she didn’t know any better.

His eyes, as if drawn to her always, found her walking steadily over there way. His face changed in an instance, but his eyes never failed to soften. Her pace slowed and once she reached the men, Dash wrapped an arm around her, hugging her close. She could smell the scotch on his breath.

“I was just telling them that a free bar all night was definitely the way to go. Tell my niece that she married up big time.”

All Gwen could think of was if Dicky and his family knew that the boy had married the 47th President of the United States of America’s only daughter, everyone would have said that it was Dicky who married up.

“Just don’t get too drunk. The night is still young,” Gwen said quietly, catching Blake’s unflinching gaze.

Gwen ordered a glass of wine and quietly slipped away from the group of men. She didn’t look back to Blake as she grabbed her drink and made her way back to her own table. The majority of the guests had found their way back to their own places and ate their desserts happily.

After a few moments, Dicky rose from his chair and everyone that hadn’t already took a seat had sat down. The sound of his teaspoon rapping on the side of his wineglass signalled everyone to silence, except the children, who were shushed by their parents.

Dicky cleared his throat. “I didn’t want the maid of honor or best man to have to prepare a toast for this day simply because I wanted Lani and I to make this day not only about us but about the people that got us here. So if my parents, and my new in-laws, would make their way up here that’d be great.”

It was the first Gwen had heard of such a thing but she walked up to the head table with Wyatt and stood next to her daughter. Lani squeezed her hand.

“I also wanted my brothers to be up here, too. Manó, S.J.?”

Her siblings joined the little gathering.

“And last but not least, if I say your name, can you please stand up? You don’t have to come up here if you don’t want to but I wanted you to be apart of this, as well.” Lani said.

To Gwen’s surprise, she had called out her grandparents, along with Dicky’s. Then she asked for Dash and one of her husband’s cousins to stand. Next it was a couple of friends of both of them. And then...Lani simply said for the entire Shelton family to stand up. Out of the crowd, Gwen saw Jackson and Teddy hesitantly stand before Blake and Josie followed, looking equally confused.
“We have you all standing to acknowledge the incredible difference you’ve made in our hearts and lives.” Dicky began. “When Lani and I first started dating, we realized that we agreed on one very important thing. That the way we love, why we love, and who we choose to give our hearts too, have a lot to do with who molded those hearts in the first place. Whether you taught us a lesson, or inspired us, or simply loved us unconditionally, we have you to thank. Because without that, we wouldn’t have found each other. We wouldn’t have understood each other.”

Gwen’s ears had perked up watching Dicky give his speech to each of the people he had standing there today with him. If she thought she was ready for what Lani had to say, she was poorly mistaken.

“I guess it’s my turn.” She started when her husband had finished with an emotional tribute to his parents. She started with her friends and then her uncle, moving onto her grandparents, citing examples of how they taught her to be more compassionate, and more understanding. “To my brothers...I wouldn’t even know compromise or patience if it weren’t for you two.” She smiled.

Turning to the audience, Lani grinned from ear to ear. “To Jackson and Teddy. As a lot of you know, we got to move to Washington when we were just kids. And we met Teddy and Jack very soon after. At the time, I didn’t know Jackson would become like my best friend. Teddy and my brother didn’t know they’d be like brothers, now. All they knew was that they liked the stars together and all I knew was that Jackson had a funny way of looking at the world the same way I did. You guys are family, and have always been through the years. Thank you for teaching me to be open, to see the world through eyes that are not my own. But mainly, thank you for your friendship. I carry it with me and into my own relationship with Dicky.”

The former First Children both had their hands stuffed in their pockets, with wide smiles, and wet eyes. It was a sight Gwen didn’t know she needed.

“And to my favorite President and First Lady. I remember the hospitality you always showed my family whenever you could. Down to my father’s accident, to the move back, and over these past couple of years as we’ve stayed at your house and become the best of friends with your kids.”

“When I was twelve, I remember we went to Camp David and I have a lot of fond memories there that I wouldn’t allow myself to enjoy at the time. The product of being a moody teenager, I guess. But there was one memory, of me and President Shelton--he likes when we call him Blake--sitting on the couch. We were playing the guitar, and he was showing me how to play a lick.”

Her daughter sighed and Gwen noticed the tears forming in her eyes. “It was a love song, one that he used to play for an old girlfriend. Imagine that.” The crowd laughed, and even Blake managed a small watery smile. “And I remember asking what was so special about love songs and why adults always seemed to want to sing them to each other. And he said--and I’ll never forget it--he said, “Always remember that friendship can only be freely chosen. Love can only be freely chosen. True love...can only be freely given. There isn’t anything greater in the world than that.””

She smiled as she looked down at her heels. “I didn’t get it at the time. But ever since I met Dicky, it’s become quite clear to me…” She looked back to Blake. “Everything else in this world, you choose. You make a decision to have or not to have. But true love, the kind that love songs try to emulate, the kind that love songs are written in the name of, is the only thing in this world that you can’t choose. It’s given unapologetically whether you like it or not. And you can change what you do about it but you can’t change how much you want it. It's given either way. There’s no choice. There’s just acceptance. And I accept the love that I deserve. I accept Dicky as my husband. So thank you, Blake. For your words. For your cadence. And for your humanity. It’s touched mine more than you know, and more than I’ve cared to share over these past few years.”
The power of love was never really felt in such a way it had been that summer evening. Gwen had never let tears fall from her eyes and let them go undisturbed, unwiped, and unnoticed, like she had that summer evening. The world had never righted itself like it did for a father and daughter until this summer evening.

And she knew Wyatt and her were next up. Words from her beautiful daughter, that she had raised with a beautiful man, that she had created with an even more beautiful man. She had done good. No matter what mistakes she might have made, this moment, made up for all of it.

She couldn’t even concentrate on Lani’s thoughtful words to her because she was staring at her former love. Her true love. The love songs were written about.

And it was a tortured look. For all Lani had given him with a single speech, Gwen wiped away with a simple look. She had hurt him deeply. She had ruined him. Isn’t that what he had said?

And as they continued to stare at one another, that tension, and all that pain, had flooded to the surface. It was too much to face head on and yet, she couldn’t look away from it. Nothing in the world could make her want to. Not even the look Josie spared the two of them when she noticed their gazes locked. It went unnoticed. Everything went unnoticed except for him.

Her daughter’s voice stopped. And suddenly she was being pulled into a hug with a million arms and the sounds of a million glasses being raised and clinked together.

“To Mr. and Mrs. Dicky Sherwood!” The room toasted.

Senior Sherwood announced last calls for food and desserts before the dances would begin. Gwen felt Blake’s eyes on her. She looked over to see blue washed in anguish and to her surprise, desire. But there was hatred in that gaze, something she never wanted to see from him.

She set her glass down on the table as everyone dispersed, some going back to the cake table, others to the bar, almost all to the bride and groom to compliment them on their heartfelt speeches. Gwen left the room and walked out into the hallway. Left was the lobby, right were staff corridors. She already felt like she was suffocating. The lobby would have people and fresh air and nowhere to hide. She wanted to be hidden so desperately.

She stalked down the hall and kept her head held high. She heard him round the corner just as she did. His footsteps were quiet and yet loud to her ears. She picked up her pace and didn’t hear him hesitate not once as he followed her down, down, down.

All of a sudden, his hand took her arm roughly, and she was pulled into a room. He let her go harshly, and shut the door behind them. Before Gwen could protest, Blake had her mouth pressed against his own. She swallowed the taste of his tongue before pushing him away and slapping that perfect face that had hardened under her care.

Blake staggered back, a mix of shock and want painting his features. Gwen breathed harshly, staring at him as if she didn’t recognize the man that he had become right there before her. When she took an actual look around, they were surrounded by electrical wires in a space that felt more like a closet than an actual room.

And they were alone. No one would find them here. She didn’t have to be the woman that broke his heart in here. He didn’t have to be the man that left her for a country in here.

And so Gwen leaned forward and snared him by the hair, curls long enough to wrap against her knuckles as she buried her fist in them. Blake bared down on her as their lips met once again, as
Blake’s elegant footsteps carried her backwards without stumbling. A wall against her back knocked the wind from her and Blake swallowed her kiss before she could take another breath. Her heart slammed against her chest as he shoved their bodies together. Blake held her by the jaw to part their mouths, grunting when Gwen bit against his bottom lip to keep him close.

Blake moved his free hand to grasp her wrist, moving her hand to his crotch so that her fingers could feel against the bulge tenting his slacks. He was always full, always thick, and warm in all the right places, and Gwen realized Blake was showing her how much he desired her. She could feel the familiar burnished buckle of his belt and the sleek leather at the sides.

“Take it off,” Blake told her, voice a husky whisper.

Gwen, with an unsteady hand, worked the latch open. A hiss of leather against fine fabric whispered in their shared sensory silence, and caused shivers to run up and down her body. Blake swatted her hand aside and unzipped his pants in one swift motion. He turned her away from her in much the same manner, until her back felt the heat of his chest.

Blake hiked her dress over her hips and brought the lace waistband of her undergarments down over raised flesh that had been adorned with goosebumps ever since he stalked her down the hallway.

Gwen felt his hand between them, guiding, and then he was there, inside her again after all these years, hard, soft, angry, wanting, and hurting. He didn’t give her a chance to settle. He pushed and backed away and pushed in further.

She keened softly and squirmed to adjust to him, to adjust against him, sinking one hand behind her to curl around Blake’s neck, the other holding onto the panel rocking against the wall. Blake leaned low, as slowly as Gwen would allow him with her painful grasp, and brushed a kiss against the corner of her temple before catching her mouth.

Gwen parted her lips wide, taking a long, drawn out, breath. A sharp stab of his hips worked Gwen’s whimpers high and her fingernails broke skin, pulling blood to the surface. Blake hissed and pulled out of her, turning her around in one quick motion. Her arm instantly curled around his neck as Blake hoisted her from the floor. Slender legs wound around his waist, and his heat returned between her hips, until she was filled, until there was nowhere else for him to go, until she felt genuine pain mixed with her want for this man. But he intended to hurt her just as much as he intended to please himself.

The next thrust was hard enough to make Gwen wince, moaning out carelessly in the tiny room. He did it again. Her hand slammed down on his shoulder in a warning that went unheard. Her legs dropped and Blake bent with her as her feet touched the ground, not stopping his thrusts. Gwen threw her head back, wanting more and wanting him to stop all at once. His face buried in her neck and his hand shot up to cover her mouth. She hadn’t noticed the screaming.

Gwen turned her head away, shoving him and pulling him closer. His hand wrapped around her thigh and hoisted it over his hip. He did not let up, and Gwen traced the curve of his lips as he drew back to look at her, panting, hurting, loving, hating.

She slapped him.

He shuddered, twitching inside of her, and leaned closer to kiss Gwen deeply again. A particular hard thrust and she bit his lip. She slapped him once more. And then again. And then again. For leaving, for making her love him, for giving her two beautiful children, for breaking up her marriage, for being the love of her life, for ruining her. She slapped him until his cheeks stung.
numb and his smirk widened with smeared blood, never stopping his brutal pace.

Her little hands finally gave him a break and she nuzzled his cheek, fingers moving lower to undo his tie. She worked the buttons on his shirt, slipped her hands inside to feel his racing heart. The panel rocked beneath their weight, a rough taking made violent but not by anger, maybe frustration, but never anger. Not like this. This was desperation. They had been trying so hard all of their lives to separate from one another. This was about being whole again.

And with speed that had always felt superhuman, and still is now, despite his age, Blake pulled out of her once again, moving to face her away from him. She was startled at the position. They could maybe start this way, but she didn’t want to finish this way. She wanted to look him in the eyes and feel his release with her own.

But before she could argue or refuse, his mouth was back to claiming her own in a ferocious, bruising tangle of tongues that tasted of livid violet and blue, like the sky had been hit one too many times by God’s hand, like a storm was brewing behind the clouds, like the wounds she had placed on Blake’s skin before they started bleeding.

And then he was back, pushing her farther than she ever thought possible. She had never felt this with him, the pain and the pleasure and the near death and the only life. There were days where he was gentle, where sleepy kisses made an appearance in the third act, where murmured words sent her to heaven, and adorable smiles sent heaven to her. There were days when they rocked together slowly, when they took their time. Those were the days when they made love.

What were they making now?

With incoherent mumblings pressed against her skin, with the strength from Blake’s hips, with the din of his devotion, and the sweet sobbings of her ruined heart?

What were they making? And why did it have to end?

The silence finally descended upon them, ringing with the aftershocks of his release, and with Gwen’s shuddering gasps, too short. Blake set a hand against her shoulder, gently squeezing as he pulsed inside of her, the same rhythm as the thump of her heart.

And when he pulled out, she expected to properly cry, but her breath eased, and her skin trembled, and her bones shook.

Neither said a word as she carefully turned back around and Blake slowly back away from her, until his back hit the other panel on the opposite wall. His eyes were downcast, his breath shallow. He sniffed and wiped at the back of his neck. He looked at his hands that had come away with blood.

Now that she really looked at him, in the blue and purple lights of the room, he had blood pulling at the bottom of his lip, barely, but there. His face was red from where she had struck him. His hair was all over the place. His shirt was open and skewed to the side. His slacks lay half done, his softening member resting just inside his briefs as he stuffed himself back in, catching her wandering gaze.

Gwen was now suddenly aware of what she must look like. The mother of three bent down to pull up her underwear. She tidied her dress back again, and was thankful Blake didn’t run his hands through her hair like she had done to him. Her mouth felt bruised, and her skin probably had traces of his blood on it.
When she looked back to him, Blake was staring at her, face betraying nothing. He had the good sense to button his shirt and zip his suit pants again. The belt lay forgotten on the floor between them, almost as if it was a line that they silently agreed not to cross.

She looked him up and down again.

“You’re bleeding.” She said.

He licked his lips, and some of the blood came away. He sighed, and moved to pick up his belt. He put it on quickly, despite his ruined hand giving him much difficulty.

Gwen watched him head for the door, and her face screwed up. She put a hand out to grab his arm, stopping him momentarily. “You’re not gonna go out there looking like that are you?”

His eyes ran over her face and she wasn’t sure what he was looking for but he must have found out because he wrenched his arm away and opened the door, walking out without a backwards glance toward her.

Gwen didn’t waste any time following after him, thinking of the wedding and the guests and what if somebody saw him or worse, the both of them. He couldn’t explain his appearance. He couldn’t see what she saw. A broken man that had been fucked within an inch of his life. Figuratively and literally.

“Blake, stop. Please.”

His back tensed. He probably didn’t think she would follow him out. But he stopped and looked over his shoulder. She caught up to him and she didn’t know what she wanted to say now that she had his attention. The only thing that came to mind was how much she had screwed up, how much he made her feel like she had screwed everything between them.

“I made a mistake.” She uttered, quietly, looking down the corridor.

His jaw flexed. “We both did. It won’t happen again.”

The sting hit her almost immediately. “I meant about what I said to you on the yacht. How I made you feel. I was trying to get you to--I wasn’t trying to hurt you, not really, just enough that you saw some sense.”

“That wasn’t a mistake. That was the truth. That’s what you’ve felt all this time and you just didn’t have the guts to ever tell me.”

“That’s not true--”

“It doesn’t matter.” He said, and turned around.

“Clearly it does.” She disagreed, following after him. She grabbed his arm. “Then what was that back there?”

He rounded in on her, staring her down with an anger that she always knew he possessed. “That was me, not being able to control my body around you. But don’t let that confuse you for what’s really going on here. Erections come and they go but I do not want you. Just like you don’t want me.”

“Of course I want you! This wasn’t about any of that. This was about our daughter! Josie would have ruined this for us.”
“Lani’s married now. What’s standing in the way? What’s keeping you at arm's length?”

Gwen scoffed. “It’s not like Josie knows solely about the affair. If she told them, we could get past that. I’ve made my amends for cheating. But she knows you’re Lani’s father. That Silas is your son. How do you explain that away, Blake?”

“You act like I want to.”

Gwen sighed, and threw her hands up in the air frustrated. “And you wonder why you feel the way you do.” She muttered as she pushed past him.

She should have known that it wouldn’t be the last of it, not when she practically dangled a bone right in front of his face.

She made it as far as the open wedding doors when Blake pushed her up against the wall. Her heart beat so loudly at the action that she was afraid the music inside the room wouldn’t be able to mask it.

“Blake, stop. There are people.” She hissed, looking sideways at the amount of people that could see them right now.

“Why don’t you say what you really want to? Why you really think that telling all of them is a bad idea.”

“Blake--”

“Just say it.” His voice raised slightly and she was scared that someone might hear him.

“Fine. You’re not thinking like a parent. You never seem to do. This would hurt our children. We can’t come back from this once its out. Nevermind your legacy or my reputation to the public. It’s our children that would suffer the most. And yes, am I still hurt that you left me all those years ago while I was pregnant with your child? You’re damn right I am. Because you don’t know what it’s like to be alone, to really be by yourself and never have to take any responsibility for the things that you’ve done. They’re our kids, Blake. All of them. You’d choose me over them but I’d choose them over you. I always will. Lani is proof of that. She reminds me every day of what you did to us. Why we’re even here right now and not together.”

Blake said nothing for a long minute before he finally grabbed her by the waist and pulled her close, leaning down until their foreheads were touching. Gwen’s breath accelerated. “There is nothing you could do that I wouldn’t forgive. Not a thing. We both know that. So, why won’t you extend me the same courtesy?” He asked.

“I can forgive you for the mistakes you’ve made. But I can’t forgive you if you don’t learn from them.” She whispered.

His lips barely touched her own. “What you don’t understand is that I have never been a good father because I’ve never been happy since I lost you. How am I supposed to teach them about love if I’m not in love with their mother? How am I supposed to teach them how to treat a woman if I’ve treated the woman I’ve loved for half my life like she was everything but I could only give her nothing? How are they supposed to know what a happy and carefree life looks like if their own father can only live one alone and sad and angry? It’s not selfish to want to show our kids what true love is, so that they may find it, and fight for it, one day. I know you think it will hurt them. But what hurts us even more is the only thing that will truly affect them when their older:”

Gwen’s eyes shut as his words surrounded her. She had never thought of it that way. To be happy,
to be loved, to live life like she always wanted, to show her kids what life they could lead. So that they know that the world isn’t all about heartbreak. So that you don’t always have to be the one to settle.

He was saying that they didn’t have to choose between one or the other. They could have it all. By choosing each other, they were choosing their kids, too.

“Gwen.” Blake whispered against her mouth. He had moved closer, as if that was a thing, as if there was any more space to be had between them.

“People are watching.” She whispered back, because how could they not be. Her back was to them but she could feel eyes. She stared at his neck, refusing to see his gaze. If she had, she would have seen him look at the many guests, not one looking in their direction.

“The love you have given me, Gwen...I have no rights to. I have no right to your heart, and yet I want it because my heart beats for yours only. It should be mine.” Her breath hitched. “And I have no right to your time. And yet I want every moment for the rest of our lives. We deserve each other. I deserve the right to love you. So, let me.”

She wanted to. She wanted to be able to give him this, to allow themselves to actually be without the damage it would cause their families. She wanted to let herself choose him over everything and everyone. And she wanted that decision to really mean what he thought. That she was choosing her children as well. But how could she know that to be the truth when his wife was on the other side of those doors, threatening to dismantle everything Gwen’s worked so hard to protect.

“What’s holding you back, Stella?”

Her eyes leaked and she was helpless to stop them. When she spoke, it was with a tired voice, “Have you ever stopped to think that maybe we haven’t earned each other?”

_I deserve you, but have I earned you? I’m worthy. We’re worthy of each other. But what have I done to keep that worth? What have we done to keep each other? We’ve had one another over and over and over again. But when have we ever just held on, kept holding, and never let go? Never. Now didn’t feel like the right time to start trying._

“Have you ever stopped to think that maybe you’ve had to earn everything else in your life and this one comes free? We’re a gift, Gwen. You and I. Our love. We don’t have to earn that it’s already gifted to us.”

Blake trailed a thumb across her lips, and Gwen allowed it. She allowed him to lean in and claim her lips again. She allowed him to pull her close as their breaths mingled and her body caved into him, tired of fighting it.

Only the music brought her back, and she pulled her mouth away from his as a couple of little kids ran past them and into the lobby, playing a game of catch with one of the table pieces. She ran her hands down Blake’s chest and pushed him away, gently.

“You really need to freshen up. You’re still bleeding. You can’t go back in there. Everyone will know.”

“There’s blood on you, too.”

“I can wash it off in the bathroom. But you need to change. Your shirt is ruined.”

Blake nodded, looking in on the party. His eyes returned to her puffy face and swollen eyes. She
couldn’t stop crying to save her life.

He sighed and asked, “Do you like me?”

It was his way of making sure they were good. His way of asking if she still loved him. She never stopped.

“I like you.” She replied, and against every fiber in her being, leaned up to peck him on the mouth. “Now go before someone sees you. Please.”

Blake finally left her and Gwen watched him walk down the hall to the elevators.

The mother of three leaned against the wall and wrapped her arms around herself. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine a world where their love didn’t hurt anyone but themselves. It was a world she fantasized about. A world she wanted to desperately catch. But no matter how hard she tried, she’d never be able to catch a fantasy. Not if it was any good. And that particular one: a house, five kids, the public a world away...was the best fantasy of them all.
Chapter 28

The knock at the door startled her.

She was in the lounge room that served as a private little area for many of the guests at the resort to come and read or finish some last minute work while away from home. Today, it was being used as Gwen’s sewing room. There was no one else in there with her as she drew a new design for a halter dress that had been selling out pretty frequently at the boutique.

The room was surrounded in windows, floor to ceiling, so that you had a beautiful view of the ocean and one of the outside pool. You could even see the main lobby if you sat on the right side of the lounge.

Gwen looked up at the entrance and saw Blake standing at the door, face casted in shadows. She beckoned him in.

It was the day after the wedding, and she had not seen him since the reception. Lani and Dicky had spent the night at the resort, and would not head out for their honeymoon until a week later. Most of the guests had left early this morning, including her brother and sister-in-law. Gwen’s parents managed to change their flight to an evening one so that they could spend a little more time with their grandchildren.

Gwen chose the couple of hours that she had free to work on some designs. It was the only thing that kept her from pulling her hair out as she thought about last night. She had mostly processed their little passionate tryst in the electrical room and the resulting conversation after but since Blake departed to change his clothes after she made him bleed, Gwen hadn’t been able to get a moment alone with him.

The rest of the reception was spent taking pictures out on the beach with the bride and groom’s families. Gwen played the doting mother of the bride after that, making a show of playing host when she had to. It meant that she was unavailable, unable to get away, even just for a second to get closer to Blake. It wasn’t as if she wanted to be near him. That would cause people to start asking questions, and for Josie to become suspicious and say things she had no right to. But after being with him in that way after so long, after hearing how he would tell everyone that he was in love with her, Gwen felt a need to keep an eye on him. The fact that she couldn’t for the rest of the night had bothered her.

The thought of him going back to his room with Josie, stripping down beside her, sleeping next to her warm body, had caused a surge of jealousy in Gwen that she hadn’t known she could still muster up. She woke up aggravated and feeling unwell because of it. Coming down here to work on some ideas had been the only way she could still stand not knowing where he was or what he
was doing. But even worse than that, it had also given her some time to think about just what exactly they were doing.

Needless to say, she was in a bad mood. And seeing him now, strutting into the room, cares nowhere to be found, had somehow agitated her further.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

“What does it look like?” She replied, going back to completing a stitch.

Blake didn’t say anything for a time and Gwen looked up at him, exasperated. He was standing there, looking out the window, eyes focused and yet unseeing. She was just about to ask what he wanted when he opened his mouth to say, “You know how nice it was to not have any of my secret service agents with me?”

Gwen couldn’t even pretend to follow his train of thought. He helped her out by continuing.

“You get them for life after you leave the office. I don’t know if you knew that. And for the past eight years, they’ve been following me around everywhere, trying to keep the boys, Josie, and me safe. But for this vacation, if you can even call it that, I did not want to be followed. Not once. And it was less of a problem than I thought it would be. You see when you’re no longer acting president of the greatest country in the world, the secret service don’t really care if you live or die, especially when you refuse their protection. It’s a day off for them.”

Gwen watched him walk over to her, eyes still on whatever was outside of the window.

“I’m going back tomorrow. Back home.” He said.

For a moment, there was nothing but silence as Gwen looked at him and he steadily avoided her gaze. Finally, she asked, “And your point is?”

Those blue eyes flew to her face, and he sighed. “I want the last years of my life to be like these past few days. I’ll tell the secret service to fuck off for good, Josie and I will get a divorce, and you and the boys can come live with me. Like a normal family.”

Gwen had to calm the racing of blood through her veins. When it registered as anger, she almost lost it for a second. “Nothing about either of our families is normal. And if you think you can just get a divorce that quick, let alone from Josie, you are sadly mistaken. And what do you suppose we’re going to do about the falling out of telling our children that some of them are related? You think Manó is going to want to finish his last year of high school in some new town? You think he’ll honestly want to leave all of his friends or his father? Not to mention the confusion it would cause Silas. Come on, Blake.”

“Then we’ll commute. I’ll come here when I can, and you can come visit me--”

“And do what?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What am I--” Her breath hitched, but not because of some forlorn emotion, but because she couldn’t help but feel like she was the only one that saw a problem with their timing, over and over and over again. “What would I be doing on these little visits? Huh? What service would I be providing for you then? Would I be there to stroke your ego? Be your cheerleader so that you can continue on lying to yourself that you didn’t wish things could be different? That you couldn’t make them that way because you didn’t have the balls to tell your wife you were in love with
another woman during the entirety of your marriage, and then have me wipe your tears away while I continue to ignore the ones falling from my eyes?"

“Gwen--”

“Would I be there to fight your demons. Would you send your bodyguards away because you think I can handle whatever bullets come flying at you today?” He flinched but she didn’t care. “What would you have me do, Blake? Maybe, I’m just here to make you feel good, is that it? You would come and visit me because maybe I’ll make you all hot and manly and ready so that you don’t have to be jealous of the day your wife eventually gets tired of you screwing your mistress and finally starts screwing somebody else! Is that it! Am I your fluffer from reality? Is that what I am? What service haven’t I already provided you that you would like when you come and see me on the odd weekend of every month you have a scratch that needs itching?”

“You’re being disgusting--”

She scoffed. “I’m being disgusting?”

“I never once thought of you as my mistress.”

“Well, maybe you should start. Because that’s what the rest of the world is going to see me as. That’s what your children--hell, even my children--will most likely think once we’ve given them every reason to.”

“We’ll deal with that when it comes to it.”

“No, we deal with it now. Or would you rather run away from this before it blows up in your face and you do something you can’t take back? Because I’m not some photo op on the White House lawn that you can just cancel last minute and hop on airforce one to avoid.”

“You’re being a coward, Gwen. And petty--”

“Oh, really--”

“--and jealous--”

“What else am I supposed to be?!?”

He blinked. But what she really saw was a man that had waited, and waited, and drowned.

Gwen’s lips closed tightly, her breath was trying desperately to settle once more. Her eyes were glossy, mirrors of misery when she stared at him, speaking in a voice that didn’t quite sound like her and yet was true to herself more at that moment than it had ever been before.

“Sometimes, I replay our relationship over and over and over in my head.” She began. “And it’s like I know the beginning and I know the middle, and sometimes, I can even see the end. We meet, we fall in love, life works against us for a couple of years but we manage to find each other again, and we can’t stop ourselves, we can’t resist, and then nothing. We give all of ourselves to one another because we’re meant to be and that’s what you do when you’re meant to be...and how is it that we can give so much and I feel like I’ve gotten nothing from you all at the same time? And that’s what the end looks like for me. I’m waiting. In the end, I’m waiting. For a house in some remote part of the world that I can’t live in and a man that makes me promises he can’t keep, and not for a lack of trying, either. And that’s the sad part about all of this. Because I know you’re trying. But your efforts lie between always and never. When have they ever not?”
Gwen swallowed the lump in her throat as she told him her biggest fear. “We will always love each other...it feels like I’ve loved you for lifetimes. You will always be my first real love and my last. We will always be a part of each other, but we will never truly be able to have one another. We might belong to each other always, but we were never each others to begin with.”

*Always but never.*

“You came. You saw. You loved. But now it’s time to go home, Blake.”

He blinked, too much, too rapidly, not being able to catch his breath. “I can’t.”

“Give it time. You learned to live without me for thirteen years. And then another eight. You can learn to do it again.”

He flinched. “That wasn’t living. I don’t know what to call that but it certainly was not living. It wasn’t a life, Gwen.”

“And waiting all alone in my big house, raising my kids, and seeing you twice a month isn’t a life either--at least not one I’d want to live.”

Blake sighed and looked away from her. “I’m not--I never--” He cut off, trying to find the words he wanted to leave her with. “I’m not the bad guy here. I can’t carry our past, or present, or even our future all by myself.”

“I’m not asking you--”

“No, let me finish.” He took a deep breath. “I’m not the bad guy here. When we met, we had the same ideals and thoughts, and what we thought to be the absolute truth, was. We connected right from the start. Our bond was the biggest absolute in my life. And I loved you more than I ever loved another human being. And then our paths split, and no matter what the reasons, what complications, or stories we remember and try to tell ourselves, it happened out of love. Now we’re on opposite sides of the ring. We think differently, and our ideals have changed, and the absolute truth we once new now seems like a big lie. But I’m a firm believer in “whom you love, you love forever.” And I know, because you’re proof of it, that love doesn’t go away even if the beliefs changed, even if the truth is stretched a mile long to the point where you can’t even see it or recognize it anymore. We may change. But our love hasn’t. And maybe my efforts will always be for you and never reach you. But have you ever stopped to think that maybe your efforts have always been able to reach me but were never for or about me? At least not in the way that mine were--the way they still are.”

Gwen’s face heated up and her heart jumped several feet in her chest, the feeling of it landing in her gut, strong and very much present.

“I’m not the bad guy.” Blake repeated. “I may have been the guy that left, that broke your heart, and that refuses to leave it in several pieces. But I am not the guy that lured you into some degrading--I am not the bad guy, Gwen.”

“I know that.”

“You want this to be easy. You’ve always wanted this to be easy. I was never easy to begin with. The White House wouldn’t have been easy for you. Our relationship wouldn’t have been easy for you. This, right now, telling our families, that’s not going to be easy. Starting a new life with me...won’t be easy. Loving me for the rest of your days...is never going to be easy. Our love isn’t easy or simple.”
“I know--”

“So don’t just stand there and look at me with dead guys like I’m some--we happened to each other. And if I could go back and make it unhappen, I would, Gwen. Because the way you’re talking to me--the way your looking at me...I’d give anything to erase both right now.”

Raw, rough-lewn, and ugly, was the thing slowly creeping its way to her soul. And Gwen didn’t know how to stop it, let alone survive it.

“We say all this stuff and then nothing, Blake. I’ve never met two people who say as much as we do in this world and watch nothing come from it.”

“I want the world to come from loving you. But I can’t bring the world on my own, Gwen.”

The cure must be a kiss, Gwen thought, as she watched him walk closer to her, slowly, as if he was a predator, stalking his prey, afraid that it would run scared in the other direction.

And the only thing she needed as his hands ran through the soft tresses of her hair and pulled until his hand made a strong fist, the only thing that ugly, tortured, monster, needed, the one creeping close to the center of who she was as Blake pulled their bodies together, was that tender moment only his kiss could bring. The one where she felt like she was in the rain, not caring if the water soaked her skin and brought a haunting chill to her bones. He was a rebellion against the elements. They defied laws and truths and just about anything the world ran on. Nature brought them rain, but their love had brought the sun out either way.

Gwen allowed herself to feel that heat, and let the light cast a glow on them that betrayal and pain had hidden with a shadow. And she didn’t take cover from it. She didn’t try to wish the light away, because it was warm--he was warm--and Gwen had felt cold for far too long.

And just as the sun was settling in on them, a gust of wind, so sharp and chilled that it pulled them apart almost instantaneously, came rushing in through the open door of the lounge room.

The amount of force she used to remove Blake from her embrace had shocked even her, not to mention the former president. And when she looked to see who had intruded on their moment, she was rather regretting her show of fear and shock.

Her father stood in the doorway, looking for all the world like he had been punched in the gut. Surely seeing his daughter kissing the former President of the United States, a married man, a married man with children, would have that effect on any father.

But this was Gwen’s father. And she was scared to think of what he might be thinking right in that moment.

Blake cleared his throat, and wiped at his mouth semi-descritely. His eyes were downcast and he didn’t dare look in her father’s direction. Dennis Stefani looked between the two of them, face still an emotional storm.

“Dad--”

“I just came to tell you that we’re back.”

He gave Blake one last look before turning around.

“Dad, wait. Please.”
He stopped, his back still turned toward them. She glanced at Blake, and he shook his head, wishing she wouldn’t but she had to.

“Dad...I know what it looks like. I know how you must be feeling right now--”

He turned around so abruptly that Gwen’s words faltered instantly.

“Are you two having an affair?”

The question shouldn’t have caught her off guard, but then again, she didn’t expect her father to throw their infidelity back in their faces so soon. She knew he asked because of everything he had seen leading up to this moment. The conversation in the living room, hearing his daughter plead this man’s name like she’d never be able to say it again, even the reaction to his name at the church, and the tension between them that never failed to bubble to the surface whenever they were in the same room.

And what answer could she possibly give him? Her father wouldn’t understand. Blake was as much married as two people who entered into an arranged marriage could be. It was an understanding, an agreement, or at least it was until Josie decided she wanted her husband to love her back. And even though Blake was technically still involved in this union, and it was still technically cheating in the eyes of the law, Gwen knew that their carrying on wasn’t just some simple affair. It wasn’t just two people blinded by lust. They had history, children together, memories that would rival the world being made into existence. It was complicated and never ending and something that needed to be felt instead of explained.

“No.” Blake said, much to Gwen and even her father’s surprise.

“Blake.”

“We’re not. You are not the other woman.” He said, not unkindly. “Now you wanted to tell him. So tell him.”

Gwen winced. It was the last thing she wanted to do, but she had to. If she wanted to be with Blake, if she wanted to finally allow her efforts to be for him, then she needed to trust that revealing the truth was the right thing to do.

“Dad. Blake is...he’s the pilot.”

Her father’s face contorted into one of confusion before the words dawned on him, realization hitting like a brick. The pilot from Hawaii. The pilot his daughter had been in love with. The pilot who refused to get on the plane.

“What?” He asked, but it wasn’t really a question.

Gwen took a deep breath. “I met Blake when he was stationed in Hawaii. And we got together. He’s the Blake I told you about over the phone. The one you were supposed to meet.”

She could tell her words weren’t making any sense to him. Dennis had looked like he had forgotten how to breathe.

“This man standing here--” Her father broke off the thought as soon as it formed on his tongue, tasting foreign and wrong and everything he hoped he raised his daughter to never want to do. Betray, cheat, lie, suffer, hurt.

“Your mother had her suspicions. I didn’t want to believe them.” Was all he said, disappointment
laced throughout his voice.

“Dad...it’s not--this isn’t black and white. There’s so much more to it than two people--”

“He’s married, Gwen. He’s married.”

“Dad, I know but--”

“I don’t need to hear anything else.” He hadn’t raised his voice, but his tone was final.

Gwen felt like a little kid again, and when he turned back around to leave them, she said the only thing that would give him pause, and shatter the little fantasy of his perfect daughter.

“He’s the father of your grandchildren.”

The wind had already been knocked out of him. All she managed to do was drive a knife through his chest. And the only thing she could do was keep twisting it.

“Lani and Silas are his children. And before you condemn me to hell, Wyatt already knows.”

Blake shuffled slightly next to her, and she could tell that the admission had moved him in more ways than one. Here was another person outside of them and Wyatt and Josie that knew the truth about his fatherhood.

But Gwen need only to focus on her father’s reactions. Just as he was turning things over in his mind, she could tell he was doing the math, putting the puzzle pieces together, and discerning the lies that she had told him and her mother over the years from the truths she was revealing to him today. For all that her father was, an intelligent man was at the top of the list.

For a long time, he did not say anything. She grew worried at the blank expression on his face. But just when she thought it was appropriate to speak again, he shocked her into silence at the look in his eyes when he dared to glance her way, again.

“I can’t fault you for the first time. You were in love. You thought you’d end up together. You got pregnant and he abandoned you. That wasn’t your fault. Lani is still my granddaughter. Wyatt is still her father. But Silas...You slept with this man while married. You slept with this man while knowing he was married. God only knows why you decided to move back here after Washington.”

“Dad--”

“End it.”

Gwen’s eyes stormed over. “What?”

“End it before anyone else finds out.”

“Sir--” Blake tried but her father cut him off.

“End it! Now!”

“Dad, stop!” Gwen yelled.

Dennis took a deep breath and steadied his heart beat. He pinched the bridge of his nose. Gwen had never seen her father look frazzled, but if she had to guess the sight, it would be right then in that very moment.
“You are so very far in over your heads. Do you understand that? This isn’t some childish declaration of love and some need to be together forever. This is stupid. Quite plainly, the dumbest thing you’ve ever done regarding yourselves. This is not some fairytale story that you’ll get to tell your grandchildren one day. This is a news story that will be plastered on every magazine and newspaper you can find in existence. This is adultery of the worst kind because you went and got yourself pregnant by one of the most famous men in history--twice! This is a nightmare that will keep the both of you up at night. This is a heartbreak that will affect the people you’ve married, the people who love and hate you, and the offspring of which you’ve brought into this world. This is not a damn romance!”

A silence fell over the room that Gwen was hopeless to persuade to go away. Because her father was right. This was a story, nothing more and nothing less. The world was just waiting to hear it and they seemed all too eager to tell it. But as much as her father was right, her and Blake were also right to want to reveal the nature of their relationship. Because she had learned a long time ago, that life wasn’t about what you want, but it wasn’t about what you don’t want either. And rarely did that ever coincide with what you deserved.

Before she could say that, however, and defend the man that she’d love ever since she was a young woman, the door swung open again. The air wasn’t cold this time, it was anything but as her youngest child and mother swept into the room.

“Mom! Look what I got at the fair.” Silas said, running over to his mother to show her the snowglobe that had the White House inside of it, surrounded by white flurries as he shook it excitedly. He turned to Blake, abruptly, and thrusted the globe up at him. “My brother told me you worked at the White House. You like it?” He asked Blake.

Blake nodded, unsure. “It’s nice.”

Silas tugged at Blake’s shirtsleeves and the older man bent down upon request. He crouched in front of his son as the boy put the globe into his hand. “Manó said you were the president. I’m learning the presidents this year. You’ll be in my book. What number are you?”

Blake smiled softly at Silas. “47. Can you count that high?”

Silas nodded, then looked at the globe. “I want you to have it. It was your home.”

Blake wrapped his arm around S.J.’s back and pulled him closer. Silas slung an arm around Blake’s neck.

“That’s really nice of you but you got this at the fair, right? Don’t you want to keep it?”

“I want you to have it more. But you have to promise to show me the real White House one day if you do.”

Blake chuckled. “I get something, but only if you get something in return. You’re not practicing to be a politician are you?”

“My daddy says that those people are all liars. I want to be the president, instead. Like you.”

Blake grinned. “I’d definitely vote for you.”

Silas smiled and squeezed Blake’s neck in thanks before letting the man go. Blake stood up and clutched the snowglobe in his hand. “Thank you for the gift, buddy.”

“Silas, why don’t we go down to the beach and join your brother?” Gwen’s mother piped up,
looking at her husband and daughter as the tension in the room still crackled like a well tended fire. Patti could always tell when something was off between her family members and Gwen had a pretty good guess that her mother knew exactly what had occurred before she got to the room.

Silas, thankfully, nodded at the idea. “Come on, Mom. I want to tell you about the fair so we can go next year.” He took Gwen’s hand and started leading her to the door.

The mother of three was helpless to refuse her son, and judging by the look on her mother’s face, she thought it was best that she didn’t either.

Looking between her father and Blake, Gwen didn’t want to leave them alone. Blake needed her. He couldn’t handle her father by himself. She didn’t want him to. Because she knew deep down that the man would persuade her love to pack his things and take his family home and never seek her out, again.

For all her hesitation, and caution, and disapproval of his unrealistic fantasies of them together, she did not want Blake to leave her.

And the thought struck her as she was heading toward the ocean with her son and mother in tow. It’s not that she didn’t want Blake to leave her, it was that she didn’t want him to leave her because someone else wished it to be. Hadn’t she always been the one to push him away? There was never anyone else between them to do it for her. And she didn’t have the time nor the resources to uncover what that exactly meant.

She wasn’t even sure she wanted to.

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The only thing that could wipe the joy from his heart after interacting with his son was the disapproving look from the father of the woman that he loved.

Blake didn’t dare shuffle his feet or avert his gaze from the older man. And he did not back down as he spoke to him either.

“I love your daughter.”

Dennis didn’t even blink. “I can see that. And I can see that she loves you. But as a man, that shouldn’t matter here.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I’m a man. And you are still a boy.”

Blake felt indignation climb from the lowest point in his body. Dennis didn’t even give him a chance to defend himself before saying, “I have worked for every single thing that I have. I have fought, and scraped, and bled over every inch of ground you walk on and claim your own only after people like me have paved it. And I don’t tell you this because I’m bitter, or because I think you want to hear the story of an immigrant’s son. I tell you this because you are the man that my daughter has decided to love and give every ounce of her heart to and destroy said heart for. I tell you this because if you even knew the half of what my daughter really thinks of you, why she has kept you out of your children’s lives, why exposing this affair would literally kill her, then you would have
the decency to pack your things and run away like you are so known to do.”

“That’s not going to happen.” Blake said, proud of at least getting something out as Gwen’s father tore into him with a ferocity that not even the best politicians could spew.

“It is going to happen. And I’ll tell you why. You are a spoiled, entitled, ungrateful, little brat. You had everything handed to you because you’re daddy wished it to be. That degree, that plane you flew right out of the sky, and that seat you warmed for eight years in the oval. I read up on everything about you before I casted my vote. And I don’t deny you wanted all of it badly. You just didn’t want my daughter badly enough. And that isn’t surprising to a man who knows you’ve been given the world and you can’t appreciate it because you haven’t had to work for anything. Not the way I have. And the problem I have with you, Mr. Shelton, is not the fact that you come from a privileged background, or that you can’t see past the money and the power and all the strings that were pulled to get you to where you are now, or that you had the audacity to father children that you weren’t man enough to raise. My problem is that you decided, after having everything you could ever imagine handed to you on a silver platter, that what you want now is my daughter. My child. Mine! What I made. What I created. You can talk about how much you love her all you want to try and change my mind about you but guess what? I am actually, quiet literally, twice the man you are. Because you are a boy.”

“Stop--”

“And my daughter has always thought so. She has told me so. When you didn’t show up to meet us, when you didn’t show up for your daughter, she knew then you weren’t the man that you claimed to be. So if you love her now, if you want the best for her now, then be a man and pack your things, and go away. Go take care of your family and stay out of the one you could have had, that you might have had if you ever had to work for anything in your easy life.”

“You don’t know anything about my life--”

“And you don’t know anything about my daughter. She is not the one you use to feel better about yourself. She is not an out. She is stronger than you, wiser, and more forgiving than you’ll ever know. You think I can’t see past you, boy? You will always be your father’s son, always live in his shadow. And part of you hates that. Part of you wishes you would have tried to make a life for yourself that you truly wanted. Don’t use the person that I made to make you into a man, into the man you always wanted to be, the man you’ve only ever caught a mere glimpse of when you’ve been with my daughter. It is not her job to fix you or make you or even love you back together. I don’t care if you are that still same broken boy before life decided to put hair on your balls. This is my daughter! You think I’ll stand idly by while you decide to take her down with you? A boy that has done nothing but have the world handed to him? My daughter will never be handed to you no matter how many times she might have spread her legs in a fit of passion. You want her? Do what a man does and earn her!”

The breath had escaped Blake for he could no longer draw any air into his lungs. He couldn’t find words. He couldn’t find sound. And he sure as hell couldn’t find the strength to defend himself, his father, or his entire life’s choices. At the heart of it, Dennis Stefani had succeeded where all of his enemies had failed.

He had reduced Blake to a mere blip on the radar. It didn’t matter that he was a decorated pilot, or that he ran the country for eight years in the highest office in the world. To this man, he was nothing more than a little boy who had flown too close to the sun and dressed up in his father’s clothes to sit at the big desk with all the other important people. To this man, he was a disappointment. He was the most disappointing suitor for his daughter’s hand.
Blake Shelton had gotten good grades handed to him, flight school given to him, law school taken for him, and a presidency bought for him. Gwen had never been easy to hold onto and for the first time in his life, he understood why.

She never gave herself to him.

He never had it so difficult in life until she came along. And was Dennis right? Was all that he had to do was go to her? Get on that plane? Stay and fight and love with her, put in the hard work, shed the real tears, and pave that ground by himself so that she could walk on it? He never worked to have her and so God did not allow him to keep her. Was that it? Had he truly believed that he could get away with it all and never lift a finger?

And if he did, now...Would it make a difference? How did he earn something that didn’t want to be procured? Something that never believed that it could be? If Dennis was right, Gwen didn’t have faith in him. She didn’t believe that he could achieve that future he talked so much about. She didn’t have faith that he could earn her. And was she right? Why didn’t he have the answers? Was it because he was so used to other people giving them that all he needed to do was ask the question?

It was another punch to the gut. As a man, he was supposed to provide. He was supposed to know and Gwen was supposed to look at him for the answer. She was supposed to know that she could count on him. She couldn’t count on him.

In hindsight, he had never been able to count on himself. How were his children supposed to depend on a father like that?

He wasn’t dependable. He wasn’t ready. He didn’t have all the answers. He was a boy. He was a disappointment. He wasn’t worth any of it. He wasn’t the man that you gave up everything for. He knew that. But he wanted to be.

He wanted to be.

As he clutched the snow globe still in the palm of his hand, he knew, above all else, that he needed to be.
He vaguely heard someone opening the door to his office, which was where he found himself sleeping most nights. He had thought the sound came from his dream. He had been picturing himself off the coast of some neutral island, staring out at the sea, and waiting. He had been waiting for the door to open and for someone to finally have found him. When he heard his name being called out, rather softly and perfectly, he knew his imaginings were no longer tethered to the dream.

“Blake.”

He finally came to and moved to stretch out on his back, groaning at the effort. His office futon wasn’t exactly the most comfortable thing in the world.

“Blake Shelton, husband of mine.” Josie’s voice finally registered in his now awake state and he peeked over to her out of the corner of one still sleepy eye. His gaze never failed to waver to her protruding stomach almost immediately these days. She was showing now and the sight never failed to remind him of what his life had come to.

Before he could dwell on it, however, Josie had started talking again, disrupting his thoughts.

“There are practically nine other bedrooms in this house and you choose your office, of all places, where you entertain the Vice President, the Chief Justice, and several other important Republican personal, almost religiously every weekend, to sweat over and make a permanent ass mark in the cushions.”

To anyone else, the comment would have seemed snide and malicious. From Josie, he knew it came from a place of aggravation. The next thing out of her mind confirmed why she was really upset about him sleeping in his office for over a month now.

“And in case you forgot, which I’m sure you did, that photographer from Time’s will be here in less than an hour. If he sees the office being used as a makeshift bedroom, he’ll start asking questions.”

“If I start sleeping in any of the other bedrooms, the staff will know.” He said, finally getting a word in.

“So let them know.”

“If the staff finds out than the press will find out within the hour. And I don’t think you want the world knowing we don’t sleep in the same bed, anymore.” He finally sat up and regarded her with
a blank expression.

“Lots of married couples who are expecting don’t sleep in the same bed.” She pointed out. “For many reasons.”

“And what are ours?” He challenged.

“Let’s see...this pregnancy is making me toss and turn all night so you’re sleeping somewhere else so that I can be more comfortable like the amazing husband you are so known to be. Or that you work late and stay up in your office for hours and hours on end through the night handling your responsibilities dutifully as President Pro Tempore and you don’t want to disturb my pretty little hormonal head with all your work. Or that I don’t particularly want to spend my nights sleeping next to my husband as I grow our child while he gets erections in his sleep dreaming of Gwen Stefani. Any of those explanations will do, Blake, you decide which one you want to share.”

Blake covered his eyes with his hands, feeling a headache coming on this early in the morning.

Josie took a deep breath when he didn’t say anything. “I need you up and showered within the next twenty minutes. We’ll do the interview, get our pictures taken, and then we can go and meet Teddy and Will for lunch.”

He nodded, not trusting himself to say anything in the moment. Besides, he was tired and all the energy had been drained out of him these past few weeks with preparing for work and helping Jackson move into his new loft with his girlfriend.

A hand carding through his hair had both startled him and relaxed him. Josie smiled down at him softly and regarded him with a loving expression. “I packed your bags for the g8 summit. I figured it would be one less thing that you would have to worry about.”

“Thank you.” He said kindly, his face not softening or hardening, quite used to her extreme mood swings.

With that, she left him to get all the way awake so that he could face the day.

In the shower, Blake stood underneath the spray and let the hot water run down his tense back. It seemed the bathroom was the only place that he could think undisturbed, and think he did. His thoughts often drifted to that little resort on the beach--to her--to that day he said goodbye, much to the encouragement of one Dennis Stefani.

After their terse conversation in the lounge room, Blake had understood what he needed to do, and where he needed to go to do it. Gwen’s father had been right. He was not a man, at least not yet. And as crazy as it sounded, he’d never be good enough for the man’s daughter, not even if he proved himself worthy of her affections in the long run. But that’s not what Dennis wanted him to take away from their discussion. The older man wanted him to see that in order to really be a man, and recognize his age, and his and Gwen’s long history together, in order to see a future, he had to stop believing that he was going to get a happily ever after and live in peace by Gwen’s side for the rest of his existence. That would never happen.

What would happen--what could happen--if he did what needed to be done, was far better, if not harder work. Companionship. No fireworks, no big wedding, no grand gesture, no undying, star-crossed love. They were too old for that. He simply needed to earn his place by her side. And that would take time. Seeing how five years had already passed since that day of his family’s departure from the hawaiin island, time was surely making itself known.
At first, his plan had seemed easy enough. The first thing he wanted to accomplish was divorcing Josie relatively quickly, and get a house for himself. He wanted to execute his plan when Teddy was finished with school. But once he accepted the job at the senate, at the urging of the President of the United States, divorcing Josie was not something he could have done right away. Gwen agreed that it wouldn’t go over well, too. Part of the reason that he got elected was because the majority of his fellow government peers—and the country—knew him to be a faithful husband and an adoring father. Splitting from his wife just before he got put up for the vote in the Senate would have surely cost him the position. He wanted the job, desperately. And so he decided to wait. Even though it pushed his plan back exponentially, it was the best choice for him, professionally.

Blake remembered the day he got the news, fondly. He recalled arriving back home to his own little island and getting a letter from the Chief of Staff of President Grant’s administration four months later and exactly a week after the presidential election. He had known the man since Grant was just a senator. The letter had detailed a job offer for Blake, one he couldn’t necessarily refuse seeing how it put him back into the political arena, a place he had missed since he got out of office. As much as a headache it had been to run the country, it was what he was good at. He had left his eight years with no scandals, relative to moderate success with newly educational and military reforms, and a country full of supporters and newly change of heart doubters.

Accepting the position had not been taken lightly. He would be farther away from his children, and Gwen, and the solitude and peace of an ocean breeze and a scalding ray of light. Even though Josie had taken the news well and was enthusiastic to get back to Washington, Blake still found it hard to let go. He had even talked it over with Gwen. When he left that resort, he had effectively left some part of his heart with it. And to his surprise, thinking Gwen would never want anything to do with him ever again, and without knowing what had transpired or what was said between her father and the love of her life, Gwen had let him leave willingly, physically allowing him to be away from her but not out of her life completely. When he told her of his plan, she had readily agreed, albeit the caution that she was so known to possess in her voice when regarding him, had lingered in the static over the telephone line. She had even understood to a certain extent that now was not the time for them to try and be together. He would have thought that his decision would have relieved her. She had not wanted to reveal their relationship to the kids. This way, they didn’t have to. But Gwen knew that it would take time for them to really come together, without the messy fallout of emotions and pent up feelings from several parties associated to either of them.

They met in the middle, somehow. They agreed to talk and start there, only. Between the weeks that had preceded the wedding, islands apart, him and Gwen had fallen into this little trance it seemed. They spoke almost every day, discreetly, and at first, it had been awkward, neither of them knowing what to say now that they were on different footing than they had been before the wedding, but in agreeance that they wanted each other and would do what they had to do to make being together a reality. And eventually, they were able to talk without any difficulty. It was effortless. And to Blake, it almost felt like they were already together, just apart for the moment, filling each other in on their kids whereabouts and activities, arguing over what to eat for dinner, and planning trips to places for just the two of them. It was easy, despite knowing anything between them would be anything but.

But those phone calls for those four months had been the brighter spots of Blake’s existence. They had even served to reiterate how much they belonged to each other, if only they could just get there. Gwen had seemed to understand and even agreed with her father that she and Blake had chemistry. That finding each other in life was something that rarely happened and they were lucky. But chemistry didn’t mean anything where timing was concerned. Because timing was a bitch.
His pregnant wife was proof of that.

He had been doing so well. They had been doing so well. Even with the move, Blake and Gwen had remained in good standing. They still talked, although it was less and less as the move and the job demanded more of his time and attention. But he didn’t let that deter them or his plan. He still intended to get a divorce from Josie as soon as he was a year into his position.

Then Josie’s father had been diagnosed with brain cancer.

It was the worst kind of news, and Blake hadn’t known what to do with himself, let alone his wife. Josie had gone from this woman who did every and anything to try and keep her husband from wandering away to his mistress, not knowing that all she had to do was wait for her father to become ill to keep said husband glued to her side.

Blake hadn’t even thought twice about it and he knew Gwen would understand. He had to stay. At least until the man got better. It took six months before the news of his full recovery would be revealed to the public. His father-in-law was going to live to see another year and they were all grateful. Blake especially, and he couldn’t help but berat himself for thinking of Gwen the moment he found out. What he hadn’t anticipated was more time. Josie’s father had just gotten over beating cancer and he couldn’t very well go out the next day or even the next month and file for a divorce. The public would castrate him if Josie hadn’t already.

So he waited. Gwen didn’t seem to mind, either. She was still sure everything would come together when it was supposed to. Instead, she chose to remain faithful to their phone calls, and even planned a trip to Washington when Wyatt asked to have Silas for a weekend camping trip. They spent two days in Portland, instead, where Blake attended a charity benefit, and did nothing but eat in the hotel and reacquaint himself with Gwen’s body as if it was the last time he ever would.

Blake smiled at the memory as he rinsed the shampoo from his greying hair. The visit was much needed after not seeing one another in person for more than a year. That time together had only spurred Blake to just end his marriage already, be damned with formalities. Josie would be fine. Her father was fine. Teddy was about to graduate highschool. Jackson was already in college. It was time.

And then Gwen went and got an offer of a lifetime. She called him one night in the middle of dinner. Blake had excused himself from the table and took the call outside, away from prying ears. The excitement in her voice was almost too much for him to handle, and he grinned like a madman, like a stupid madman, because if he had known what she was calling to tell him about, he would have never even let his mouth twitch in the slightest for her joy.

She was moving to Italy.

The dressmaker had gotten an offer from a lucrative italian brand known for their wedding dresses. The offer came from a scouting executive who specializes in recruiting self-made designers. A vacation and an accidental stumbling upon Gwen’s boutique had sealed the mother of three a deal of a lifetime. And she wanted to accept.

A million things ran through his head when she recounted the series of events that had lead her to have already started packing up her house. She was moving to Italy. She was taking Silas even farther away from him. And even though he hadn’t seen his youngest son in over a year, it was nice to know he was still where Blake had left him. Not anymore.

And how could he refuse her? How could he convince her not to go? She had encouraged him when an opportunity came up to further his career, a position that he happened to love. Clothes
were everything to Gwen. If making dresses for the First Lady was a dream, he couldn’t even imagine what this opportunity for her could be compared to.

In the end, he had given his blessing, just like she had given him hers. And she moved within the month. Communication had been sparse during that time, but they had managed to keep in touch. The problem wasn’t anything to do with feelings changing or even doubt. They still stood with each other where they wanted. But seeing as how she was on the other side of the world, being together in the near distant future wasn’t going to happen any time soon. So Blake stood put.

Another year had passed, another summer here and gone. Teddy was preparing to go off to college, Jackson was preparing for another semester, and Josie and him remained married. Their relationship had changed some time ago. They didn’t have sex, they didn’t hold any passion for each other, but they got along. For Josie, remaining with him was more about pride, about what she felt she deserved by sticking by him all this time. And since his position in the senate afforded her the opportunity to further her own law career, it was an ideal situation. As much as Blake hated to admit it, it was ideal for him, as well. With Gwen gone and not coming back any time soon, he still got to hold on to a semblance of a life that he had wanted to build with her.

It was probably selfish, and no doubt everything that he wanted to avoid in order to earn her but there was only so much he was willing to give up when Gwen was happily living her life in a foreign country miles and miles away from him. He was waiting for her. She was not waiting for him. And that’s how time worked, he knew. She had been waiting ever since he moved back to Washington, ever since he stayed with Josie during her father’s health scare, ever since he remained with her for fear of public backlash. Gwen wasn’t waiting anymore. It was her time. He had to respect that.

Until then, he had a home cooked meal to come home to every night, a warm body next to him, and the pathetic shell of companionship that he and Josie had made for themselves ever since their marriage truly fell apart.

The day Gwen called him one Sunday out of the blue, Blake had almost expected her to tell him she was staying for another year, and it was surely going to crush him. He had already endured two years of “Italy this” and “Italy that,” he couldn’t do a third. But to his overwhelming surprise and joy, Gwen revealed to him that she was coming home.

The minute he got off the phone with her, Blake had told his assistant to clear any appointments the following day. He had to meet his lawyer. He had to file the papers.

He did.

He finally filed for divorce. It would be public, surely, by the end of the week. But he didn’t care. Gwen and his son were coming home. It didn’t matter that Hawaii wasn’t exactly home anymore to him. She would be closer. She would be reachable. He was ecstatic.

It didn’t last. The divorce had been all over the news. He had prepared himself for it. And even though he already got a chance to talk to both of his kids about it, albeit not in any extensive length, the news of their parent’s abruptly finished marriage had got around to them in a less than welcoming manner.

Josie had been positively shrill. She had even refused to sign at first. It had taken several months, both at a stand still, for them to come to an agreement. During that time, Blake had stayed at Brad’s and talked frequently with Gwen. She had just gotten settled back in Hawaii, and was seeing the flurry of his private life on the news every other week. To his surprise, Manó and Lani had reached out to him, personally. Of course, Blake wasn’t naive enough to believe they hadn’t
already been in contact with Jackson and Teddy, but for the two of them to send their sympathies and condolences had been something of a novelty in his book. He had accepted their pity willingly, much to the chagrin of Gwen. In her eyes, if they knew why the former president was divorcing his wife, they wouldn’t have been so nice as to reach out to him in his time of need.

But Blake didn’t have it in him to push away anyone’s affections. He was going to get a divorce if it was the last thing he did there on Earth. How naivety got the best of him. How time had made him its bitch.

Just when he managed to get Josie to give up, the unexpected and unfortunate happened one night out of the blue. Josie’s father had all of a sudden taken a turn for the worst. He had died within the week. The funeral had only been a day after. And Blake had been a mess.

His father-in-law had been nothing but kind and nurturing to him. In all the years that Blake had known the man, he had reminded him of what a father should always strive to be. It hurt, his passing. He grieved with Josie, knowing full well how it felt to lose a father--a parent--in any regard. During that time, he did nothing but be a doting husband, and the irony was not lost on him, seeing as how Josie had not signed the papers just yet.

Gwen had been equally horrified upon hearing the news, and he had not been proud of his behavior when it came to the woman he so affectionately referred to as his other half. His phone calls had been practically non-existent during that time of mourning. He had not wanted to hold Josie in his arms as she cried every night and make a call to his “mistress” after she fell asleep, although Blake could never think of Gwen as such. But it still felt wrong to him. It felt like he was doing a disservice to both women. It was the kind of thing a little boy did. Blake was working on becoming a man.

And as a man, he stood by his wife’s side through it all. The only thing he regretted was lying next to his wife like a man, as well. Because that had produced a baby, and driven Gwen further away from his grasp.

Blake grimaced as the water turned cold in the shower. He remembered the night he gave in to Josie, a hand on a shoulder turning into a hug, a brush of his lips turning into a kiss. They had both been drunk, one of those rare occasions where pretending just wasn’t enough for them. Life had been a bitch. Josie’s father had been taken from them. Their relationship had been at an all time low and neither of them were feeling anything particularly throughout their days. They were numb, essentially. He was lost without Gwen, but he hadn’t known how to reach out to her in his time of need. Josie was lost without her father, and her husband had been the next best thing.

They sought each other out. He could finally admit it for what it was. And in what felt like forever for them, Blake had made love to his wife. They had made a baby. It wasn’t until several weeks later that they would find out the news. And in that time, Blake had not known what he was doing with his life. It was like he was at a standstill.

News of the pregnancy had rocked his world. Many emotions had plagued him during that time. Anger, frustration, hesitant joy, fear, and resignation. Here he was, still married, about to have his fifth child, and so far away from a life that he thought he was working toward.

It didn’t even surprise him when Gwen hung up the phone after he revealed the news. After avoiding her calls and not endeavouring to reach out to her after Josie’s father’s passing, calling to tell the love of his life that he was having another child with his wife, a woman that he was swearing he was leaving for Gwen, was not on the list of conversation starters for any couple. He tried not to be upset. He didn’t have any right. And Dennis’s words had come back to haunt him as the silence over the phone surrounded the former president.
He was not a man. A man did not do this. She didn’t deserve this.

So, Blake had let it be. In his mind, this was just time working itself out. Yes, he had made a mistake that night sleeping with Josie unprotected--sleeping with her period--but it was over and done with, and now he had to face the consequences. If Gwen still wanted to be with him, then she would reach out to him when she was ready. He couldn’t force the issue. But nothing had changed for him. He still loved Gwen. He still wanted to be with her. This baby didn’t change that. Even though it put him in a bind, he was still going to try for them, because that’s what a man did.

A knock on the bathroom had told him that he’d taken more than the allotted twenty minutes to get ready and Blake shut off the water a second later. Once he was back in the bedroom, sopping wet and soaking the carpet, Blake dressed in the clothes that Josie had laid out for him. It was a neat black suit, with a pocket hanky the color of the nursery. Josie had decided on yellow for the baby girl they were expecting.

He walked out into the hall and heard voices in the living room. Upon his arrival, he saw a camera crew and his wife talking to the interviewer about the design of the house. Blake managed to avoid rolling his eyes as he fixed his glasses upon his face. The older he got, the more he found wearing contacts to be an inconvenience.

The interview had gone just as he expected it would. Him and Josie had gotten very good at pretending over the years. No one was the wiser, except perhaps maybe their children. They couldn’t help it either. The years had given them perception and wisdom. They weren’t little boys who thought their parents never fought. Him filing for divorce had only added to their skepticism. They were only mildly surprised when they broke the news about having another child. Teddy wasn’t overjoyed by them starting over, and the big age gap that would be between him, his brother, and their little sibling, was less than ideal. Blake had silently agreed with him. He was much too old to be having another child. Even Silas was thirteen now.

Jackson had been worried that they were only staying together because of the baby, something that Josie had quickly dismissed. She refused to believe that they were only together for this child. She had just come off a low with her father’s passing, and him only staying with her because of that, and now because of the baby, was a shot to her pride that he was sure his wife couldn’t take.

Blake had not made his plans known, but seeing as how they had not changed, he didn’t think that it would be any surprise when they came out. It would still be hell trying to get a divorce out of a pregnant Josie, but he didn’t intend for their marriage to last after the baby was born. To him, it made no difference waiting before or after to end things. It wasn’t as if she would go without. She was entitled to half of what was his.

But until then, he’d bide his time. Gwen had still not tried to reach out. It had been five months. He would wait. For now, he would do this interview, take these pictures, and go see his son for lunch. For now, he’d dream of that island and that door opening to reveal what he truly wanted out of life.

He only needed to be patient.
She chalked the slip up to her being half awake. It was, after all, four in the morning, and if she had her wits about her at that early, she would have read the caller I.D. She would have seen his name and promptly avoided the call. But she didn’t have her wits about her, and that deep voice had flooded her tired senses and startled her well and truly awake.

For a moment, she didn’t say anything. As if she could pretend like she hadn’t answered the phone at all, but her shallow breathing gave her away, if not for the loud thud of her beating heart, and Blake tried again, calling her name so quietly as if he was trying to avoid waking someone up. Perhaps, Josie, or more likely, the baby.

The thought would have sent her into action right away, but he did something that always kept her hanging off his every word. He appealed to her sense of grief.
“Please don’t hang up...I didn’t know--I can’t--there was no one else. Believe me, if there had been someone I could--I wouldn’t have chosen you.”

Somehow, she managed to understand him perfectly. If there had been someone else that he could turn to, he would have. He wouldn’t bother her like this. Exactly what “this” was...It had Gwen sitting up in bed, hearing the edge in his voice.

“What happened?” She asked, softly.

He sighed, and she could hear him shifting slightly, as if he had been lying down. She half expected him to never say what was on his mind, or what had provoked him to call her so late. The other times had been around normal people hours, and she had refused to acknowledge his efforts. She just couldn’t face him, yet. Not with Josie’s growing stomach or her growing resentment.

But then, as if God was tired of seeing her disappointed, Blake spoke.

“I can’t do this.” He said.

And the devil came crashing back in.

Those four words could have applied to anything in the world, but Gwen knew what he really meant. And it was too soon for her to forgive him. It was too soon for her to let go of her own anger in in exchange for his piece of mind. She’d be getting nothing at the end of that particular deal.

She shouldn’t have to comfort him, she thought. Not now. Not with this. She knew she wouldn’t be able to. His doubts about being a father at the age he was, in the place he was in his life and marriage, were not hers to dissuade or try to quell. And it was unfair of him to ask her to even try.

She ended the call, holding back sobs, but letting tears fall from her eyes. She was helpless to stop them.

Gwen curled in on her side and buried her face in the pillow. Every night, she’d dreamt of him. This night, she refused to allow her mind to imagine him so. He could not have her here. This was the only place she could try and be without him.

It was easier thought than done.

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“You’ll miss your flight if you peel those carrots any slower.”

Gwen looked up at her mother from where she was seated at the kitchen island. She was helping the older woman prepare dinner for her and her father. It wasn’t something she normally did, but ever since she moved back to California, Gwen had saw the necessity of spending some more time with her parents. They were definitely at that age where she knew they wouldn’t be around for much longer, and she knew she was lucky they were still here now so that she could help with little things like mowing the lawn or help prep a meal.

“Missing my flight won’t be that bad in comparison to what I’m flying to.”
“I thought you loved weddings?” Patti looked at her knowingly.

Gwen’s face mirrored hers. “I wasn’t prepared for another twenty year old something wedding so soon after Lani’s.”

“That was five years ago.” Her mother pointed out.

“Five years felt like it came and went.” Gwen defended. Look how much she had done and accomplished in that time.

“Must be nice to not feel the effects of the years as they come and go.” Her mother said, pointedly.

Gwen rolled her eyes when her mother wasn’t looking. “I felt them.” She replied, quietly, cryptically, too.

Patti looked at her daughter and shook her head. “You didn’t have to.” She said, just as vaguely.

Gwen’s eyes snapped to the older woman’s. “And what was I supposed to do?”

“Meet him halfway.”

She scoffed. “I can’t believe you still take his side even after everything he’s done.”

“I don’t take his side.”

“You defend him then.” She argued.

“I defend him because no one else does. I defend him because you push him away and it must be tiring chasing after someone who gives the impression that they do not want to be caught.”

Gwen gaped at her mother like a fish out of water. “I push him away? I got a job offer that I couldn’t turn down. That I didn’t want to turn down. I supported him when he wanted to move back to D.C. It was my turn.”

“I agree. But you kept him at a distance while you were there. And I know it’s because of that young man you were seeing.”

Gwen had the good sense not to comment on her little Italian affair and decided to defend her point further. “I didn’t decide to have another child, keeping me in a relationship I claimed to not want to be in.”

“Did you let him explain himself?” Her mother didn’t give her a chance to reply as she kept talking. “Did you even consider that you kept the existence of your children together from him for years, and the moment he knew about the little one, he told you right away? Or maybe, that he thought he had made a mistake, and was still under the impression that he could make it up to you if only you’d heard him out or gave him the chance. You haven’t exactly been perfect all these years, Gwen. You’re my daughter, and I love you, but I don’t hate that man like your father does. I believe it takes two people to hurt each other and love each other as you two have. He’s at fault for many things, yes. But you push him away. Even now, after the news, you have not tried to reach out to him and it seems like that’s all he ever does, nowadays. He hasn’t given up on you.”

Gwen’s jaw hardened as she spoke. “You think that changes everything but it doesn’t. It shouldn’t. It was a tragic thing that happened. And I feel for his wife. And as a woman, I can’t--As a mother--it would be wrong of me to feel anything but sympathy and grief. I can’t just have him now because it’s convenient, again. Come to think of it, time to be with one another has never been
convenient.”

“Until now.” Patti voiced, knowing she was right.

It irritated Gwen to no end.

“My conscious won’t let me.” She revealed, the hostility she felt rearing its ugly head.

Patti sighed and dropped the knife she was using to cut the onions and peppers. She turned to her daughter and gave her a look filled with so much pity and yearning that Gwen felt it all piercing underneath her skin like little knives.

“You try so hard to get that man to walk away from you. Have you ever stopped to consider how painful it’s going to be if you succeed? If he actually does walk away?”

“Mom—”

“Do you know how rare it is to find a man in this lifetime that would travel to the ends of worlds if that’s where you wanted to lead him? Do you know how precious it is to know someone who would willingly feed themselves your scraps because it’s what you showed them once upon a time ago and they didn’t flinch in the slightest at the idea of never having more because your lowest, your lesser, and your nothing was enough for them? I saw you both at Lani’s wedding. I see you now. I’m not stupid. You’ve been through too much to deny yourself this simple truth.”

Gwen closed her eyes as her mother said what she had been wanting to ever since her father divulged what he learned of her and Blake from that morning at the resort.

“Trust is hard for you. I know that. And I’m so sorry that I wasn’t there for those times where your trust and you’re faith deserted you, or hurt you, or kept you from going after him time and time again. I’m sorry that he didn’t take care of that trust and faith you gave to him when you first met. But please, stop punishing the man for something he did while he was still a boy. You ask why I defend him…” Her mother’s voice drifted but her eyes never wavered from her daughter. “Because how else is a boy going to grow up if he doesn’t feel like he has someone in his life who would notice if he never did?”

The words punched her right in the stomach and knocked the wind out of her.

“Gwen...Stop pushing him away. I know you think it’s the right thing to do. For you, for him, for his wife, even for the children. But you’re thinking as if life is either right or wrong, something completely fixed and never changing. What is right or wrong about two people who breathe in sync and never stopped from the moment they laid eyes on each other?”

Her breath hitched, and if she didn’t feel so compelled to let her mother say her peace, Gwen would have begged her to stop at that.

“So, stop giving him parts of you that you don’t want. Give him everything. Because you can be damn sure that he loved you when you gave him nothing and he’ll love you until there is eventually nothing left of you. You and Silas have a plane to catch and a wedding to attend. I expect when you get back that I’ll finally be able to sit down and talk warmly with the man that gave me my first grandbaby. I trust you to be happy, Gwen. And I have faith that you will be.”

Those last words had stayed with Gwen on the flight, until all she could think about were the past five years. As much as she did not want to give her mother’s musings the benefit of the doubt, she had to admit that her words held some merit. She was afraid to trust it, them, him. It seemed like every time they were on the cusp of coming together, life would throw some curveball at them. It
wasn’t like she wasn’t used to that, but it was just slowly confirming to her how little faith she had in everything truly working out.

And then the baby had been put between them and Gwen had not been able to move forward. She couldn’t leave it all up to trust. She had to protect herself from his excuses, his mistakes, and his need to be selfish when it came to his pain and his grief. She understood the circumstances had been less ideal for him to leave Josie, but Gwen started to feel that if he hadn’t done it by then, no matter what he was going through, that he never would.

That thought had sealed their fate for Gwen.

“Mom.”

Gwen’s attention snapped to Silas, who was sitting in the window seat, earphones placed firmly on top of his head.

The thirteen year old gestured to the aisle and Gwen saw that one of the stewards were patiently waiting for her order from the food cart. She didn’t feel hungry but her throat was a little parched. So, she ordered a water and bought Silas a bag of pretzels and a soda.

Once he had his junk food, her youngest turned back to the window and promptly ignored her for the rest of the flight. That’s how it had been for the past six months. Her youngest was clearly going through a phase, and talking to her, was indeed part of it. At first, she hadn’t thought too much about his change in behavior, not even when he’d decided to grow his hair out, dyed it black, and changed his entire wardrobe. He was a teen, he was supposed to do things like that. But then came the attitude, and not talking to her or Wyatt, and barely acknowledging anything around him if he didn’t have to. His grades hadn’t suffered, so she hadn’t pushed him too hard for the truth of this “new” S.J.

Somewhere along the way, perhaps while in Italy though, he had begun to look exactly like Blake. Almost to the point where she was looking at her former love everytime her gaze landed on her boy. Of course, Gwen thought he was the perfect mix between her and the former president. But Silas would smile exactly like Blake, contemplate things the same way, and even yell at her in the same voice Blake possessed. It had been the worst thing to happen to her. Where at first, she liked the thought of Silas becoming more like his father. Lani was so much of her own person now, and had grown out of her similarities with Blake, that having at least one of their children who was like him had been a comforting thought, once. Ever since she and Blake stopped talking, Silas being more like his father had seemed like some sort of punishment to her.

And the thought of this had Gwen thinking about her former lover and his thoughts on another one of his kids getting hitched so young.

Teddy was young. Only a year older than Lani had been when she decided to tether herself to Dicky for an eternity. But seeing as how Theodore had an incredible head on his shoulders, and the young man he was inviting into his life had an even brighter track record, she wasn’t too worried. In fact, she was happy to be apart of something so happy and warm feeling for once. It had been a long time since she found a reason to smile.

When they landed in New York, Teddy’s place of residence ever since he got accepted into Columbia for music, Gwen called Manó to tell him of their safe arrival. The twenty-two year old had also been a manhattan resident ever since he got a job in the city working as an art restorer in some fancy museum. It wasn’t the career anyone would have thought for him, but it was something of an unexpected pleasure that dropped into her son’s lap and he leapt at the chance to pursue the opportunity further.
There were several cars outside waiting at the arrivals section of the airport but Teddy’s dark blue Ford Mustang GT had stood out amongst the other black and grey automobiles. He had allowed Manó to drive the car while the blonde stayed with him and his fiance for the weekend.

Manó waved his mother and brother over and helped them with their bags after he pulled both into a bone crushing hug. Once in the car, Manó started firing questions at Silas about his new school and making the football team. Surprisingly, Silas didn’t hate his siblings like he seemed to hate his parents and answered each question with ease, albeit his tone was as dry as ever, something Manó picked up on right away.

Gwen looked out the window and pulled her jacket closer to her chest. It was New York, after all, and winter was upon them. Whoever told Teddy to have a February wedding should have been shot. She had lived in Hawaii for far too long.

The drive to the hotel was not long considering the traffic and the weather. When they arrived, Jackson helped them carry their luggage up to their floor after she checked them in. He was rather impatient to get down to the car so that he could get back to the bar where he and a couple of his work friends were having a karaoke night. She got a pity invite, seeing as how she would be spending the night in a strange hotel room, no matter how lavish it was, and being ignored by her son. Truthfully, Gwen just wanted to take a nap but it was too late in the evening, and she would never go to bed tonight if she did. So, Gwen popped an aspirin for her headache and took Silas downstairs to the little French restaurant next to the lobby. They ate dinner in silence, even though Gwen tried to get more than two words out of him. She was unsuccessful, per usual.

At the end, Gwen asked him if he wanted to do anything or go somewhere before it got too late. By the time she paid the check and they ventured outside to the main entrance, the sun was setting. Silas had taken a couple of pictures of the buildings and lights but otherwise wanted to go back upstairs and watch television. She gave him the spare room key and told him she’d be up in a minute.

Gwen didn’t want to go inside just yet. For some reason, her skin crawled, and her lungs felt like they would shrivel up if she stepped foot back inside the hotel without at least going for a walk and getting some fresh air in her system. New York air wasn’t exactly the cleanest, but it was cold. It would due.

She rounded the front of the building and made her way down the street, walking at a steady pace and looking behind her every so often to make sure that she wasn’t being followed. The great thing about New York was that there were so many people that lived in just one province and for the most part, were up at all times of the day.

Gwen allowed herself to let go of some of the tension that she had been feeling ever since her earlier conversation with her mother. She kept her heart open on that walk, something she stopped doing because it made her vulnerable, and kept her head down, focusing on not stepping on any cracks in the sidewalk, something that Silas had always done when he was a little boy.

She successfully avoided five before she ran into someone. Gwen cursed because she knew better than to do that crap at night, but also because running into New York people wherever was always a tricky thing, at least, that’s what she had heard. Manó had said that you never knew what kind of asshole you were going to get.

Gwen started apologizing immediately as she righted herself again, realizing at the last second that there were warm hands holding her arms, helping to keep her balance. She looked up and in to blue eyes, somewhat sunken in.
Her breath hitched. Blue eyes that seemed grey. In fact, everything about him had greyed since she last saw him. Had it really been five years? She didn’t count that weekend in Portland. She never would.

Blake’s face was a flicker of emotions but they changed too fast for her to catch anything of what the older man was feeling. As he removed his hands from her, choosing to stuff them back into his pockets instead, his head dipped slightly, and she saw that beautiful head of curly hair, that had not waned since he aged. The curls were thinner, yes, and greyer, but no less ruly.

For a moment, she did not say anything. Neither did he. His eyes seemed to want to look anywhere but at her. How did they keep meeting like this? Of all the places, a random street in New York, and here she was, face to face with the love of her life.

And they couldn’t even say a single word to each other because so much had already been spoken between them. She wished they could just start over. Where she didn’t know him and he didn’t have the faintest clue of who she was.

She said as much when she was fed up with the silence.

Blake’s head snapped up to meet her eyes, even though he still had to look down at her because of their height difference. She could see from the tortured expression on his face that he had taken what she said out of context. She quickly corrected his assumption.

“I didn’t mean it in that way. I meant--I wished we didn’t know each other because bumping into one another like this would be much simpler under different circumstances. Maybe we would know what to say to each other, then. Even make a joke about learning how to walk without running into strangers or tease each other for being so distracted in the first place.”

Him finally meeting her eyes had allowed her to see just how much he had changed. No longer was the man that had proposed to her on a whim because his heart still allowed itself to be dictated by feelings. No longer was the man that had tried to convince her to blow up her whole life by admitting an affair she fell victim to. No longer was the man that had left her on that scalding island and promised to come back. But most importantly, no longer was the man that had missed the plane. He startled her. He scared her. Because she did not recognize him, anymore.

“I was looking up at the sky like an idiot. I didn’t see you there.”

It took her a small moment to realize what he had just said, and when she understood that he was attempting to give her what she wanted, somewhere, somehow, to start over, she smiled a real smile in over five years and said, “I was looking down at the ground like an idiot, so I’m afraid I’m not much better.”

Meet him somewhere in the middle.

He tilted his head as his eyes travelled the length of her. But it wasn’t a leer, it didn’t make her uncomfortable, it didn’t feel as if he was eyeing her out of lust or desire or nostalgia. He was simply trying to figure it out, it felt like. Like it was new to him, too.

“I’d say you were a thousand times better.” He finally spoke again, his voice barely a low timber.

His words had squeezed her heart. She looked down at their feet. He was wearing tan, leather, boots and dark washed jeans. His jacket was big and black and somehow it was the most endearing thing she had ever seen on someone who was easily ten feet tall.

“What were you looking at?” She asked him, head moving back to peek up at the stars.
“The moon.” He said, simply. “What were you doing looking at the ground?”

“She cut off, realizing she was ruining the amenity of the moment. They were strangers right now. She tried again. “My son...I used to watch my son try and avoid all the cracks and lines when he was younger.” She looked away, suddenly embarrassed. “I don’t know--it’s stupid.”

His dimples showed when he smiled. “It’s serious stuff. With your mom’s back on the line and all.”

Gwen laughed, covering her face with her hands. Damn him. She wiped at the skin under her eyes and looked up at him. “You’re funny. That was a good one.”

He gave a little shrug. Gwen noticed the way he stared, and the weight he put behind his gaze. “Where were you going?”

She thought for a moment. “Nowhere. I just wanted to be somewhere.” She stated truthfully. “Where were you going?” She parroted.

“To see my son.” He answered. “He’s staying at the Tipton.”

She had a feeling that she didn’t need to tell him that she was staying there, too. He already knew.

“You wouldn’t want to keep him waiting, then.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” He regarded her for a moment before he let the pretense drop. “Do you want me to walk with you back to the hotel?”

She sighed. “That’s okay.”

“You sure?” Blake asked. “I don’t mind. I mean, I know we just met and you have no reason to believe that I’m not a serial killer, or worse, a Republican. But if you want--”

She laughed, loudly, cutting him off. Just when she thought he would be bringing them back to reality, he surprised her with this...this knowing and not revealing. It was like a secret. To be what they weren’t and yet stay who they are, all in the same moment.

He grinned, “Let me walk you back.”

“You really don’t have to do that.”

He scratched the corner of his eyebrow. “Okay. Let me put it this way, Gwen.” The use of her name had shattered the illusion but she let him continue. “I could just say that I know I don’t have to but that I want to because my mom would kill me if I didn’t make sure a woman walking by herself this late at night was safe getting back to her room but I don’t want to say that. Because that’s the every girl speech. And you are not like every girl. You never will be, at least not to me. The truth is...I was looking up at the stars and I made a wish for something to make this night better and I ran into you.” She looked away as her face blushed. “And you want to pretend we’re other people and I don’t mind to do so as long as I can keep making you smile like that. So, if you could stop being difficult and let me fetch a taxi for you or walk with you or even carry you--”

Gwen couldn’t help the choked up laugh that came out of her. “--I would really appreciate it.”

Gwen shook her head. She couldn’t believe what she just heard. She couldn’t believe that it was the most Blake thing he had ever said, and yet, it sounded nothing like him.

“Are you really not a republican?” She teased.
“Oh, no I am. But I didn’t vote for Bush.” He replied, knowing it would tickle her so. The fact that he was a republican, and ran as a republican candidate for the presidency had somehow tickled her even further.

“Did you vote for Shelton?” She asked.

“The guy’s an asshole.” He said, much to her amusement. Her laughter bubbled to the surface once again.

“He wasn’t that bad.”

Blake shook his head. “I know for a fact that he was notorious for hurting the one woman he loved most in the world.”

Her laughter had come to an abrupt stop and she looked at him so fiercely that she was sure if he had been the same man from five years ago, he would have coward back. This man in front of her, this Blake, had simply met her fire with cold, cold, ice.

“I knew him to be a bastard. Selfish, and naive, and even undeserving.” He started, again. “But getting to know him these past couple of years, I see that he’s tired. I see that he’s older, and much more used to things being grey rather than bright with color. I think he knows how much he deserves what he got, good and bad. I think he’s sorry--I know he’s sorry. And I think the one thing he wants, even more than the woman standing before me right now, is that same woman’s forgiveness. I think he thinks that if he got that, if she afforded him only that, then he could be okay with pretending for just a little bit longer. He thinks he’ll finally walk away if you give him that. I think he’s right.”

It was involuntary, her forgiveness. He had it from the moment she saw how dull his eyes had become with the weight of her silence lurking in them. Really, she had forgiven him as soon as the news reel revealed how his wife had suffered a stillbirth in the seventh month of her pregnancy. It had been awful, her secret and private forgiveness. Because she did empathize with the woman. It was part of the reason she had refrained from seeking him out after. It would have been wrong.

But what did her mother say? Right and wrong didn’t apply to life. Breathing in sync with him all these years could not be defined by simple means. It transcended all of that and more.

She should have been happy, overjoyed, to see the understanding flash across his face. She had forgiven him. He had gotten his wish. It was plain as day, written across his face. You must really hate me for falling in love with you. But since I can’t fall out of love, I can at least fall out of your life, for good this time. You’d like that, right?

He could do the one thing she had been telling him, fighting with him, to do ever since they reappeared in each other’s lives all those years ago.

He could finally let her go.

So, why did it feel like death was passing through her, then? Why did she feel despair instead of hope at the prospect of finally managing to push him away indefinitely? He was letting her go. It’s what she wanted. Right? Right?

You try so hard to get that man to walk away from you. Have you ever stopped to consider how painful it’s going to be if you succeed? If he actually does walk away?
I don't know how many times shit can hit the fan in this story but I promise this time, Gwen and Blake stick by each other through it. Enjoy some fuzzies, and this is what Gwen and Blake are both wearing to the wedding. God they're a gorgeous couple. xo
Gwen sipped her tea and drew a short line from the figure’s head to the middle of her back. In her mind, she had an idea for a lace veil, one that had hidden details in the seams. Small flowers and leaves, etc. Slowly, over the past few months, she had been designing a dress that she intended to make but never intended to sell. It was a personal project. She had no idea where the inspiration had come from but she didn’t want it to stop.

The mother of three was sitting in the hotel lobby, biding her time until Silas was finished getting ready. They were going to Teddy’s orchestra concert. The twenty-one year old had been in the Columbia University Orchestra ever since he was a freshman. Considering this was his last year and his last concert of the season, and that it fell on the day before his wedding, he had invited some of his wedding guests. He was only allowed fifteen tickets. After inviting his fiance and soon to be inlaws, parents, and Jackson, that left Bradley and Stephanie, Manó, two friends from school, Charlie and his husband, and Silas and her. Gwen had come to find out when they arrived at the hall.

The first person she saw that she knew was Jackson. Besides his lighter hair, he had not changed a bit over the years. He was standing outside with the rest of the admittees in the hallway that wrapped around the building. The doors wouldn’t be open for seating until the clock hit eight, precisely. Outside, it was a quiet evening, but inside, there was a swarm of bodies and noise.
When she caught Blake’s oldest son’s gaze, a surprised smile transformed over his handsome face. He waved them over and she instructed Silas to stay close to her as they wormed their way through the massive crowd. Once she was in earshot, Jackson yelled how nice it was to see her and pulled her into a warm hug.

“You’re as tall as your father.” Gwen commented, looking up at the younger man.

He had the decency to flush. “Someone had to get his height.” He said, his voice deep and smooth. Silas wasn’t the only child of Blake’s to take after him so clearly.

Jackson shook hands with Silas and thanked them for coming on his little brother’s behalf. He then turned to the man standing next to him and introduced them to Teddy’s fiance.

Gwen did not know what she was expecting, but a tall twenty-three year old with dark red hair and warm brown eyes was not it. It had come to her attention lately that she had been surrounded by very handsome men all of her life and would continue to be from the looks of it.

“It’s very nice to meet you.” The red head--Will--she corrected, greeted with a soft voice.

Gwen smiled. “Likewise. I’m so happy to meet you before the wedding. I was afraid I wouldn’t.”

“Thank God for this concert, then. Teddy was thrilled when they announced it would be this Saturday.” Will answered.

“Manó told me he was practicing at all hours of the day yesterday. Which makes me extremely happy that I didn’t take his offer to stay with him and Will for the weekend. The hotel is much quieter.”

The mention of the Tipton brought her thoughts to Blake, but she quelled them down. He would be there soon enough. And so would Josie.

The four of them waited out in the lobby together and fell into an easy conversation about New York and Washington, alike. Unlike his brother, Jackson chose to remain in D.C. From what he was telling her, being close to his father had helped his career significantly.

Jackson had managed to make a name for himself in photography. He had photographed some very famous people, from singers and celebrities such as Prince and George Clooney, to politicians and even the current President himself. When he wasn’t pulling jobs, he was taking pictures for his upcoming exhibits. Washington had been his home. It was where his studio was, and where most of his clientele sought him out. He had done well for himself, and was a long way away from the amateur pictures he and Lani had taken and developed when they were merely kids.

Will was just in the middle of telling her and Jackson about his plans to travel to third world countries after he finished his residency when Jackson spotted Charlie and his husband. In much the same way that he waved them over, Charlie and Marcus where more and the same. The former Chief of Staff was thrilled to see Jackson as he pulled him into a fatherly embrace.

Gwen stood back and allowed the round of hugs and good natured greetings to make their way over to her. When Charlie saw her at last, he gaped for a second before schooling his features once more. He seemed surprised to see her, and that let Gwen know that Blake didn’t share much with the man like he had with Bradley.

Gwen shook his and Marcus’s hand before introducing Silas to the couple. Silas was his usual guarded self and only gave one worded answers when anyone tried to pull him into a conversation. Not long after he had answered another question about school with a simple and quiet, “sure,” had
Brad and his wife joined the growing group.

By that time, the doors had opened, and they wasted no time getting to their seats. Will opted to stay out in the hallway until his parents arrived and Jackson stayed with him to do the same with his parents. It made Gwen think about the state of things. Would Blake and Josie arrive together? Come to think of it, she didn’t know where the couple stood with one another. She had not seen anything other than the miscarriage in the news. Nothing about a separation or even a divorce.

What did it matter, now? You wanted him to walk away and he was doing that, she thought to herself as she sat down in the row reserved for them. When she looked around, she saw many men in suits standing near their section. She figured that was Blake’s influence and title. He was the second-highest-ranking official of the United States Senate, after all. Technically, he was third in the line of succession to the presidency. Even though he served two terms already, there had never been someone in a position this unique, where for the first time, if anything happened and Blake was sworn into office again, it wouldn’t be against the law for him to serve as acting president. Of course, that would take too many deaths and a complete belief in the faith of things to work out in his favor. It would never happen and as far as Gwen knew, Blake never wanted to put on the presidential pin ever again.

She sat on the end, between Silas and an empty chair that was right next to the isle. She expected Manó to sit there. She let the others catch up and talk while she looked at the stage and the many chairs that adorned it. She had never been to an orchestra concert before. She didn’t exactly know what to expect, but she was excited to find out.

Silas leaned his head on her shoulder, and surprised, Gwen tensed for half a second before she smiled into his hair as she laid a kiss on his head.

“You okay?” She murmured to her youngest.

He nodded, but didn’t say a word. She placed another kiss on his head right as Will and his parents ventured down the aisle and over to them. Gwen slightly gestured for Silas to move his feet as they squeezed past them. Gwen nodded her hellos to the couple, who bore a striking resemblance to their son. Red hair, although theirs was greying rapidly, same brown eyes, and a significant height. Turning around to see if she could find Jackson, Gwen saw a glimpse of the woman that had spent the better part of a decade and more, with the man in her dreams. Gwen turned back around so quickly. She didn’t want Josie to catch her staring first. She would not be the one to greet her first. Call her a coward, but she wouldn’t. In some ways, she still felt like the mistress.

As she resolutely stared ahead of her, the stage darkened, and the lights focused on the center where the chairs were placed. The orchestra members filed out from the side wings quietly, and the voices in the theater died down. The concert was about to start.

Movement to her left had her looking up as Jackson excused him and his mother to get to their seats. Gwen caught Josie’s eyes for a fraction of a second before thoughts of her oldest son leapt into her mind.

“Do you know where Manó is?” She asked Jackson.

He bent down to whisper to her as Josie went on without him. Gwen almost let out a sigh of relief. “He just got here. Went to the bathroom real quick.”

She nodded and didn’t hold up the boy any longer as he followed the path his mother took to his chair.
After five minutes had gone past, a brush of a hand on her shoulder almost startled her. She looked up to see Manó crouching but not sitting in the seat she had saved him.

“I’m gonna go sit with Jack. That okay with you?” He asked, gesturing to the empty seat on the end where Jackson was seated, looking up at the stage as the conductor started waving his baton. The music started and Gwen nodded, not wanting him to block anyone’s view.

She didn’t want to feel too disappointed and a glance over to Josie’s end of the row had her skin tightening over her bones. The only other seat left was next to her, and the only other person not there yet was Blake.

Where was he? Why was he so late? Why hadn’t he arrived with Josie?

Silas shifted next to her. His head was no longer on her shoulder but he had moved closer to her, to the point where he wasn’t even touching Bradley’s arm where the older man sat next to him.

Gwen shut her mind off as the music began to pick up. The moment she spotted Teddy, sitting in the second row near the center, playing his violin, Gwen’s heart almost grew three sizes. For some reason, when looking at Teddy, she saw Silas in a couple of years. Both boys had similar facial features in her opinion. Both had familiar mannerisms and interests. To see him now, in his element, playing for a prestigious crowd such as this one, gave Gwen feelings of pride and love that she wasn’t sure she was allowed to feel. This wasn’t her son, after all. But he was Blake’s son. And Blake’s children would always feel like her own.

It was a slight movement in the air around her that startled Gwen. She didn’t need to look very far as a figure slid into the seat next to her, quiet and gentle. To her left, Blake settled more comfortable by her side. His eyes were fixated on the stage, scanning and searching until they landed on Teddy. Even then, his eyes did not look away.

Gwen stared at his profile, not knowing how to stop her eyes from roaming over his honeyed skin. He was wearing a dark grey shirt that was open at the top of his chest and Gwen saw the greying hair there too. Going back to his face, his eyes, there hues matched the very seats they were sitting in. Gwen watched him. She was sure he could feel her eyes but his attention was so wrapped into his son’s playing. She saw that smile he reserved for his kids, so gentle, understated.

*How is it that my love for this man travelled from my heart to my blood?*

Gwen felt it everywhere in her body in that moment. When the feeling got to be too much, she tore her eyes away from him and looked back to the stage. It was several moments later before she would feel the heat of his skin on hers. Gwen looked down and saw his hand creep closer to hers, until the backs of his fingers where kissing hers in a barely there touch.

Her gaze lifted to his face. He wasn’t looking at her, focus still on his son. Gwen looked back down to their hands. In a moment of courage, she grabbed ahold of his pinky only and held onto the digit tightly with two of her own fingers. His squeeze in return had her heart fluttering in response.

They sat there the whole concert, holding onto each other just barely. It was like a metaphor for their relationship. Not quite. Almost. They only parted to clap along with the audience. But their hands found each other every time, discreetly, and held on. To Gwen, it felt like she was young again. This was hesitant. This was soft and gentle and beautiful. This wouldn’t last, but the fact that it was happening had been enough for her.

Still, she thought all the while, was he going to walk away from her? Would he stay if she just told
him that she wanted him to? Why was she making things so difficult? She could have him. Now was the time. But what were he and Josie now? Why wasn’t he divorced? Why was he late tonight? Why was he holding her hand?

The sounds of clapping erupted around her. The audience jumped to their feet around her and as Silas stood up and clapped, even whistling a couple of times, Gwen realized that the concert had come to a natural end, and so would this private moment between her and Blake. As if right on cue, Blake let go of her and stood, as well.

It took Gwen a moment to regain her barings, and when she finally did, she got to her feet and joined in along with the rest of them. The orchestra took their respective bows along with the conductor, and filed one by one off of the stage. The lights came back on, and the sounds of chatter filled the room once again.

Gwen looked to Blake but the man was gliding out into the aisle where she lost him in the crowd as everyone made their way back to the hall. Holding onto Silas so she wouldn’t lose him, they found themselves back out into the lobby. She scanned the masses for Manó or anyone from their group but her son had slid up behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

He breathed a hello into her shoulder and let her turn around to hug him properly.

“We’re going to the after party if you guys want to come.” He told her, squeezing her tightly.

Gwen pulled away, frowning. “After party?” She asked.

“It’s not really a party.” He explained. “I guess the university hosts an after event. Drinks, music, food. The families are invited just to say thanks for supporting. Most of the musicians have parents and families who donate to the school.”

“Ah. Makes sense. Is everyone going?” Gwen asked, Blake on her mind.

“Will’s parents have to get back home and Charlie and his husband are dipping out for an extremely late matinee. But other than that, everyone else is going.”

Gwen turned to Silas. “Do you want to go?”

He shrugged. Gwen didn’t see any contempt on his face but then again, a party where he could sneak a couple of sips of beer sounded like a great night for her youngest. She resisted the temptation to roll her eyes and said, “Okay. But we can’t stay too late. I don’t want to be tired at the wedding tomorrow.”

“Alright, awesome!” Manó exclaimed.

Before she could ask where the event was and look and see how much money she had for a cab, the previously separated group had suddenly joined together, minus Blake and Teddy, and started discussing rides. From the judge of things, there was no room for her or Silas. Will was going to drive Teddy, Jackson, Manó and one of Teddy’s friends, while Bradley extended a ride to Teddy’s other friend, Josie and Blake, and of course, his wife. That left her and Silas. Gwen had the decency to flush when the rest of the group had realized who they had left out.

Gwen caught Josie’s gaze and the woman had a small smile of satisfaction at the turn of events. Gwen was about to tell them that she could procure a cab when Teddy’s sudden arrival had the group swarming to congratulate and praise him. Gwen barely got a chance to hug him when the boy saw his father parting through the crowd, wondering where he had gone off to, Gwen turned to regard the man too when she saw the large bouquet of flowers he was holding. It was as large as
him, and obscured his face slightly as he looked from behind the petals to see where he was going.

Blake was flanked by his security but that didn’t deter the people who noticed the president pro tem and wanted to get a closer look at the man and his family. Teddy laughed when his father set the flowers down at his feet, and embraced him fiercely.

“You’re an idiot. These are never going to fit in the car.” Teddy said, pulling back.

Blake chuckled. “We’ll put them in the service car.”

Teddy slung an arm around his father and turned to the group. “Well, let’s go get drunk, family.”

The twenty-one year old grinned from handsome ear to ear and Gwen couldn’t help but smile at his infectious energy.

“My mom and brother need a ride. So I’ll catch a cab with them.” Manó said, bringing up the previous forgotten issue.

Gwen was about to disagree and tell him that he didn’t need to when Blake spoke first.

“They’ll ride with me.”

Four words should have not provoked the group into silence. And from what Gwen could tell, only about less than half of the members really knew the weight behind his words.

To Manó, Will, Jackson, Teddy and his friends, and Silas, the words were harmless. They were a solution to the problem at hand. But to Brad, his wife, and Josie, the offer was similar to a gunshot going up into the air.

“It’s really fine. I’ve never been in a cab before and I know S.J. is looking forward to it.” Gwen said, trying to appear innocent and like she wasn’t aware of how much she’d fucked things up in the past regarding where this man was concerned.

“I already have the car for the night.” He reminded everyone, but his eyes had been on Teddy. “I’m really proud of you. You played better than anyone up there.”

And just like that, the discussion had been dismissed so naturally. It was decided. She and Silas would be riding with Blake.

Teddy blushed under his father’s praise. Changing the subject from him, he pushed everyone out the door, holding onto his dad until he had to let go to pile into the boy-infested car. As everyone parted ways, Blake laid a small hand on her back and led her to the town car waiting at the front. He opened the door for Silas and then helped her climb in before joining them himself.

The car was spacious and had a double row of seats. Silas and Gwen sat across from Blake as he directed the driver to the address of the party. They settled into a somewhat awkward silence as Blake glanced out the window, she glanced at Blake, and Silas glanced at both of them.

Finally, he looked over to her as they turned down a busy street. His eyes weren’t surprised to see her staring at him. And for a brief moment, she saw how different he actually was from the man that she had known for the majority of her life.

“Did you have a good time?” He asked in a soft voice.

She nodded. “I didn’t know he played that well.”
Blake smiled proudly. “He’s alright. He has years to go before he can safely say that he’s one of the greatest of all times.”

“And you think he will be?” Silas asked, uncharastically joining into the conversation willingly.

Blake hadn’t startled at his son’s voice. “I do. I think all my kids will be the greatest at something eventually. Your sister is a well known director of some of the best documentaries I’ve ever seen. Jackson shoots the best of the best in any given industry and Teddy just got offered to join the London Symphony Orchestra, the fourth greatest in the world.”

For a moment, Gwen thought that Blake’s slip up would have gone unnoticed by Silas, but as she suspected, S.J. was too smart for his own good.

“What does my sister have to do with you?” He asked.

To his credit, Blake didn’t flinch at the question or the realization that he had just grouped Lani into “his kids.”

“I’ve known Lani since she was a little girl. Your siblings have been over to my house, playing with my kids ever since they were children themselves. I guess I think of them as my own from time to time.” Blake saved himself. “I’m incredibly proud of Manó, as well. I never got to tell you.” He turned to her and smiled.

Her eyes danced. But as her heart was still recovering from the mini heart attack that the two of them almost gave her, that was all Gwen could manage in the moment.

“I want to be in government some day.” Silas voiced, sounding almost abashed.

The comment startled even her. But she was more intuitive than Blake was. It wasn’t a random comment. Silas didn’t do random, nor did he speak just to hear himself talking. He didn’t like anyone, and he was moody and mean most of the time. He revealed to Blake his aspirations--his dreams--because in some strange way, deep down, unbeknownst to the both of them, he wanted Blake to be just as proud of him as he was of his own children and by definition, Silas’s siblings.

Gwen’s heart did a little flip. Like she told Blake long ago, her kids had a way of gravitating toward him. This was just the first of many for them.

“Really? Still?” Blake asked him. Silas gave him a look of confusion. “When you were eight, I don’t know if you remember, but you told me you wanted to be president one day.”

It took Silas a moment to rattle his brain but he looked up at Blake surprised when the memory must have come back to him. “I remember. Vaguely. You remember that?”

“I told you I’d vote for you. That hasn’t changed.”

The comment sent her youngest into a silence that was both gratifying and terrifying.

“You involved in any groups at school?” Blake asked him.

Silas nodded, finding his voice again. “Football, chess, and lacrosse.”

Blake’s eyebrows rose. “I’d give anything to see you play out on the field.”

“Why?”

“Because football is my favorite sport and you look like you’d play a hell of a game.”
Gwen released the breath she wasn’t aware she was holding in. When she caught Blake’s eyes, he gave her an amused look. The bastard was doing it on purpose. But from the way Silas’s eyes lit up at the compliment, Gwen couldn’t be too mad at him. This was the most her son had reacted to anything in months.

“We live too far away for that to ever happen.”

“California, right?”

Gwen hadn’t known that he knew they moved. Silas nodded and Blake shrugged. “If you want me to come to a game then I’ll make it out there.”

S.J.’s face scrunched. “I still don’t see how me possibly being good at a game you love would make you really want to travel all the way to see me. You don’t even know me.”

“Going to see you play would allow me to get to know you.”

“But how?”

“Come on. You’re smart. People bond over a love of mutual things all the time.”

“But what would you get out of being friends with a thirteen year old kid?”

Blake spared her a look that said, how did we make this kid, together? He’s too good. She sent him one back that said, I know. Isn’t he wonderful?

“You drive a hard bargain for friendship. All these questions you’re firing my way.”

Silas shrugged. “People can be disappointing.”

Blake laughed. “Yes they can.”

That seemed to be the end of their little interaction, and Gwen was almost grateful because she hadn’t realized she was on the edge of her seat, waiting for the other shoe to drop. The closeness it brought to Blake had went unnoticed too until he leaned forward and laid a hand on her knee. She tensed but as she stared into his eyes, her body relaxed almost immediately.

“How are you?” He asked, abruptly.

She did not know what to say in reply. “I’m good. I’m--we’re settling into the new house, finally.”

“You like it there?”

And what he really was asking was, why had she moved in the first place?

“I do. I’m closer to my mom and dad and I opened my own shop. More clientele in California for a wedding dress designer.”

His hand was burning her skin. Even through the fabric of her dress, she could feel the heat.

“You’re still in D.C.” She commented.

“Can’t move until I’m out of the Senate.”

She told herself not to deflate. “How’s Josie?”
Gwen also told herself not to ask about his wife but the words just fell out as if they had a mind of their own. Blake’s face hadn’t changed when he responded.

“I don’t know.” He told her truthfully. “We only see each other when it’s something to do with the kids.”

Gwen tried and failed not to get her hopes up. “Are you--I mean, I never saw--”

Blake spared a glance at Silas and then removed his hand from her leg and leaned back into his seat. “Yes. They’re sealed.”

The knowledge that he was divorced officially, that the reason she had not known was because the documents were sealed, had taken a weight off of Gwen’s body. She felt lighter. The glue in her heart had all but disappeared, as if it had never been broken.

“Blake…”

He stiffened and looked out the window as the car slowed to a stop. Forgetting herself, forgetting that Silas was privy to this moment and looking between them with a curious expression on his face, forgetting that he was walking away from her and letting her go all in the same breath, Gwen squeezed his hand so hard when he helped her out of the car.

They were the last to arrive, and when they walked into the party, a couple of people at the entrance stared at them. In her head, she could see what they saw, or rather, what it looked like but couldn’t be possible. Blake, a beautiful woman they had definitely seen before but couldn’t quite place, and a boy that looked strangely like a handsome combination of them both. She wanted to scream because it was true. All of it was true.

Blake found the rest of their group at a circle booth in the corner of the large ballroom and greeted his friends properly this time. Bradley shoved him down in the seat next to him, which left Gwen and Silas to slide in next to one of Teddy’s friends.

Looking around the table, almost everyone had a drink and was engaged in some sort of conversation. When her gaze landed on Josie, the former first lady was talking to Stephanie. A couple of times, the women would look over at her as they were chatting quietly and each time it would irritate Gwen. She knew how much her actions in the past had hurt Josie, but she had stayed away for five years. It was not her fault that the woman’s marriage had officially ended, or that she lost her baby, or that her children wanted Gwen around for some inexplicable reason for almost every important event in their life.

She didn’t deserve to be an outcast here tonight. And when the looks got to be too much, she told Silas she was going to the bar to get a drink. He asked her to get him a beer and this time she made sure he saw her eye roll. Even though she came from an italian-american family where wine was served at the dinner table from a young age, she did not condone her son’s newfound interest in alcohol. Especially, not at thirteen.

The bartender was a pleasant woman in her twenties who made the best margaritas that Gwen had ever tasted. She didn’t even feel the least bit guilty as she sat at the bar and drank it. Silas would be fine with some water or whatever soda he ordered. She couldn’t go back to the table, not with Josie there.

Chancing a glance back, she saw Blake laughing at something Brad had said. He still looked grey and tired and so very unlike himself, but it would just take her some time to wrap her head around the fact that this was the new Blake. He was not young anymore. He was not a boy any longer.
Really, he was the man she had wanted decades ago.

The thought had been a simple observation but the more she delved deeper into the weight of them, she knew. This was the man she wanted. She did not want him to let her go. She did not want him to walk away from her. She might have thought it would be the best thing for every one but she was wrong. She did not want to leave this city in two days without him swearing to be a part of her life.

And just like that, she was pining after a man that was still emotionally, physically, and mentally, unavailable. He said it himself; he couldn’t move until his job was up and they elected someone else. Not to mention the finality of their relationship surfacing every so often in his mind. She had forgiven him, and that was the only thing he would acknowledge in his life as the one factor that would allow him to move on. He had already made his mind up. To suck him back in and give him hope would be too cruel. But it wasn’t false hope, she tried to justify. She meant it this time.

Gwen shook her head and drank the last of the slush out of her tumbler. How long had she been over here? Long enough for half of her table to have dispersed. A look at the middle of the room, where a makeshift dance floor had been started, she saw Teddy and Will dancing with his friends. Jackson and Brad were still at the table, eating some kind of chocolate cake. Manó was sneaking Silas a taste of some of the drinks as they sat at a free table to the left of the room, almost obscured in the corner.

Gwen laughed at the sight and shook her head.

“This seat taken?”

She almost jumped at the sound of his voice. She turned to face Blake, who was holding a beer in his good hand. She had almost forgotten that he got shot.

“You shouldn’t be over here.” She said, getting straight to the point.

He looked taken aback, but then his face mellowed out and he nodded. Seems like she wasn’t the only one forgetting that he was supposed to be leaving her alone.

“Not in front of your wife.” She paused. “Ex-wife.”

Understanding dawned on Blake. He sat down anyway. “If it helps, she gives me the same looks.”

She snorted. “No. It doesn't help.”

He grinned. “I can’t do anything about it. She’ll let it go one day when she meets another man. She won’t ever thank me but she’ll appreciate my bastardness in the privacy of her own heart.”

Gwen agreed. “Wyatt did.”

Blake took a sip of his beer. “How is he?”

“Good. Very good. Almost too good. I envy him.”

“Some days...I think I do too.” He responded.

Gwen’s lips curled. “You’re so different.”

Blake stared at her for a moment before saying, “And you haven’t changed one bit.”

She frowned. “I don’t think that’s a good thing.”
“You weren’t the one who needed to change.” He said, and left it at that.

Somehow, Gwen didn’t believe him. They were both supposed to grow. It would never work if she hadn’t.

“God, look at that.” He said, suddenly, gesturing to the dance floor.

Teddy and Will were swinging each other around as a pop song blasted through the speakers. Gwen grinned.

“I never thought in a million years that you, Blake Shelton, would have a gay son. I’m almost jealous.”

He laughed, loud, and full-bellied. “Neither did I.” He said, once he calmed down. “It still doesn’t sit right with me. Just how I grew up and everything. The day he came home with painted fingernails I almost fainted.”

She giggled.

“But he’s Teddy. He’s my son. Will makes him happy. And as Josie pointed out, we already lost a child. Why would I want to lose another one for my ignorance?”

The mention of his loss had thrown her off kilter and she struggled with a reply. “About that...I always meant to at least tell you how sorry--”

“Please, don’t apologize.” He cut her off.

She tried again, “I meant...It was a terrible thing to read about. I couldn’t imagine living through it.”

He downed his beer. When he didn’t say anything, Gwen grabbed his hand and made him look into her eyes.

“No matter how angry I was at you, that little baby deserved to have a life. She deserved you as a father. And I am sorry that I didn’t reach out to you in a time like that. I regret it.”

Stunned, Blake took his hand back gently and sighed. Where once, he would tug at his ear, this time, he didn’t. How much he had changed.

“It would have been one more child to disappoint.” His words had been blunt and raw. “It was always a risk. Josie was too old. In the end, the baby didn’t have a chance. I was almost relieved when I got the call. Not because I didn’t want another kid or because it came between me and you. But because if Josie tried to save the baby, the baby would have most likely killed her and died anyway. I knew that when it came down to making a decision, Josie was too far gone to see how much it would impact her life. She just wanted to hold onto me and what we had. That wasn’t the way. And even though it killed me to bury my daughter before she could even take her first breath...it was small in comparison to saving Josie’s life. And afterwards, it was what she needed to divorce me. It was what I needed. And that might be horrible to hear and horrible of me to say but it’s the truth. So don’t apologize for not reaching out. To be honest, I didn’t deserve your kindness. And you’re here now.”

He wasn’t holding onto her, so she couldn’t squeeze the emotions she was feeling into his skin but he was staring into her dark brown eyes, and she was sure she was projecting as much as she could into them.
In that moment, with all that had been laid out before them, she wanted to tell him how much she wanted him to change his mind. How much she wanted to tell him to not give up. The moment was snatched away by Teddy pulling his father off the chair and leading him out onto the dance floor. For a moment, he looked scared, as if they were going to make him dance. But Teddy just wanted to introduce him to a man that Gwen didn’t know and most likely never would.

Gwen sighed deeply and turned back to the bartender. She ordered a shot this time--two--and put her face into her hands.

She would try again tomorrow. And the day after that if she must.

=Gwen had never been to a wedding where the nuptials had been private. But seeing as how Blake was a prominent figure in the republican party, having a gay son was not a popular character trait to these people. But what suited Teddy and Will would have to suit her as well. She was not their mother, and was only a guest. Her job was to show up, bring a gift, and celebrate their love. Which was exactly what she did.

The reception was being held in a large mansion estate off of Long Island. It reminded her of europe in a way, with its rolling hills, and beautifully manicured gardens. Of course, Teddy was a Shelton. She shouldn’t have been surprised at the amount of money that was thrown at his wedding. And despite the boy’s preferences, there had been a flood of old, white, rich men and their wives, surely republicans and democrats alike, because Blake had the uncanny ability to make everyone his friend, right there on the mansion’s doorsteps, shaking hands with the grooms’ parents one by one.

Come to think of it, the more Gwen looked around, the more she saw how many varied guests had been in attendance. There had been way too many invited, but they seemed like they came from all walks of life, and that had been the only redeeming quality about the suddenly stuffy air.

As she and her son waited their turn, a loud voice calling her mom had startled Gwen into turning around. She saw Lani running up to her in heels and a beautiful lavender dress. She crashed into her mother with a force of a train but Gwen didn’t mind. She hadn’t seen her daughter in months. The young woman was living in Paris, filming a documentary on sex trafficking. They spoke once every two weeks because of Lani’s earnest work in wanting to live the lives she had sworn to film and expose to the world. That meant she wasn’t always sleeping in a soft bed, waiting around to call her mother.

“You never texted me when you guys landed.” Gwen chided slightly.

“We missed our flight and got on the next one, thankfully. By the time we got here, we had an hour to get ready and headed straight here.” She said, panting slightly. She pulled Silas into a bone crushing hug, which the thirteen year old excepted reluctantly. By the time Dicky caught up to them, he was panting heavily.

“God, I don’t know how you women run so fast in heels.” He said, pulling Gwen into a kiss.

She smiled and smudged the lip gloss from off his cheek with a wet thumb.

“We didn’t miss anything did we?” Lani asked, looking at the long line to the entrance.
“Nope. We’re waiting to get in.” Silas said, somewhat bitterly.

“Well, he is one of the former first sons. I wouldn’t expect anything less from the Shelton clan. Where’s Jackson? Have you seen him?”

“I think he’s inside already.” Gwen replied.

“What about Manó? I thought he’d be with you guys.”

“He’s best man.”

Lani huffed. “I forgot about that.” She said, and fixed her hair. She really had grown so much since the last time Gwen saw her. She was taller than her mother but only by a few inches and her hair had been cut to a shoulder length that looked surprisingly good for her.

They waited in line as it moved steadily, only getting a few words in here and there as they neared the front. And when they finally reached Blake and Josie, Gwen took a steadying breath. She would have to be careful around Josie. Around Blake, too. She had no wish to draw attention to herself.

She pasted on a fake smile as she greeted Josie first. The woman, surprisingly, but most likely in a show for the guests behind them, kissed both of her cheeks and welcomed her with a kind voice. She did the same with Lani, although it seemed much more genuine. She was glad. At least Josie knew that it was not her kids fault that their father used to be her husband.

Blake smirked when she greeted him next. Once upon a time, Blake had told her that she looked pretty when she dressed up, especially when her smile touched her warm brown eyes. Occasionally, she looked beautiful. But all the time, and he couldn’t stress it enough, she looked downright stunning. The way his eyes were looking her up and down hungrily, Gwen had a feeling he was trying to come up with another word to describe her beauty. She flushed just thinking about it.

“I’d say you look beautiful but I have a feeling you already know that.” He finally voiced.

She had the decency to blush even more. “You look handsome yourself.” He did, with his black suit jacket, dress pants, and vest. His light grey shirt and crisp black and grey tie made him look very pristine. It tickled her a little bit to see that their clothing matched. She had thought the dress she was wearing would be too revealing for a wedding, but since she got nothing but appreciative stares from men and women alike, she thought the see-through and accentuated dress had been a hit.

“My hair matches my shirt.” Blake said, seriously, and one look up at his grey head had her falling into a fit of giggles. The look she got from Josie had sobered her up and she moved down the line so that Blake could greet the rest of her little party.

When Blake saw Lani, his eyes widened at how much she had grown since the last time he saw her. Lani wasted no time in pulling him in for a hug, and Blake closed his eyes once embraced. It was a little sad at times, seeing him with the children. Knowing the man he had become now, made her hurt that he didn’t have the relationship he could have had with his kids if things had been different.

She wasn’t allowed to dwell on it as she was led further into the mansion by an excited Lani. With one last glance to Blake, who had caught her gaze, a wave of understanding passed between them, some sort of silent acknowledgement of their mutual desire. She turned away and paid attention to
her daughter, who was talking up a storm.

“Living with prostitutes and homeless people for over six months has definitely made me appreciate my privileged life.” She said as she headed straight to the open bar.

Gwen casted a look at Blake once she ordered a glass of wine for herself. He was still greeting the many guests, and one guest in particular had said something to make the man laugh. Blake threw his head back, and Gwen’s stomach tightened.

She drank up. And kept them coming.

=G=

Gwen knew deep down that her jealousy was unfounded. Blake and Josie were celebrating and basking in this moment as parents together. Watching their son take his first dance as a married man was something to share and behold and treasure for as long as they were allowed time on this earth. But Gwen couldn’t help it. She hated the possessive way in which Josie was clinging to her ex husband and whispering in his ear every so often. The fact of the matter was... she wanted to be the one hanging on his arm, watching one of their children have one of the most loving moments they would ever make in their lives. She wanted to be the one who felt the tickle of his breath against her cheek as he spoke. She simply wanted him.

“You don’t like seeing her with him, do you?”

Bradley came up from behind her, having left his seat at the former president’s table. His eyes followed the direction of her gaze. She should be staring at the happy couple, but she couldn’t find her wits.

“Brad, please don’t.” This man had seen her and Blake at their most vulnerable, young and without spouses and children and anger and disappointment. She didn’t need his condescending opinions.

“I didn’t mean any harm by it.” He reassured her.

She shook her head. “You’ve always been a great friend to him. His longest in fact. He cares what you think.”

“Not when it comes to you.”

She looked at him, hesitantly.

He sighed and nodded. “I told him many times to get over you. He didn’t listen. Part of me knew deep down that he couldn’t. If there’s one thing I learned about being with Stephanie is that you can’t help the way you feel about someone. That’s just a fact of life. You’re a fact of his life.”

She fell silent for a moment, soothed by his words. Before she could say anything else, Bradley squeezed her arm and walked past her to the bar, where his wife was waiting for him. Gwen sighed and sat down at her table. Silas had been watching the dancing with mild interest while Lani was itching to get on the dance floor with Dicky.

When it was time for the rest of the wedding to dance, most of the couple wasted no time in joining the new couple. The only satisfaction Gwen got was seeing how Blake had refused to dance with
anybody and instead chose to mingle with a few of his party members. A little put out that he hadn’t sought her out, Gwen just ordered another champagne and helped Silas take a couple of pretty pictures of the decorations.

By ten, Gwen had quite enough of the reception. She hadn’t spoken to Blake once since her arrival, and had not danced with a single person. She had offers, but she politely refused because the person she really wanted to dance with had not been any of her suitors.

As if God was testing her, Bradley made another appearance by her side. “Want to dance?”

His words weren’t slurred, but she could tell that he had a lot to drink. “Won’t your wife be less than happy if we did that? From what I saw yesterday, Josie has polluted her opinion of me.”

“Stephanie knows exactly who and what you are to Blake. If anything, she thinks Josie is a fool to have stayed with him as long as she did.”

Gwen’s eyes snapped to his so suddenly. “She knows?”

“She’s my wife. Of course, she knows. But you don’t have to worry about her opinion. Stephanie doesn’t think anything of you that I don’t.”

“And what do you think of me?” She asked, not really sure she wanted to know the answer.

Bradley hummed. “I think you’re a scary human being. And by scary I mean brave. I think you’re a great woman, albeit not without a few flaws, but what great woman isn’t? I think I underestimated you and disliked you for a long time because I couldn’t see how much Blake needed you. I thought Josie was the answer. He picked her. So by definition, so did I. She was the one to bet on and you were messing with my hand. But you, Gwen, are the winning piece. So...no hard feelings?”

She resisted the urge to laugh in his face and instead, smiled softly. “No hard feelings.”

“Great. Now dance with me.”

She shook her head. “I can’t.”

“He won’t mind.”

“That’s the point. He hasn’t talked to me all night.”

Brad chuckled. “Women. Gwen, he’s being discreet tonight, I’ll give him that, but he’s rarely taken his eyes off of you.”

Gwen looked over to his table, where he was still entertaining a conversation with a gorgeous woman. He was nodding, listening, but his gaze moved around the room until it landed on her. He smiled slightly and looked back to the woman.

“See?”

She laughed. “You’re infuriating.”

“Ah, something you and my wife agree on. Well, since you won’t dance with me, I’ll go find some other beautiful woman to accost. Although, I’ll admit, you and my wife, are the only women here worth taking a second glance at.”

She wanted to be annoyed at his words, but he had said them in earnest, and she appreciated his
effort to cheer her up. She looked back to Blake, and he was staring at her as the woman continued
talking. She tried to look away but his gaze was unflinching. Suddenly, he turned to his companion
and excused himself before standing up.

He made his way over to her and Gwen ignored the flutter in her chest as he neared. He sat down
wordlessly next to her, and Gwen remained staring at the empty dance floor. It wasn’t as if the
guests had gone from the party, quite the contrary. If anything, it felt as if more people had showed
up, but they were all just sitting down and chatting or standing in corners conversing.

“What did Brad say to you?” He asked her.

She shrugged. “He complimented me for the first time.”

“That was all? You were laughing and smiling...”

“You sound quite jealous.”

He gave a short laugh. “Are you seriously angry with me right now?”

“Not angry, no. You’ve ignored me all evening. Not as if I was expecting you to sweep me off my
feet but a simple acknowledgment at least once tonight would have been nice.”

He leaned in closer to her, so that their arms were brushing barely and said, “I would’ve loved
nothing more than to sweep you off your feet. But I promise I had reasons for not paying you the
attention you deserve.”

She looked at him then, her eyes narrowing. “Are you drunk?”

“Slightly intoxicated, why?”

“You don’t talk like this to me unless you’ve had a lot to drink.” She told him.

“I didn’t say my intoxication had anything to do with alcohol,” he said silkily, his tone flirtatious.

“You are drunk.” She said, hiding her amusement, and the sudden heat in her lower stomach.

His gaze fell to her gown. “That’s really revealing. A lot of married men in the room have looked
at you more than they should be allowed.”

“A lot of them have offered a dance, too.”

He frowned. “I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you before now. There are a lot of eyes watching me.”

“Why?”

“Because I decided to become an unmarried republican and still have the audacity to smile about it.
And because I don’t apologize for my son. And I don’t particularly care if I sit here next to you, a
gorgeous woman in a dress like that.” He held her gaze for a moment longer, before sitting back in
his chair.

Gwen’s breath hitched, and they watched the lights run across the empty floor as she fought to get
the air back in her lungs. “I think that for the first time in my life, I am not the miserable one in a
room. So many people were hurt by our love, or would have been: Josie and the baby, our kids,
Brad and Charlie, my parents.”

“You and me?” He whispered.
She bit her tongue. “You and me.”

She was unable to tear her gaze from the intense expression in his dark-blue eyes. Suddenly, he stood, and looked down at her. His hand extended out in an invitation and she looked at him unsure.

“You said you wanted to dance. Dance with me?”

Her eyebrows rose. “Right now?”

“No, in ten years from now. Yes, right now.”

“Blake…”

“Dance with me before I fall over.”

“I thought you said you weren’t drunk?”

“And I thought I told you it wasn’t the alcohol that had impaired me?”

“Won’t my closeness bring you to the edge, then?”

“I’ve already been at the edge over you for years. I’m looking to jump tonight, baby.”

She laughed against her better judgement, and took his hand unsteadily. “In that case, yes. I will dance with you.”

He pulled her to her feet and led her to the center of the floor, but before he took her into his arms, he raised his fingers to her shoulders, ignoring the question in her eyes. His shaking hands took a handful of her hair and brushed it over her shoulder delicately, until the patch of skin covered in thin fabric was now in sight. He did the same with the other side before taking her right hand in his left and moving it to rest upon his chest. His free hand came to touch her back, and Gwen placed her own hand on his shoulder.

“We are playing a dangerous game, Blake Shelton.” She whispered as they started to dance.

“No games.”

“We’re notorious for games. It’s in our nature. Like a never ending round of tug of war.”

“You do realize that the two opponents are trying to tug each other forward at the same time. We’ve only been pushing each other away.”

“We’re not going to suddenly fall into each other’s arms. You know better than that.”

“Look where we are, Gwen.” He leaned down next to her ear and whispered, “We’re already in each other’s arms.”

And she finally had everything she had longed for that night. And like a splash of cold water, she looked past him and saw the many eyes of the room on them. They were still the only ones out on the dance floor. She looked back to Blake and let out a breath.

“I don’t know how you do it,” she told him.

“If I can remember, it’s Arthur Murray, six lessons as a kid.” He replied.
She couldn’t stop the abrupt bubble of laughter from her chest. “That’s not what I meant. Over three hundred pairs of eyes are focused on you right now with two questions...Who’s this woman and why is the president pro tem dancing with her?”

Blake spun her around slowly and allowed his eyes to meet the many that were on them before looking back to her simultaneously. “Well first of all, the three hundred pairs of eyes are not focused on me. They’re focused on you. And the answers are...Gwen Reneé Stefani, because she said yes.”

She smiled and looked up at him. He gave her a satisfied smirk, and overwhelmed and out of her mind with love for this man, seeing the pure hunger in his own eyes, Gwen laid her head against his shoulder. She hadn’t seen him close is own eyes as he leaned his chin against the top of her head.

Without even thinking about it, he started to stroke her back with his thumb and was rewarded when a small sigh escaped her lips. Gwen pushed her face up and nuzzled into the crook of his neck. She breathed in the scent of his cologne and smiled at the small shudder his body gave her in return.

She knew, somewhere in the room, their children were staring at them with wide and confused eyes. She knew, somewhere in the room, Josie was glaring at them with seething anger. And she knew, everywhere in the room, there were strangers’ eyes watching them with private thoughts and opinions of their own. But what mattered more was this man holding her close.

What mattered was the rope dropping on the floor by their feet, and the fight being won.

Only this time, there were no losers between them, no white flags, no battle wounds to lick in private. This was not a romance, sure.

But it was far from a war being raged.

That would come later.
In the end, it was Jackson who had interrupted them.

If it was up to Gwen, she would have stayed in Blake’s arms, swaying lightly, listening to their hearts beating in sync all night. When she eventually tuned out the eyes and murmurs, Gwen had been transported to a world that she had not visited since she first met the man. Nothing mattered more to her in that moment than their closeness. It wasn’t the product of desire or lust or even longing. It was intimacy in its purest form, and Gwen had been without it for so long.

“Hey, you two. We were going to do a round of shots with Teddy and Will. You guys want one?”

The question was so innocent, and thoughtful, now that Gwen came to think of it. But the twinkle in Jackson’s eyes as he tracked their embrace was nothing but innocent. She couldn’t tell what he was actually thinking, but to know their actions had caused enough of a stir for him to come over and try to break them apart, confronted with the many eyes that were actually on them, Gwen could see the dangerous if not hesitant and confused thoughts that were swirling around in the boy’s mind.

She expected Blake to pull away at the interruption, but his hands stayed on her body, and only his eyes drifted to his son.

“No thank you.” Blake said clearly, and then turned his blue gaze on her. “You?”

She shook her head after a moment. If he was willing to hold her for several minutes more, she’d take what she could get.

“I’m okay. Thank you, Jackson.” She said quietly, watching the boy’s perplexed expression.

He obviously didn’t think they’d refuse, and to be honest, if Blake hadn’t rejected the offer first, she would be over at the table downing five shots by now.

“But I do have to leave you for a moment. I just remembered a very important phone call that I didn’t make tonight. It can’t wait till tomorrow. Tell Teddy I’ll buy him a bottle of the finest scotch if he starts whining.” Blake said, catching Jackson’s knowing glance. The two boys had to be used to their father’s attention being split between them and work by now, even on such big days as this.

“You don’t mind do you?” Blake asked, and it took a moment for it to register that he was talking to her.

Gwen shook her head as convincingly as she could. “Yeah, go. Do what you need to do.”

He squeezed her hip as he retreated from the room and Gwen, with nowhere else to turn to, looked at Jackson. Her mind was spinning out of control, as well. And with Blake’s departure, it felt like all the air had gone out of the room, and she was desperate to draw a breath that didn’t strain her
lungs.

When Jackson offered her his arm a second later, Gwen tried not to show her surprise. She latched onto the younger man and he lead her off of the floor, away from prying eyes and opinions she didn’t need.

The table was a safe place to be, but she could practically feel the tension radiating off of Josie, not to mention their children, even though many of them tried to hide it.

*It was just a dance,* Gwen thought to herself. One silly dance because she hadn’t partaken in one since the night began. Blake was just being nice. He had known her for a long time. Their kids were close, and by definition, so were they. That was all. They could spin this however they wanted to.

In the end, Gwen didn’t take a shot but she drank a whole glass of champagne and finally found the courage to call it a night when Blake rejoined the group, looking disgruntled. Whatever his phone call had been about, it clearly upset him.

Gwen’s only hiccup in escaping back to the hotel was Silas. The boys had wanted him to come along to Teddy’s apartment. They were continuing the celebrations at home, but Gwen knew with an apartment full of boys that had been drinking and had no intentions of stopping that there was bound to be some trouble. And yet, Silas had never asked her for anything like this in months. He kept to himself, and stayed in solitude if he could help it. He was smiling genuinely from ear to ear, and looking as if she had the power to crush his entire heart if she refused him this.

Against her better judgment, Gwen said yes and watched all of them pile into a car at the entrance of the mansion, loud music already bumping through the speakers rather obnoxiously.

She felt a hand rest along the length of her back and didn’t have to turn around to know that it was Blake who had followed her out. The wedding reception was so big that no one had probably even noticed that the grooms had left. There wouldn’t have been a send off party anyway but still, Gwen couldn’t help but think.

“Don’t worry. They know Silas is young. They’ll take care of him no matter how trashed they get.”

She grinned. “Somehow, that still doesn’t reassure me.”

He chuckled. “At least you have a night off.” He said, conversationally. “I have several phone calls to make when I get back to my hotel room.”

She turned to face him properly. “At this time?”

“China is awake.”

She shook her head, fondly, and then sighed. “Well, I have to try and get a ride from Bradley if he’s not taking Josie. I don’t think there are cabs in this part of New York.”

“And what part is that?”

“The rich and elite.” She deadpanned.

Blake clicked his tongue. “First of all, this is New York. There are cabs everywhere. Secondly, I’m aware that was a jab at my lifestyle. This coming from the woman with a successful business with its clientele consisting mostly of actors and celebrities, even if you’ve never met them. And thirdly,
I’m taking you back to your hotel, not Bradley.”

Gwen raised her eyebrows. “You’re my personal driver now?”

He scoffed. “No, I’m too rich for that.”

She laughed and punched him in the arm. “Are you able to leave now? Don’t you have to say goodbye to the guests?”

“If my son can dip out on his own wedding reception than so can I.” He said, matter-of-factly, but then smiled. “But in all fairness, I’ve been playing host tonight more than anyone. Josie and Will’s parents are still here. I’m sure they can finish out the night. Let me call my driver and we can start heading out.”

She nodded, unsure if he was really able to leave without much of a fuss, but considering he was not too worried about it, Gwen remained where she was and waited until he got off the phone. After summoning his driver, Blake’s hand returned to her back as he lead her down the drive, passing a couple of town cars parked on the edge of the lawn along the way. She was vaguely aware of the two men in suits that followed him and got into another car. They weren’t the same detail in his presidential days but the fact that he was still being followed around consistently didn’t go unnoticed by her.

He opened her door for her and then slid in next to her side. He gave his driver directions before settling into his seat. He didn’t touch her again for the remainder of the ride, and kept his gaze out the window. She wanted to say something, but the words had escaped her. Taking his lead, she watched New York pass them by as she all but melted into the car seat.

When they arrived at the hotel, Blake got out first and helped her with a steady hand to her own feet. He walked her as far as the entrance before stopping, and the thought had crushed her as soon as it became apparent that he was leaving. He didn’t invite himself up, and hadn’t seemed like he was going to either.

“Thanks for coming, Gwen.” He said, somewhat awkwardly but with the voice of this new Blake. The Blake that had been forgiven and by definition, had decided to stop pursuing her. Gwen wanted the new him, just not the resignation that came along with him.

“Did you--I mean I’m not--” She sighed and tried again. “Do you want to come up for a little bit? Like you said, I have the night off. I know you have to do some work--”

“I don’t think I should.” He cut her off, suddenly. His eyes were soft but his face was hard. Bravely, Gwen replied, “I didn’t ask you if you should. I asked if you wanted to.”

Blake stopped in his tracks and regarded her for a quiet moment. Then, he turned to the two men protecting his life. She hadn’t even known they’d gotten out of their car.

“Guys...I’m gonna be an hour or two. Get yourselves something to drink or eat at the bar. Bill it to Jackson’s room.” At her amused look, he rolled his eyes. “Yeah, I paid for that too. Snotty and rich. I get it.”

She held in her laugh and allowed herself to just feel happy that he hadn’t rejected her offer.

Once inside, she led him to the elevators with a confidence she wasn’t feeling but was trying rather hard to summon. They stood close to each other’s side as the floor number went higher. She didn’t dare disturb their easy peace with words and instead, tentatively, allowed her fingers to curl into the
side of his suit jacket as she showed him to her room. Blake hadn’t given her any signs that he was aware of her touch. He was being cautious, too cautious in her opinion.

Gwen dug the hotel key out of her clutch and let them in swiftly. Turning on the lights, she dropped her things on the small kitchen area counter and grabbed two bottles of water from the mini fridge. Blake let himself wander around the room, and she had the distinct feeling that Jackson’s room was bigger, grander, richer.

Gwen kicked her heels off and watched as he did the same with his dress shoes and jacket until he was sitting on the edge of the bed in nothing but a shirt and vest and those ridiculously expensive pant legs. Even his tie had been undone and thrown to the side.

She offered the water to him and Blake took it gingerly. He uncapped the lid and took several mouth fulls, looking over to the little sitting area. There was a couch and a recliner, all facing a small television that was thinner than her own frame. He looked back to her, eyes raking her body at a slow pace before landing on her warm brown eyes. There was a question that she could see, plainly, and she nodded in answer.

Blake stood up and made his way over to the recliner. Gwen tried not to look too put out. He really wasn’t trying anything tonight. She should be grateful. In a way, she was.

The screen flickered to life and Blake busied himself with the channels until he landed on an old episode of *Gilmore Girls*. Gwen, rather than subject herself to sitting on the couch by herself, took a spot on the floor, much to Blake’s amusement. She rested on her side and looked up at the show with mild interest.

Several minutes later, she startled at the sound of his voice. She looked back at him over her shoulder and saw him on the phone. He had one leg crossed, a sight that was so formal and dignified that Gwen really saw his true age in that moment. He hadn’t been lying when he told her he had work to do. And true to his word, Blake made several phone calls for over an hour. To Gwen’s surprise, she hadn’t minded at all. Once she got into the program, laughing and smiling at all the comedic moments, she was distracted from his deep rumble of a voice, talking serious business to God knows who halfway across the world.

Several times, Gwen abruptly caught herself from laughing too loud and turned around to see if she had disturbed him. Each time, Blake would look up from a little notepad he had taken from the hotel’s nightstand drawer some hours ago and give her a slight smile that told her he thought she sounded and looked well and truly like a small child, with the way she was sprawled on the floor, clutching her stomach through fits of giggles.

She hadn’t cared what she might’ve looked like to him. Being this way, feeling like she even could in the first place, came from a familiarity and comfortability that only years of knowing and caring for someone could create. But eventually, Gwen grew hungry. It was after one in the morning and she hadn’t eaten since the beginning of the reception.

“I’m ordering room service. Do you want anything?” She asked him, trying to keep her voice down as he was still listening to someone over the phone.

He looked up at her and for a moment, Gwen’s heart tightened in her chest at the look of him. Whatever hair gel he had put in for the occasion was slowly wearing away as he constantly ran a hand through his curls. The locks seemed to fall into his eyes at an angle that was almost criminal. His eyes looked tired but they were bright with something...passion maybe. Passion for the work he was doing.
He shook his head, silently, indicating he didn’t want anything, and Gwen gave him a small smile and let him get back to his work.

She ordered a bowl of chocolate covered strawberries and a cheese and fruit platter before cutting herself off. She didn’t have the means to pay for expensive hotel food. Blake had been right about the kind of people that bought her dresses, but those were far and few in between. And she had just finished getting her house together. That had cost her more money than she had anticipated.

Once she tipped the delivery man, Gwen sprawled her food out on the carpet and went back to watching the show. Several minutes later, Blake’s voice had finally ceased to penetrate the air and she looked back to see that he was off of the phone.

“That was more than one phonecall.” She voiced, teasing him for his remark earlier about just having to talk to one person. It felt like he had been on the phone with half of China.

He sighed, and pinched the corners of his eyes. “I know.”

“You alright?”

“Tired,” he said wearily, then met her eyes. “Stop worrying. Watch your show. I’m almost done.”

Gwen gave him one last longing look before she looked back to the screen, snatching a piece of cheese and plopping it into her mouth as she did. She didn’t know how long she laid there. Some time throughout the next episode and the fourth after that, Gwen had turned onto her stomach. It helped ease the tension in her abdomen as she continued to laugh herself silly. Vaguely, she was aware of Blake, and even more so when he got up from the recliner and moved to the couch. The piece of furniture wasn’t closer to her by any means but it gave him a better view of her face.

Gwen was laughing out loud again when she realized it. Turning her head slightly, she locked eyes with him, noticing him completely free of his work. He was just sitting there, relaxed as ever, back sinking into the cushions, one leg crossed over the other, watching her. He had been unafraid of being caught, seeing as how he kept staring at her even though she was aware of it now. There had been a small grin playing at the corners of his lips as well.

But what gave Gwen pause was the intensity of his gaze. There was nothing behind it but the force of his personality. But that was enough to have her unconsciously licking her suddenly dry lips as she stared back at him.

His pupils dilated ever so slightly. The atmosphere had thickened, charged with a pulse that resembled the pounding organ in her chest. Slowly, deliberately, with the television bathing them in some twilight background, Gwen began to ease up off of the floor until she was able to crawl over to him.

His eyes darkened, almost to the point where it was difficult to distinguish where the blue had been in them just a few seconds ago. The weight of his gaze would have sent a much younger woman running, but Blake had long lost the ability to send her packing.

Filled with desire and love and hope for this man, Gwen stopped just at his socked feet. Cautiously, she slid a gentle hand underneath the fabric of his pants legs, right at the opening of the ankle. Her fingernails scratched lightly along his skin, and Gwen felt the hair on his legs rise in anticipation. A quick glance at his face was a mistake. Blake was staring down at her with an unreadable expression, but his eyes were burning. She felt the heat of that gaze over her own body, and she suppressed a shudder.
Loud laughter from the television had broken her concentration, and she looked back to the screen. Chancing another look at Blake after regaining her focus, Gwen was startled to see that his attention on her hadn’t wavered a bit.

Retreating her hand, she slowly undid the back of her dress and allowed the shoulders of the dress to fall from her overheated skin until her torso was bared to his naked eye. She continued pushing the fabric down until it pooled around her knees and she was finally able to step out of it without having to get up.

Bending over him slightly, arm slung over his chest, fingers finally drifting into soft, grey, curls, Gwen regarded him with an open expression and asked, “How long can you stay?”

His breath was harsh to her ears. “As long as I want...As long as you want.” He corrected almost as an after-thought. But it was the tone in which he had relayed the words to her. Almost...like he didn’t want to stay.

Gwen leaned down further onto him, still on her knees on the floor, but allowing him to feel most of her weight as her hands went to his grey shirt. She slowly unbuttoned it with hesitant fingers, aware of his hot gaze.

“What are you doing?” He asked, barely above a whisper.

She stopped to look at him. Licking her lips, she continued her ministrations, murmuring all the while, “I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

He sighed. “Do what?”

“Look at me like that...and then ask me what I’m doing.”

He meant to say something in return but his voice caught as soon as her hands went to his belt. She had gotten as far as the buckle before his hands stopped her, halting her own for the time being.

“I didn’t mean to--” He cut off, finding his footing. “You know I wish you wouldn’t do that.”

“What?” She asked, almost offended.

“You know what.”

Gwen frowned. “I don’t.”

His thumb swiped her bottom lip so fiercely that Gwen fought the temptation to slap his hand away. When his palm wrapped around the back of her neck, she swallowed back her desire as understanding washed over her.

He didn’t like it when she confused him. As she was doing now. Surely, forgiving him, not discouraging his plans to walk away, only to undress for him now, reel him back in with a slip of vulnerability, and give him false hope in his tender age, had been the most cruel thing she had ever unconsciously done to his psyche.

He didn’t like her being cruel. She didn’t like it either, and the fact that she was marginally unaware that she had been had scared her more than it aggravated him.

“Are you mad?” She asked.

“You know I am.”
“I don’t mean to be.” She said, knowing he would know that she was talking about her cruelty.

“Don’t you?”

That stung. “No, Blake. I don’t.”

He sighed and looked away, unsure. Gwen gripped his chin and forced him to look at her.

“I know you’re not going to believe this because we’ve hurt each other over a million ways in this goddamn lifetime but my forgiveness wasn’t an out. I don’t absolve you from everything you did. You don’t get to go off and live out the rest of your years doing whatever the hell you want and whoever you want while I struggle to breathe and keep my head above water. I told you I needed you to become the man I knew you could be. And you are. And all of a sudden you feel like you’re going to go be that man for someone else? I deserve that. I deserve you. You deserve to be with me, now. So I’m sorry if this was cruel. I didn’t know how to deal with you actually wanting to walk away from me. But this is life. This is us. We’ve never been particularly kind to one another but we’re still here.”

Her chest rose and fell with the exertion of her words. But she had meant them and he needed to hear them. Maybe then, he would understand.

“Then why start now?”

She wasn’t expecting those mocking words. She wasn’t expecting him not to give in to her. And his reaction had hit her like a furious blow to the chest. She stared at him wide-eyed and he didn’t even flinch.

“Blake--”

“I’m serious. I understand that time has passed. I understand that we’re not who we used to be. But that isn’t exactly the soundest of proof that this is gonna work out between us. And frankly, I’m not sure I can go down that road again...I want you. That’s never been the problem. The problem was keeping you. The problem was you allowing yourself to be kept.”

“That was never the problem.” She defended.

“Really? You divorced Wyatt. You never gave yourself to me. You didn’t even have the guts to keep up with that Italian fellow you met over in Italy.” At her shocked expression, he pushed her back slightly and stood up. “Yeah, you didn’t think I knew about that.”

“How--why--You were checking up on me?”

“What kind of man would I be if I didn’t?”

“One I could trust.” The words hit him physically, and Gwen stood up just as they landed a moment or two again. As if she had repeated herself, but she didn’t need to.

She walked over to the closet and wrapped the robe hanging inside around her semi-naked body. “You know, next time, ‘cause I’m sure there will be a next time, you might want to gather the strength to grow a pair and just kiss me. Just kiss me, Blake. Don’t fight me, don’t offer marriage, don’t remind me of how fucked up this relationship actually is. Just kiss me.” Coward, went unsaid.

“Don’t you think I want to!” He yelled, the intensity in his voice making her flinch.
“I want you to. I’m giving you permission. I’m here. I’m not going anywhere. You have me.”

“I’ve heard this before.”

“I meant it before. Just as I mean it this time.”

“This is the last time, Gwen.” She cocked her head at his words and he took a step forward. “This is it. We’re old. We’re free. And we’re damaged. This is it. If it doesn’t work—”

She should have known that was what this was about. How had she missed this? Maybe because there was never a doubt in her mind that this was the only time in their lives that things could go the way they always intended. To her, being older was what they needed to be together. Wisdom, years, experience. Being free so that they could have each other in the light instead of scraps of each other in the dark. Being damaged had allowed them to know what being whole once felt like, and if they had never been broken, they would have never appreciated each other’s pieces.

But to Blake, he saw all of this as a negative. They were too old to lead a life that resembled anything near love if they couldn’t love each other. They had already invested so much that they wouldn’t have anything left to give to someone else. They were free to be one but if the two of them couldn’t manage it, then freedom would slowly choke them like a chain as solitude often did once it married loneliness. Not to mention, who or what in this world could possibly love them after it saw how much damage they could inflict, how much they had already been exposed to?

She shook her head. They were two sides of the same coin. It would have comforted her in the moment if she had not been so scared that he was about to leave her.

“It will work.”

“How do you know?” He asked.

“Because walking away from each other didn’t. Time and distance and children and marriage...none of it worked. We’re still here, trying to be together.”

Blake drew closer but his eyes hadn’t changed. His resolve hadn’t lessened. “There’s a million reasons why going down this path tonight would be a huge mistake.”

“And you’ve no doubt thought of all of them.”

“Apparently, I’m the voice of reason now.”

She grinned bitterly, “I know we live in different states, Blake.”

“And we have kids together that we can never acknowledge publicly or personally but who will have the most questions when they discover we’re fucking each other.”

She flinched at his bluntness. “We’re two consenting adults who aren’t married with mostly grown children. I don’t think they can condemn us forever.”

“Josie will rip us in half. I can’t know for sure that she won’t do or say something to blow this whole thing up in our faces.” He warned her, drawing closer.

“Then we keep this quiet until more time has passed.”

Blake shook his head. “I’m not loving you in the dark, anymore. If we do this, we do it openly.”

“You’d risk it all to do this with me?” She asked, referencing his job, his public favor, and his
personal relationships. He’d suffer more than her if it came to light.  “Regardless of how I feel, I don’t want it to feel like your life is over because of me.”

He suddenly had her backed into the corner of the room and his eyes burned with an intensity that rivaled the sun.  “It’s not about living long enough, Gwen. It’s about living hard enough.”

She barely had time to shiver in sudden stunned realization before her back hit the wall she had forgotten was there and his mouth came down on hers.

In all the times that she had been kissed in her life, by handsome men, nice men, damaged men, none of them had ever felt anything like this.

His arms were braced against the wall on either side of her, effectively trapping her in the bracket of his frame. His slender body, yet always broad in form, was burning as it pinned her against the wall, all sharp angles and soft bones overlaid by sinewy muscles that had been managed with age. His mouth was scorching her, as his tongue slid along the seam of her lips and she opened to him eagerly, closing her eyes. This close to him, Gwen could smell the complex scent of rain and earth and firewood. She could taste it as well, as his tongue entered her mouth and the kiss deepened.

Her legs buckled and Blake caught her around the waist. She dug her hand into his shoulder, feeling the deceptive strength in him, while her other hand tangled in his hair, grasping fine curls. Gwen arched against him, and they broke apart for a second, just long enough for her to draw in a ragged breath, and for him to remove the robe from her overheated body.

“I love you..” She breathed finally, a ragged breath, a mere whisper.

And although it came out breathless and uneven, it made him shudder as their mouths met once more and she began to kiss him back, exploring his mouth with a renewed vigor. A shiver ran through him and he shifted even closer. Gwen’s breath hitched when she felt the unmistakable hardness of his erection pushing against her. She barely hesitated before tilting her hips to press against him in response.

She couldn’t get close enough to the heat of his body through all his layers, and with his mouth devouring hers, Gwen couldn’t make her hands move from his hair and the back of his neck. She moaned in frustration and want, and Blake gentled the kiss, slowly drawing it to a close before pulling away.

Gwen opened her eyes to see him standing farther away from her, lips slightly parted, a faint flush on his stubbled cheeks, and his chest rising and falling at a methodical pace. She vaguely felt the air touching her half naked body, and looking at his still clothed form had stirred something inside of her.

“Gwen,” he said quietly, and she looked up startled. “I love you.”

Still a little breathless, she tried to swallow before she could answer him. “I know.”

He nodded and looked away from her. “Do you mind if we--I mean would it be alright if we didn’t--”

Gwen walked over to him and hugged him where he stood. Even in his older age, he would always be taller than her, and she had to raise up on her toes to wrap her arms around him properly. He sighed into the embrace and leaned down to rest his head on her shoulder.

She knew what he wanted--rather what he needed. Each time they had each other in the past, it had been the product of longing, desire, and an undetected anger that went unnoticed more times than
not. There had been passion and love, but there had never been any tenderness, any thought to the love-making. In some ways, it seemed that they had both been blind. Tonight, their eyes were wide open and he didn’t want to miss a thing.

So she held him and rubbed his back and promised silently that they didn’t have to do anything just yet. She’d wait for the rest of her life if that’s what he wanted. It wasn’t about sex with him. It was about every little moment where she felt she could be or do anything in this life because each breath he took her way had convinced her she could. That was all she wanted. Those little moments.

“Come on. Let’s lay down.” She said softly, pulling away only to lead him back to the couch.

She pushed him down gently until he was lying on his back and then settled herself between the cushions and his warm body as she half laid on top of him. Blake sighed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. Looking up, she saw him staring at the ceiling. She sighed and rubbed circles across his chest, her own gaze returning back to the television. She sent a prayer up to God and closed her eyes. Distantly aware of how afraid she was to fall asleep.

Gwen heard voices in the distance.

She cracked her eyes open to see the flashing lights of the t.v. Blinking, she shifted over onto her back and then sat straight up when she realized a body was no longer underneath her.

Her heart sank.

The room was dark, save for the flickering images, and Gwen looked around her hotel room for signs of him. There were none.

Gwen got up from the couch and sighed. She travelled across the room before stopping at the sight of his suit jacket still on the bed. His shoes were gone, but his tie left forgotten on the floor filled her chest with hope.

Looking around again, Gwen wondered where he’d gone. Putting on the robe he chucked to the floor earlier, the mother of three walked to the door of the hotel room unsure. She had no idea where he might’ve gone, but she knew he couldn’t have left without his notepad still on the table and his phone wedged between the recliner cushions.

Opening the door and venturing into the hallway, Gwen was startled by the agent standing next to the door. He hadn’t startled when she came out, merely turned and regarded her with a blank expression. But his eyes had twinkled when they saw her state of undress, particularly, her bare feet. She had the decency to blush.

How had he found out the number to her room?

The thought led her to another one as she realized there were two of them and only one standing guard outside her door. The other man must be wherever Blake was. Before she could open her mouth to ask the man standing before her, he gently extended his hand out in the direction of the elevators and beckoned her to follow.
Gwen did so immediately, thankful that she wouldn’t have to utter a single word to the agent as he led her downstairs and across the mostly deserted lobby. It was nearly four in the morning, of course there would be no one up.

As they drew closer to a set of double doors, Gwen could hear a piano being played in the distance. The agent opened one door for her and Gwen slipped inside quietly. Her gaze went right to the figure sitting at the instrument in the middle of the room.

Her breath didn’t waver at the sight of Blake playing a melancholy tune. Instead, it left her when she noticed the audience he was playing to. There were several men in various states of undress, cleaning, putting down tables, and stacking chairs. Another look around and she saw they were in a ballroom of sorts, a place the hotel hosted events and parties for certain guests. Clearly, there had been one that night and neither of them noticed.

Some of the men looked over at her, doing a once over of her appearance. She didn’t flush this time. Others were staring at Blake, content expressions on their face as they listened to the melody he was flushing out.

Gwen’s eyes went back to him, and she walked closer, safely behind him so that he couldn’t see her presence. It wouldn’t have mattered. He was so engrossed with his playing that she doubted anything could distract him now. He was hunched over, eyes surely closed, tapping rather gently, and then almost aggressively as he neared the end of the song. It was a sight to behold, and the fact that she was sharing it with these men hadn’t bothered her one bit. This enigmatic man was hers, and she had known him and loved him for so many lifetimes that it was impossible to know which one she was living in with him now.

A couple of the employees clapped when he finished, straightening up and wringing out his hands. He looked around the room and then behind him, pausing when he saw her standing there. His eyes looked tired, and so did his face.

She drew closer until he no longer had to strain his back to look at her.

“I thought you left.” She voiced, knowing she could be heard by strangers’ ears because the room was so quiet. She found that she didn’t care.

“I did, technically. I tried not to wake you.”

She tilted her head. “How long have you been down here?”

He sighed heavily. “Maybe an hour.”

She whistled. “So you’ve just been putting on a free concert for these nice gentlemen all this time?”

He tried to chuckle but it just came out like a strangled noise from the back of his throat. “They seemed to be enjoying it.”

“Then I’m sorry I interrupted.” It came out clipped but she couldn’t help it. He was acting so distant.

He exhaled and looked up at her ruefully. “I’m not mad you’re down here.”

“No. Just less than ecstatic.” She said, no emotion in her voice.

“I’m...tired, Gwen.”
“Then come back upstairs and sleep.”

“I won’t sleep if I come back upstairs with you.” His voice darkened, and Gwen suppressed a shiver.

“Is that what this is about? You don’t want to want to have sex with me?”

His jaw tensed and he looked around the room. Gwen didn’t need to see for herself the many eyes on them, trying and failing not to listen. She just didn’t care anymore.

Blake cleared his throat and addressed the entire room, “Would you mind giving us the room, gentlemen?”

Gwen rolled her eyes. So proper, so refined, so unlike him.

Just as well, Gwen heard the scrapes of chairs and mute acquiesce as the men departed from them one by one until the door closed with a final click. Not even the agents were anywhere in sight. Gwen looked down at Blake and saw him staring at the piano.

“You have to try and understand where I’m coming from.” He told her.

“I know where you’re coming from. Every time we go down this road, it doesn’t end up working out the way we want it to.”

His head snapped up to meet her gaze. “I’m not afraid to fuck, Gwen. That’s all we’ve ever been able to do right.”

The conviction in his voice should have scared her or at least angered her. But it was what she needed to connect all of the dots. Even as he continued to speak, Gwen knew what he was truly afraid of.

“How come the idea of having you still seems so fucking far away to me? You’re right here. You’re this close. All I have to do is reach out and touch and…”

She went to him. She reached out to him. She touched him.

Planting herself firmly in his lap, Gwen snaked her arms around his neck and wound her fingers into his hair. He flinched away from her violently but she held him close to her, capturing his mouth in a fierce kiss. He protested, the sound quickly muffled by a moan a second later, until he gave in momentarily and stroked his hands down her back.

His resolve was short lived as he broke the kiss. She almost growled in frustration. But then he cupped her cheek in his hand, his thumb stroking along her lower lip, his eyes softening slightly behind the burning hatred he felt for their situation. And then his fingers slid into her hair and gently tilted her head back so he could lean in to kiss her neck. His breath was hot against her skin as he nuzzled at her throat, nipping at certain spots under her jaw and over her pulse, each tiny bite making her shiver.

“Don’t stop.” She breathed.

He pulled back to look at her and Gwen very nearly smacked him.

“Stand up.” He said, his voice leaving no room for argument. Gwen did as she was told, backing away until her backside hit the piano. She opened her mouth to reassure him when he beat her to words. “Take it off.”
When she frowned in confusion, his hand went to the tie at the front of the robe. He pulled one end and the other fell with it. Gwen helped him push it off of her shoulders and watched as he tugged his own shirt out of his pants before starting to undo the buttons. She wanted to do that but she didn’t dare make any more movements. He wanted to lead and she’d let him.

His vest fell next to him on the bench and he stood up. Gwen couldn’t help her hands from going to the slithers of bare skin his open shirt offered her. Fingers explored ribs, sparse black and grey chest hair, broad shoulders and a tense back.

One strong hand and one weak hand lifted her up suddenly, and set her down on top of the piano. At this height, she was almost eye level with him, and she took advantage of the fact to tangle a hand in his hair and draw him close for a kiss. She closed her eyes and moaned as he deepened it. Her free hand roamed blindly down his chest and stomach once again until she could touch him through his pants, feeling the heat radiating from him. Pleased he didn’t push her away, Gwen wrapped her hand around him, as much as she could through his clothes, and squeezed. Blake groaned into her mouth and pushed his hips against her palm, making soft noises of pleasure.

He was so close to her that it was difficult for Gwen to undo his belt and buttons with just one hand, especially since he had gone back to kissing her within an inch of her life. But she managed to get his suit pants half undone before she realized that he had begun ripping her underwear down the seam.

It gave her pause and she cupped his face harshly and made him look into her eyes. When blue met brown, Gwen saw the raw heat and need in his gaze. He was reverting back into himself, and she wouldn’t let him. It hurt to see him like this, thinking he had to be this way with her because he was afraid that if he wasn’t, he’d get hurt afterwards. He still didn’t believe it—she still didn’t believe her.

_He didn’t think they were capable of making love and if by God they somehow did, he was afraid he wouldn’t feel anything once it was done. No that wasn’t right. He was afraid he wouldn’t allow himself to feel anything after it was done._

Had he never allowed himself to feel it? Not ever when they were together? Not even once? She very nearly cried for this man, but instead, held his focus as she kissed his forehead softly and murmured, “Love is not a romance.”

He started to close his eyes but her grip tightened and he remained staring, remained listening.

She took a deep breath. “Love is not a romance. It’s pain and it’s a lot rarer than you’ll ever believe. Do not turn it off. Don’t think about after, think about right now, and how much you’re feeling in this moment. Think about how much you love me. And then show me.”

After a long, and breathless moment, his expression cleared and his eyes glittered in a way that said he understood, and that told her he was thankful that she understood. And for a long moment, he stayed motionless, only his eyes moving. She could feel the weight of his gaze as he slowly scanned her body, absorbing the sight. It hit her then. He was trying and this was the next step. To make love to her, he had to appreciate the sight of her first.

She saw him catalogue what he could, what was visible to him, as he swallowed thickly, as his chest rose and fell a little more rapidly. When his eyes met hers, that raw heat and need were back, but this time, it was overshadowed by a gentle passion, one reminiscent of the one she heard in his voice while he was working earlier. She saw the love in him too, the love she encountered when she first held Lani, or when she first saw Silas play the piano.
And then he was gone, sliding onto his knees as he knelt on the floor, leaning close to her. It took her a moment to realize what he was about to do as his breath tickled her skin, as his curly hair brushed her thighs, as his hands gently eased her legs apart. He kissed the inside of her thigh and bit softly, whispering something too quietly for her to hear before leaning closer, and a moment later she cried out as she felt his tongue slowly licking her. This was the next step. To make love to her, he had to give her her pleasure first, and wait to have his own.

They’ve been here before. But for the life of her, Gwen couldn’t really say what he was doing then; the sensations jumped and blurred together as he kissed and licked and sucked and teased and kept pushing her to places that she hadn’t known her body could venture to. For her, the world came down to the slowly building tension and pressure inside of her as she drew closer and closer to the edge, whimpering and shaking as she did. And when his mouth found just the right place, when she felt his love in just the right way, she broke like a dam, clutching him to her and praying she’d never have to let go.

She was aware of him when he stood back up, again. Aware of his half-undone pants, his erection still straining at the fabric, and the way he was looking at her, like he was asking permission to love her, like he had so much to give and he was scared she might not want all of it.

“Come here,” she whispered.

His feet moved and once he was standing between her legs, Gwen leaned back until her bare skin touched the cool surface of the piano. She held his weak hand in hers, and moved it across her chest and stomach in an indistinct path before tugging it closer, effectively moving him over her. He chuckled when he realized what she wanted.

“I can’t get up there. I’m too old.” He murmured.

She smiled and strained her neck to look down at him from the side. “Do you want to go back upstairs now?”

His eyes darkened as he looked at her, his voice deepening to an almost growl. “You’re shifty.”

She laughed and sat up, bracketing him with her thighs. “Take me to bed, then.”

This time, she heard no arguments.

Blake helped her down from the piano and found her robe by their feet. She put it on as she watched him collect his vest and stuff her torn underwear into his pant’s pocket. She didn’t say a word as he lead her out of the room. The two agents were standing outside the door but none of the workers from earlier were around.

The ride up to the room was quiet and somewhat awkward considering she was sure Blake’s detail knew what they had been doing inside of the room. She was still flushed, and Blake’s hair was in disarray, not to mention his lips were slightly swollen and pink from his efforts. Gwen looked down at her feet and waited for the cart to reach her floor.

The doors slid open and Blake walked out first, pulling the hotel key from his vest pocket and opening the door for her. She went outside and distinctly heard him tell the two men that he’d be spending the night. She wasn’t sure of their reactions and she wasn’t particularly keen on finding out. What they must think of her, Gwen thought.

She didn’t see any point in prolonging the inevitable. They had been this close down in the ballroom, and Gwen knew that once she got through to Blake, he wouldn’t see not being with her
as an option anymore. She was right when she turned around and saw him divesting himself of his vest and shirt. Momentarily distracted by seeing flesh she hadn’t peeked at in years, Gwen discarded her robe for the final time that night and took her bra with it.

She sat on the edge of the bed and watched as he kicked off his shoes and socks, and then stepped out of his pants. With only the thin fabric of his briefs left, she could see the full outline of his erection more clearly, and something tightened low in her body.

Blake watched her intently as he slid his fingers under the waistband of his underwear, finally shedding the last of his armor. Her mouth went dry and she looked up at him, before scooting back further up the bed and waiting with bated breath as he crawled up the length of it to lay beside her. He leaned in for a gentle kiss, and she sighed, twining her arms around his neck. She kissed him in return and lay back, drawing him down with her. He made a low sound in the back of his throat as their naked bodies pressed together. He broke the kiss with a soft peck to her bottom lip and stared at her. Before the words even escaped his tongue, she knew what they would be.

“You are so beautiful.”

She smiled. He sounded much like he did at the wedding but there was something resigned and almost excited in his voice, like he was aware he was going to be telling her this for the rest of his life and he loved nothing more than the thought.

Holding his gaze, she rested her hand on his chest and slowly trailed her fingers downwards over his stomach and the curve of his hip bone, hesitating for a moment before touching him gently. His eyes closed and he let out the breath he had been holding in a long sigh as she did so. He twitched under her fingers as she explored his heat and hardness with a familiarity, drawing shivers and gasps from him. Reaching between his thighs more brazenly, she cradled the warm weight of him in her palm before she wrapped her hand around his shaft tightly, in the way he loved, and smiled as he moaned in her ear, his head falling back.

“It’s been a long time.” He said breathlessly, but she heard the warning in his voice. He wouldn’t last if she kept going.

She pulled away. “I’m not done with you yet.” She teased.

“God, you’re gonna kill me,” he joked huskily, pushing himself up on one elbow and leaning in to kiss her again.

She smiled against his mouth and let him move over her, revelling in the weight and strength of his body as he gently pushed her back against the pillows. Shifting under him, she ran her hands down his back as she spread her legs and he settled between her thighs without breaking the kiss, moaning softly into her mouth when she felt the head of his erection pressing against her. Bracing himself on one arm as the kiss came to an end, he reached down between their bodies and began to guide himself carefully inside of her.

Settling his weight on both arms again, his eyes met hers as he slowly pushed deeper, trembling with the effort of holding back. He knew, without her having to tell him, that it had been a long time for her too. And feeling that first twinge never failed to make her tense in pain. Where once he might’ve kept going, Blake stopped moving, his hand smoothing her hair back from her face as he leaned down to kiss her once more, slow and deep and thorough. He continued kissing her, making no attempt to move, and she relaxed with the taste and feel of his mouth on her. It seemed to go on for hours, and this she knew, was the next step.

To make love to her.
It came without warning when he suddenly jerked his hips and thrusted hard.

She gasped sharply, stiffening under him. Blake hunched his shoulders a little and leaned down further to nuzzle at her neck, kissing her throat gently, before he started to move again. The shallow, rocking, movements of his hips had created a sort of ache in her, and Gwen held onto the short curls at the base of his neck as the feeling grew.

“We okay?” He asked, his voice muffled by the skin of her neck. He kissed her again, very softly, and she felt a tear slide down her cheek. We okay.

She nodded her head, unable to speak, and was grateful when he pulled back only to push in again. Briefly, a thought hit her so hard that she was afraid her heart would stop.

“I don’t--have you...” Her breath hitched for a moment as he moved. She got her tubes tied in Italy after she was tired of taking birth control and got tested shortly after moving back home. She hadn’t been with anyone since.

“I’m clean,” he assured her hoarsely, somehow knowing exactly what she was trying to ask. “I have been for years.”

She let out a breath and finally gave into the sensation of their connected bodies. Gradually, his movements were becoming less slow and gentle, his breathing growing heavier. Shifting underneath him slightly, Blake’s hips pushed into her at a new angle and Gwen saw stars. She cried out softly as he did it again, moving with more certainty as he found a comfortable position to hit that angle every single time. Every thrust pushed that coiling pressure in the base of her stomach higher until she could feel it all over.

“Blake..” She whispered hoarsely, shaking, arching her back and straining against him. “I love you--I--”

He made a sound somewhere between a groan and a growl in response, breathing hard now, and thrusted again, his eyes burning as he stared down at her. His pace quickened, his thrusts hardened, deepened, and as she was teetering on the edge, one final snap of his hips made her cry out. Gwen dug her nails into his shoulders as her hips bucked, and she threw her head back at the force of his movements.

He slowed down through her climax, prolonging the pleasure with easy rocking movements that drew out every last little shiver her body could muster. Leaning down, he kissed her gently, before he pushed himself up on his hands and started to move in earnest, putting more force behind his thrusts as he drove into her. She would have laughed if she wasn’t so turned on and exhausted from her own orgasm.

She shivered as her body was overstimulated, but forced herself to relax as she watched him reach the peak of his own pleasure. Finally, he cried out wordlessly in a strangled voice, his expression twisting as he shoved himself into her one last time before dropping to his elbows and shuddering violently.

She didn’t have the strength to tell him to move off of her, and if she was being completely honest, she liked the way his weight felt on her, pressing her into the mattress so that she was trapped. If she never went anywhere again, that would be just fine with her.

Gwen turned her head to the side and kissed his sweaty neck. His forehead rested against the pillows by her shoulder and he shuddered at the feel of her lips, no matter how brief they might’ve been.
It took several minutes before Blake drowsily squirmed off of her and onto the left side of the bed. Gwen missed the heat of his body right away and nestled against his chest. He chuckled and demanded they cover up with the sheets before they both fell asleep. Gwen obliged and went right back into his arms once they were covered. He nuzzled closer with a sleepy sound in the back of his throat, burying his face in her hair, and whispered, “Stella.”

She smiled tiredly, gaining the courage as the minutes passed to tell him how much she didn’t want to leave tomorrow. Thoughts of moving in with him as he finished out his years in the senate came swirling at her with so much want. It was unreasonable, considering she just moved Silas to a new home and enrolled him in a new school. But she wanted so badly to say fuck it and do what she wanted finally.

She was on the cusp of letting those sentiments fly loose when she heard the sound of Blake’s breathing. He was already asleep.

She laughed quietly to herself and cuddled closer, closing her eyes and letting herself drift off to whatever place he went to in his dreams.
Gwen woke up to darkness.

She could see that the morning was in sight, by the way the sun was barely touching their side of the world. It would be a couple of hours before the sunrise but it was well on its way.

Her phone buzzed on the kitchen counter and she sighed at how far away it was. She felt so tired and so warm. Blake was a furnace pressed against her back, spooned up against her with his face buried in her hair and his arm wrapped around her waist.

He was snoring, she realized with a smile. He always snored. The sound was quiet and rhythmic, almost perfect as far as snoring went. It was cute. As if trying to defend himself unconsciously from such a comment, Blake stopped in his sleep and snuggled closer to her, sniffling lightly.

She stifled a laugh, getting momentarily distracted by her phone buzzing on the counter again. She sighed. Gwen would have to get up now. It could be Silas begging for her to come and pick him up. Even at this early hour, she wouldn’t put it past the boy.

Gwen began to carefully ease her way out of Blake’s arms without trying to disturb or wake him up. But the arm around her waist tightened as she did and his body tensed. After a moment, when she didn’t try to move again, Blake relaxed.

*He has the same fears as me.*

Gwen’s heart ached and she tried once again to get up. His arms tightened once more and he mumbled something that might have been her name before his voice became clearer, “Stay.”

She grinned. He really was adorable when he was half asleep. “I have to get my phone. It keeps ringing,” she explained softly. “Let me up?”

He made a sleepy sound of complaint but withdrew his arm so that she could slide out of bed. Turning to look back at him, Blake wasted no time in burrowing deeper under the blankets in the spot she had just vacated.

Smiling, she walked naked across the floor to the counter and retrieved her phone. It had been Manó calling. Frowning, she looked through her texts but only a single one had been sent, and all it said was that it was urgent. She listened to the first voicemail he left and nearly dropped her phone. She let out a strangled breath and looked around the room horrified.

Her frantic motions had alerted Blake, even in his half state of consciousness. He sat up and looked over at her with blurry eyes. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and went over to her suitcase, pulling out a pair of underwear and a sports bra.
as she tried to calm her breathing. Blake’s voice faintly cut through the fog in her mind but she was too focused on getting dressed without tripping over her feet in a haste to get out the door.

“Gwen. Gwen, you’re scaring me. Who called? What happened?” His voice was much closer now and when she turned around, he was there, hands coming to bracket her wet face. She didn’t even know when she began to cry.

“I have to--I can’t--Silas.” She got out in between breaths.

Something grave passed over Blake’s face and he let her go in search of his own clothes. He dressed much quicker than her and all Gwen could do was stand there and watch, not knowing how to take control of the situation, like she was paralyzed. And then the thought hit her. Manó had mentioned it briefly but she had focused solely on Silas when her son had been mentioned.

“Jackson.” She said, voice barely above a whisper.

Blake was tying his shoes when his head snapped up to her. “What?”

She trembled, “He said Silas and Jackson.”

Blake’s face contorted into a mix of emotions before he stood up and ran a hand through his curls. His phone went off at that precise moment and he snatched it from in between the recliner cushions.

“What?” He snapped into the phone.

She could hear Will’s voice over the receiver but Blake’s face betrayed nothing as he listened to the young man. It was a short phone call, Blake not demanding anymore than what the boy was giving him. When he ended the call, he looked at her and Gwen tried to keep her tears at bay.

“We’re going to the hospital. Will, Manó and Teddy are on their way now. Jackson and Silas are both in an ambulance--” He broke off at her heart wrenching sob. He walked over to her but she couldn’t bare to be touched. He sighed and stepped away.

“Let me get you to him, Gwen. Okay?”

She wiped at her wet face and nodded. He gently touched her arm and she allowed herself to be led from the room. Outside, the two guards from before were standing on either side of the door. One had a coffee in his hand, while the other possessed a half eaten donut.

“You ready to leave, Sir?” The dirty blonde hair agent asked, taking a sip from his drink.

To her side, Blake was tapping away on his phone. “We’re going to the hospital. I suggest you trade places with Kenneth and Abigail when we get there. It’s gonna be another long day and I wouldn’t put you both through that.” Blake responded, hand still in the crook of her elbow. He pocketed his phone and pulled her along with him to the elevators.

“As you wish, Sir.”

Once inside, Gwen sniffled quietly and looked at the other guard. He was chancing looks at his employer until he finally worked up the courage to ask what he wanted.

“Is everything okay, Sir?”

Blake exhaled and for the first time in her life, Gwen saw a glimpse of a man that she had been
wanting for decades. Instead of reacting and responding emotionally, Blake was trying to hold it all in. He was putting on a brave face for her, and she appreciated it more than he knew.

“My sons were in an accident.” Blake finally revealed, and her heart skipped a beat at him referring to both Silas and Jackson as his sons. The agents wouldn’t know the difference, and would probably assume Teddy was in the equation but it didn’t matter.

Her hand found his next to her and she squeezed it tightly. Looking up, Blake was staring forward, all emotions devoid in his blue eyes. The silence was deafening as neither of the elevator’s occupants knew what to say.

In the empty lobby, Blake let go of her hand. She was hurt for all of a second until she remembered who he was, who she was, and where they were.

The car was waiting outside for them. Blake opened her door and ushered her inside quickly. Once settled, he took out his phone and called someone named Tom. Gwen blocked the conversation completely as she looked out the window. It was still dark. Her son--their son--and Jackson, a boy she considered one of her own because of Blake, were in an ambulance. Their injuries had to be severe enough for them to be travelling in such a way. But there were so many questions that she had.

Why were they even out this early to begin with? What exactly happened to cause the accident?

“Gwen.”

The use of her name interrupted her thoughts and she looked over to Blake. His body was tense, his limbs struck with some kind of barely seen anger. She wondered why he was feeling such a way.

She hummed and he took her hand, much in the same way she had done in the elevator, and grounded her with his touch as he spoke. “Somebody tipped off the accident to the press.”

Her immediate thought was, already? The second was about how much she hated his celebrity and position in American politics.

Blake sighed and continued, “The car will drop you off at the main entrance and I’ll circle around to the back. I don’t--I’m not--” He huffed.

She could finish his thoughts for him. I don’t want it to be like this, not after the night we shared, but it has to be. You understand? I’m not ashamed. I’m not sure what the hell is going to happen but I got you. We’re in this together. You understand?

She understood.

“Our focus right now is the kids.” She said, quietly. We’ll come later.

He nodded, and squeezed her fingers so tightly that she was sure they would fall off when he pulled away. And pull away he did. The car stopped at the main entrance and Gwen saw a horde of men with big cameras already waiting to catch a photograph of what she wasn’t sure. But the door opened just slightly, only enough that Gwen could escape the confines of the car without Blake being seen or photographed. She realized it was the driver that had helped her out and she thanked him softly.

The door was shut loudly and she was led to the sliding doors of the hospital entrance. There were only a few questions directed her way and she heard her name a couple of times. She was known to the public as a dress designer, and her own little hold on celebrity saved her from Blake’s
disastrous reputation in the public eye. It still unnerved her, however, for such a private and terrible moment to be intruded on by the press. The only real reason that they were there was because her son managed to get into an accident with the former President of the United State’s son.

She sighed and allowed herself to be brought to the front desk. The driver let her go gently and stepped away from her. “I’ll be praying for you, Ms. Stefani.” He said quietly. His goodbye left her in quiet tears and she thanked him once again for his generosity. She didn’t know how he knew her in such a capacity as intimate as it seemed to be but she was grateful for the moment nonetheless.

At the desk, the woman she inquired about her son’s whereabouts to had waved her in the direction of a waiting room down several halls. Gwen was surprised that she hadn’t gotten lost. Once standing outside the door, she took a deep breath and opened it hesitantly. Several faces greeted her at once. Some she knew, some she didn’t, and the dressmaker realized that it wasn’t a private waiting room, just more private then some. There seemed to be another family waiting inside with them, identical tear-stained faces and all.

To the left of the room sat her crowd. Teddy, Will, Manó, Lani, Dicky, Brad, and Josie were waiting in uncomfortable chairs huddled around each other. There was another man standing close by to them, clearly in the inner circle but not someone that Gwen immediately recognized.

Their solemn faces shot up when she entered and her children immediately ran over to her to envelope their mother in a bone crushing hug. Gwen let silent tears fall as she tightened her hold on them. She was aware of Lani’s crying and Manó’s shaking. When all three of them pulled back, Gwen’s face was an open chasm.

Her oldest son steadied himself before speaking, “I’m so sorry, Mom.”

She ran a shaky hand down his sweaty face. “It’s okay.”

He shook his head. “We were racing and it just...It was so stupid. I should have told him no. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She pulled him into her warm arms and shushed him. She didn’t know what “racing” meant but she knew that it was genuinely an accident. Gwen pulled back after planting a chaste kiss to her son’s forehead. Her eyes looked around the room again to meet Teddy’s guilt stricken face, Will’s worried one, Dicky’s confused expression, Josie’s hostile one, Brad’s sad gaze and the strange man’s curious one.

The door opening once again saved her from having to analyze the different moods in the room. Blake entered and Gwen really noticed that he was wearing his suit from last night, disheveled, and not at all put together in his haste to get ready with her that morning. She was dressed in a pair of sweats and a sweater. Her makeup was still on, her long hair tamed but clearly slept on. She could guess what Josie had already put together just by taking one look at the pair of them.

The stranger from the corner walked over to Blake but he brushed past him. It looked like he was barrelling after her but he brushed past Gwen on his way to his only son in the room. Teddy had stood up when his father entered and he coward back as Blake approached him. To Gwen’s, and the entire room’s horror, the former president grasped Teddy’s shirt in his hands and pushed him up against the wall.

The twenty-two year old whimpered in the face of his father’s anger. Josie cried out to Blake, and Will stood to the mens’ sides, ready to protect his husband but understanding Blake’s authority in the situation. To her surprise, Brad leapt up to the two men and was ready to intervene.
For a moment, the father and son were silent as they stared at one another, Teddy scared and apologetic, Blake seething and hurt. Eventually, Blake spoke, and his deep voice was unrecognizable.

“What did I tell you?”

Teddy’s hands came to rest over his father’s and he blinked back tears. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t think--”

“You never do. You never do and now your brother is lying in a hospital bed. Gwen’s son is lying in a fucking hospital bed!”

“Dad, I’m so--”

Blake let go of him forcefully and stepped away, trying to regain a hold on his temper. “What the fuck happened?” He addressed to the room. “Besides the fucking obvious.” He snapped, casting an angry look at his son.

“We were just going too fast.” Manó spoke up. “Jackson and Teddy were--”

“Racing. Yeah, I know they were. Something I specifically told them not to do when I bought the damn bikes.”

“Blake.” Brad reproached him.

Manó continued cautiously. “A car came out of nowhere and they swerved off and we were just going too fast--”

Gwen slowly put the pieces together. It was why Jackson and Silas were the ones injured and the other boys weren’t. Why did they even let Silas on the bike with Jackson to begin with?

“Where are the doctors? Where the hell are the boys?” Blake demanded.

“They’re working on it, Blake.” The man Gwen didn’t know approached the politician. “They’re gonna give us an update as soon as they know what’s going on. But until then, we need to do damage control. Can you let me do that?”

Blake nodded shakily and let out a deep breath. “Fix it, Tom.”

So this was Tom. The man gave a brief smile and looked around the room. “First thing’s first. I need you to look like you have your shit together. I’ll have Marisa buy you a new suit and you’ll change and freshen up in the bathroom. I don’t want anyone talking to anyone in this hospital, that goes for nurses and doctors. The press already have an early invitation into the accident. We can’t spin it any other way but to some fooling around between boys. The speeding is not ideal, but the police were only involved after, and we can swing Pelphry to not press charges against the boys. I’m assuming Jackson won’t because he was the driver and also your son and Silas is only thirteen which just leaves you Ms. Stefani. Will you be pressing charges?”

All the eyes in the room went to her and she swallowed down a mouthful of vile and shook her head no.

“Good. Now, this won’t be pretty to clean up. It will leave a lasting bitter taste in the mouth to most at home but it won’t affect you much, not for long at least.” Tom said to Blake. “The most important thing here is for everyone to keep their composure and pray that Jack and Silas are going to be okay. And keep your voices down and your conversations not so heavy because the other
family we have to share this room with is not privy to privacy contracts although I suggest drawing some up and having them sign them. It’s your call, Blake.”

Gwen did not envy her love. He wasn’t even allowed to grieve properly or feel these things like normal people without having to think about what it would do to his image or his family’s image.

“No. Leave them be. They’re waiting on good or bad news just like the rest of us.” Blake said, finally sitting down in the chair nearest to him.

Tom nodded. “Alright then. I’ll have Poppy bring some food and drinks while we wait, as well. Ms. Stefani, may I talk to you for a moment?”

Blake’s head shot up. “No, Tom. You wait until we know more about the boys.” It was said quietly, but there was no room for argument in his voice.

Tom looked like he wanted to argue anyways, which made Gwen even more curious about what the man wanted to speak to her about but she trusted Blake, and if he said it needed to wait, then it would.

Since there was no more to be said about any of the matters that had plagued this group of people who had known each other longer than most, Gwen sat down next to Blake. She knew she shouldn’t, judging by the intense look Josie was giving them, and the put-out looks from her children who most likely needed their mother’s comfort, but Gwen needed the comfort and familiarity from the love of her life in this moment, the father of the child currently lying somewhere in this hospital in pain. Even though she couldn’t touch him, just being near him gave her strength.

It was a moment before he spoke, voice falling on deaf ears as he whispered in her general direction. “I’m sorry.”

She wanted to pull him into her. “Why are you sorry? It wasn’t your fault.”

His eyes strained to meet hers. “I told you everything would be okay. I told you they’d take care of him. And they went and put him on a fucking motorcycle at four in the morning like they were invincible. I should have known...I bought those damn bikes. I told them to slow down. I told them not to race. Ever. And here we are. I’m sorry, Gwen.”

The urge to touch him had not settled in the slightest and she sighed. “Accidents happen.” It was all she could say. Of course there were ways to be more cautious and avoid them from happening. But accidents do happen. It would do her no good to condemn anyone. Teddy had wrapped himself in the corner as it was, eyes blank, heart weighed down with guilt. It was no doubt his idea to race, as Blake’s reaction earlier suggested, and it was his brothers, even if he didn’t know it, that had suffered the consequences. But it wasn’t all his fault. Jackson willingly participated, was even the driver, and Silas had agreed, even though he knew better. Manó should have interjected, so should have Will and Teddy’s friends. No one was without blame. Even Gwen. She should have never allowed the boy out of her sight in a strange city to begin with.

Gwen would be carrying all of her guilt and regret with her until she saw for her own eyes that Jackson and Silas were safe. And even then, she wasn’t sure that they would follow her around until the end of time.

Those particular harsh thoughts stayed with Gwen as she waited with the rest of them, keeping her occupied as Blake left her to change into his new suit, as Manó scrambled over to Blake’s seat next to her to surround himself in his mother’s love and forgiveness, as Lani remained glued to Dicky’s
side, as Teddy shielded himself from his father’s wrath when he returned, as Josie busied herself with thoughts of her injured son instead of her emotional injuries inflicted upon her by Blake and Gwen. It was almost a miracle when the door finally opened and a man in his late forties walked in wearing a doctor’s white coat, flanked by two nurses.

He shook hands with Blake first, clearly aware of who his patients were linked to. Then he addressed Josie and then finally, Gwen. He introduced himself as Dr. Lupin.

“Both boys suffered a few broken ribs. Nothing that can’t be fixed. Jackson suffered a dislocated shoulder and a fractured wrist. There are some minor bruises and cuts along his face but other than that, I’m confident in a full recovery. We’re keeping him for two nights to monitor his head injuries and further assess his internal organs.”

Josie breathed a sigh of relief but Blake just remained intent on what the doctor had to say about his other son.

“I regret to inform you about Mr. Howlett, however...Silas suffered many injuries to his lower extremities. His hip is broken, his right leg has three torn ligaments, and I’m afraid his left kneecap was shattered in the accident.” Gwen swayed on two shaken feet and was vaguely aware of two hands catching her. Blake.

The doctor continued solemnly, “I’m aware of the extent of this kind of damage. We can fix it, but he will need extensive physical therapy. My main concern is the kidney damage he’s experiencing due to blunt trauma from the accident. There’s a lot of blood in his urine and I’m afraid that the damage is irreversible...he will need a transplant.”

The wave of gasps and murmurs surrounded her ears but all Gwen could hear was Blake whispering to her as she moved to her knees on the floor. He carefully guided her onto a chair instead and squatted down in front of her.

“Do me a favor and breathe.” He coaxed her. She thought she was breathing.

“Gwen. Gwen, look at me.”

She did. It was all a giant ocean that she saw.

“He’s gonna be just fine.” Blake murmured.

“You can’t know that.” She found herself saying.

“I do know that. If there’s anything I can promise you in this world, it’s Silas pulling through this. We’re gonna get him another kidney and he’s gonna be fine.” She shook her head. “Do you trust me?” She nodded her head. “Then stand up and hold my hand and listen to the doctor.”

Her head remained still but she got to her feet and sought the comfort of his grip. The doctor gave her a small, apologetic, smile.

“He’ll be put on the donor list as soon as he passes the required evaluation.”

“How long?” She murmured.

“Pardon?” The doctor asked.

“How long will it take for him to get the kidney?”

“Well...the average wait time is five years. But I’m confident it won’t take that long. It could be
weeks, months even, but I don’t expect years.” Because of Blake, went unsaid. Clearly, he had
connections and she was expected to use them. “However, living donors are very much an option
here. Family members can be tested to see if they’re a donor match and if they’re willing, Silas
could have a new kidney as soon as tomorrow morning, maybe even tonight if you so wish it.”
Again, if Blake so wishes.

Gwen sighed and felt a hand on her shoulder. Lani had given her a small smile. “My brother and I
will take the test. My mom, too. Dad will fly out to take it, as well.”

Gwen’s insides tightened. Poor Wyatt. Did anyone call him, yet? She needed to tell him about
Silas.

“I’ll have rooms prepped right away.” The doctor told them, exiting in a flourish after explaining
what was next for Jackson and Silas.

The oldest Shelton boy would need his wrist casted, and Silas’s first surgery would involve his hip
and knee. Gwen asked if she could see him before he went in. It was best that she didn’t. The
doctors and nurses needed to work fast if they were going to have the boy ready for the kidney
surgery if any of them were a match.

The mother of three didn’t argue and let them do their jobs. Eventually, her and her children were
taken to three separate rooms to be tested. Gwen had managed to numb herself from that point on
and did everything that was asked of her. When she got back to the waiting room, the family that
was there previously had been removed and one of Tom’s assistants had brought that much needed
food and drink for the family. It was around the same time that one of the nurses allowed the
Shelton family to go and see Jackson. He wasn’t awake just yet, but they could sit with him as long
as they liked.

That left her and Lani in the room alone. With the Shelton clan gone, along with Brad, Tom, and
Will, and with Manó and Dicky out of the room in search for a vending machine, Gwen’s daughter
went to sit by her mother.

“You okay?” Lani asked, softly.

“I am. Surprisingly.”

“Don’t blame yourself. I know that’s what’s going on.”

Gwen gave a short laugh. She didn’t know how not to. There she was, having one of the best nights
with Blake in her arms while her youngest child was out brushing his life with death.

“I’m a mom. I’m always going to think that it’s my fault whenever something happens to my kids.”

Lani kissed her cheek. “You’re an incredible mom. And woman. Clearly, I’m not the only one who
sees that.”

There was a question in her statement and Gwen immediately tensed. “What?”

Lani was staring at her and she didn’t much like the implications of her gaze.

“You and Blake have gotten closer.” Her daughter said. “We’ve just noticed is all...is that
something new? I mean it’s okay if it is--or if you are--I just...you’re both unmarried. You’ve
known each other for awhile now. It’s not completely out of the blue for people like you to connect
after...especially if you’re kids are close--”
“Lani, please stop. You’re rambling.”

Lani had the decency to blush. “I’m sorry. It’s just...it’s a little awkward if you guys are.”

Gwen wanted to sigh. She didn’t even know the half of it. She’d probably hate her if she did. Manó and Dicky’s presence saved her from having to answer her daughter outright, not even sure if she knew what she was going to say if they hadn’t shown up. They were a wonderful distraction as she waited for any news, of Jackson and Teddy both.

Blake and everybody returned after an hour. She wanted to ask how Jackson was but Manó beat her to it.

“He’s still asleep. But you both can go see him if you’d like.” Josie, to Gwen’s surprise, told them.

“I’ll wait until he’s up.” Manó said. And Gwen knew it was because of Wyatt’s accident when he was younger. Seeing his father bruised and weak in a hospital bed had scarred him for life. Now, the only way he could see someone like that is if they were at least talking and could open their eyes to look at him. And since Manó wasn’t going, Lani and Dicky decided they would wait, too.

Gwen would have liked to see Jackson but for some inexplicable reason, she felt like it wouldn’t be appropriate. And since Blake nor Josie had offered the invitation to her themselves, she kept her mouth quiet.

Blake sat in a chair in the corner, well away from Gwen. She didn’t allow it to affect her and soon went back to staring at the floor, numb and resigned. She didn’t have to wait long for the emotions to come back to her when the same nurse that had administered her blood and tissue test came in to reveal the results.

No matches.

Of fucking course. Of fucking course.

Lani had deflated. Manó grew angry. The rest of the room had just felt sorry for them, conflicted themselves, for reasons Gwen would never understand. She chanced a look at Blake and saw him lean over his knees before he promptly threw up all over his shoes. Without hesitation, Gwen was on her knees by his side, careful to avoid the mess.

Blake shook his head and leaned back, trying to draw air into his clogged lungs. Gwen tried to calm him down, reassure his racing heart, but she wasn’t sure how to do this with her own threatening to beat out her chest.

She knew the reason for his sudden illness. And she was surprised she wasn’t sick herself.

He knew it was time. He had to get tested himself. And if he was a match, he’d have to give a kidney to his son, a son that only three people in that room knew about. If they thought they were going to be able to do it their way, they were so poorly mistaken. And Gwen felt that loss just as heavily as Blake did. It was unfair. The choice had been taken from them. But they had no other options. It was this or wait and she wasn’t going to gamble with her son’s life because she wanted to keep the identity of his biological father a secret.

There was already so much to be dealt with and now this. Gwen would have cried if she wasn’t too worried about Blake. Staring at the man in front of her, racked with another bout of sickness, Gwen rubbed his back and waited for his retching to subside. Bradley was on his other side, helping him out of his jacket and loosening his tie.
A look around the room and Gwen saw the children scared at Blake’s state of mind and body. Even Josie had managed to look truly afraid for him, sympathizing in a way she was sure took even Josie by surprise. After all, she knew that Blake was going through the motions with both of his children hurt in the accident.

“Let’s get him to the bathroom.” Gwen suggested to Brad.

He nodded and helped Blake stand up. They both wrapped an arm around each of their shoulders and led him out of the room. The bathroom was just across the hall and they went into the men’s. Blake, coming back to them slowly, stripped his shirt and shoes for them until he was just in a white undershirt and dress pants. The door opened suddenly and Tom walked in, carrying a brand new dress shirt and shoes.

“God, Tom. Are you never not prepared?” Brad asked, serious and yet joking at the same time.

“You’re friend pays me a lot of money to keep him from falling apart. I will always be prepared for shit to hit the fan.” Tom responded, handing the shoes to Brad and unpackaging the black shirt himself.

Blake sniffed and leaned over the sink, running the water until it was cold enough to sting. He then put his head underneath the faucet and breathed deeply.

“Brad, if you would leave us for a second please.” Tom requested, sensing an opportunity.

But Blake’s head shot up and he wrung out the icy water from his hair and eyes. “Brad stays. He needs to know.”

Tom refused flat out. “I let you handle the situation with Gwen but this is non-negotiable. Too many people already know and one of them is only keeping a tight lip because you have her hands tied around a shit load of money.”

“Know what?” Brad immediately asked.

“Nothing.” Tom said.

Blake sighed harshly. “Tom, you’re not gonna win this one.”

“I’m not trying to win, Blake. I’m trying to do my job.”

“Then do it with him knowing.” He challenged.

“Knowing what?” Brad asked, growing impatient.

Tom and Blake stared each other down before the fixer eventually gave up, throwing his hands in the air and stepping away. Gwen was thoroughly confused but the dilemma was cleared up very shortly after that as Blake turned to his best friend.

“You’re probably going to hate me. And I wouldn’t blame you. But it was a lot of shit and I could never find the right time--”

“Just tell me Blake.”

The former president looked at her as he said, “Silas is my son.” Tearing his eyes away from Gwen, he planted them on Brad. “And I know you have a lot of questions but what I need you to focus on is my little boy’s recovery. And I need you to understand that if I don’t take this test, he
“You’re not even sure he’ll get one even after you take the test. Which is what you don’t understand. It will be out in the open and--” Tom tried but Blake cut him off, again.

“It doesn’t have to be. Plenty of strangers donate kidneys. It’s all about a match. It has nothing to do with me being his father. All that does is just increase the chance that I am a match.”

“Except they will ask why you even offered in the first place.”

“Me and Gwen have been friends for a long time now. Are families, are children have always been close. This is a no brainer. If I can help, I’m going to help. If anything, that should boost my public opinion.”

Tom shook his head. “It’s a risk.”

Blake pinched the bridge of his nose, whether from irritation or another bout of sickness. “This is my son we’re talking about here. This is no longer up for discussion. I’m getting the test.”

“Then you’re not going to tell anyone unless you are a match. No one knows but us in this room and the nurse who does it. If you’re not a match, we never speak of this again.”

“Fine.”

Gwen felt like she had been watching a tennis match, but she wasn’t sure who came out the victor. It wasn’t a tie per say because neither man was appeased by the situation. Gwen’s eyes raised to Brad. Poor Brad.

She stepped forward and put a reassuring hand on his wrist. He didn’t flinch or pull away, and so Gwen stayed put. “I didn’t tell him for the first eight years. I regret that. And when he did find out...I didn’t want anyone to know. He never told you because of me. So please don’t be angry with him. He’s your best friend and he needs you now more than ever...I need you, Brad.”

She didn’t expect him to understand right away. She even anticipated him to be angry and upset with the both of them. But to her surprise, and she was having a lot of them lately, Brad’s eyes softened and he pulled his wrist away only to press a reassuring grip onto her shoulder.

“I don’t know whether to call you stupid or extremely smart for procreating with that rich asshole.”

It wasn’t what she expected to come out of Brad’s mouth, but seeing how it wasn’t an insult or some vile words condemning their existence, Gwen smiled softly at him and allowed his humor to paint over the tension in the room.

“I was an asshole. I’m trying to be better.” Blake spoke quietly, an apology laced throughout his deep voice.

Brad sighed and spared his friend a hard look. “You should have told me...but it’s over with now. I’ve got three nephews. I can’t say I’m too tore up at the notion of another Shelton boy driving me insane and calling me Uncle.”

The words calmed Blake and he gave his friend a soft nod of acknowledgment at Brad’s efforts to accept Silas right away. Gwen wondered if he would accept Lani in much the same manner. She couldn’t see it.

“Well I’m glad another person knows about this sensitive tidbit of information that could ruin your
political career forever. But we have to manage to get this test taken as discreetly as possible and that starts with getting it out of the way as quickly as we can.” Tom announced. Gwen couldn’t help but smirk at the man. His job was to keep secrets and fix problems for his clients and she and Blake had a shit ton of fumes to fan any flames that he would try so desperately to put out. She did not envy him. In fact, there wasn’t a man in her life that she did not pity in some way or another.

The four of them piling out of the bathroom would have been a sight to anyone that would have been lucky enough to see it. Fortunately for them, the small group made it back to the waiting room without detection. Once inside, Blake persuaded everyone to forget about his bout of illness and focus on Jackson and Silas once again. His excuse to escape the room without suspicion was Tom’s insistence that he prepare a statement to give to the press once they knew more about Jackson and Silas’ condition later on.

Gwen silently wished him luck in her head. Part of her wanted him to be a match. The other part wished that he wasn’t so that they wouldn’t have to blow up their entire lives. Either way, the situation was out of her hands. She needed to wait and wait she did.

Her nerves were only slightly settled once they heard news of Silas’s surgery. They managed to perform a partial hip replacement, which was better than an entire replacement in her book. The shattered knee was put back together with metal wires and a few screws. All in all, it was a success, with two orthopedic surgeons working on both areas at the same time. Gwen didn’t know that was possible but she was highly grateful for their skills and efforts.

They were allowed to see him once he was settled and once Blake came back from his testing and speech session, which she did not know was an actual thing they were planning to do, Gwen, her kids, and Teddy, who still felt horrible guilty, ventured to her little boy’s hospital room.

It felt wrong to leave Blake behind but she knew that she had to. Until the test came back, he wasn’t the boy’s first priority. They had to keep up appearances, and she hated every part of it. Part of her didn’t want him to see S.J. as she had not yet seen Jackson in his own room but she quieted that petty part of her heart and walked the winding hallways to her youngest.

She wasn’t prepared for the sight of him. Surgery seemed to have sucked all of the life out of her little boy. He was pale, and somehow looked smaller lying limp in the bed. There were bruises around his face, cuts and marks along his arms and legs where he’d hit the ground. His leg and hip where elevated at an awkward angle, and his breathing came too slow and deep for her soul to be put at ease at laying eyes on his very much alive form.

Gwen did not hesitate to pull a chair closer to his bed and sit next to him, taking in his battered body. She held his hand gently and sent up several prayers to God that he heal her baby, that he let Blake be a donor match and healthy enough to give their baby a new kidney. She prayed harder than she ever had in her life and could only sit back and hope that they were heard.

She was aware of Lani and Manó grabbing seats on the opposite side of their brother’s bed while Teddy remained standing. There was no comfort that she could offer the boy that would help him with his guilt. So she said and did nothing but look at her youngest until Tom knocked softly on the door. Looking around the room, she saw that she was alone. Gwen didn’t know how long she had been sitting with Silas for Teddy was no longer in the room, and neither were her children.

The guilt had probably been choking Teddy alive to the point where he could no longer stand being in the same room with the evidence of his mistakes laying so broken before him. Gwen wasn’t surprised that Manó was no longer present. In fact, she was even shocked that he came in the room to begin with, knowing Silas wasn’t awake to greet his older brother. Somewhere, the mother of three was aware that Lani had touched her shoulder and whispered in her ear that she
was leaving to go back to the waiting room, probably to seek comfort in Dicky’s arms. All Gwen could focus on was Silas.

Tom cleared his throat and walked into the room cautiously. She looked at him with tired eyes.

“The nurse has the results. I asked her to wait for you. The three of us only need to hear the results first. In case it’s—”

Gwen stood, softly placing a kiss on Silas’s hand. “I get it, Tom.”

The fixer nodded and looked at the boy in the bed. “I know I seem like an ass but I do wish that Blake is a match. No child should have to go through something like this. No parent should have to either.”

She had nothing to say to that but ‘thank you’ and she didn’t feel in the mood to thank anyone right then, except for the people who were tending to her son’s health. Gwen walked over to Tom and squeezed his arm instead before walking out of the room.

Outside of the waiting room door stood Blake and a nurse, the same one from before who had administered her own test. Gwen took a deep breath and stood as close to Blake as she could without seeming inappropriate. She couldn’t tell from the look on the nurse’s face if they were going to be having good or bad news.

“Is this everyone you wanted Mr. Felton?” The nurse asked. Tom nodded and the nurse took a deep breath. “The tests concluded that Mr. Shelton is a donor match.”

Gwen let out a strangled noise, somewhere between a cry and a laugh. She turned to Blake and immediately buried her face in his neck. His arms wrapped around her without hesitation. She could distantly hear Tom dismissing and thanking the nurse all in one breath.

“You lucky bastard.” Tom said underneath his breath.

She could practically feel Blake’s smile in her hair as he pressed a kiss to her head. She pulled back and leaned up on her tippy toes to kiss him on the mouth, not caring who saw. Tom let out a harsh breath, clearly wanting to intervene but thought better of it as Blake pulled her impossibly close and melted their lips even further together. It was a moment before they pulled away, and she laughed at the amazed expression on his face.

“I love you.” She said quietly, staring into his impossibly blue eyes.

His nostrils flared and his heart picked up speed. She had said it when they were making love last night, but he hadn’t said it back. This time, he did.

Tom’s anxiety grew by the minute and Gwen took pity on the man. She finally stepped away from Blake’s warmth and turned to the fixer. “I was thinking and I really don’t see why we have to tell everyone. Why can’t we just say that Blake wanted to help? That he felt guilty and wanted to take the test to just see if he was a match and now that he is...he just wants to make it right. He wants to help. They don’t have to know who Silas is to him.”

Tom sighed heavily. “I thought about that already. But we can’t. Not when it comes to this medical shitstorm. It’s serious. We can’t lie to the doctors or nurses about his biological affiliation with the boy. If there’s an underlying medical condition or anything they need to know before they do this transplant and we lie to them, it could be serious repercussions for everyone involved. Once the doctors know, the nurses...I can’t promise any of them will talk unless we force them to sign confidentiality contracts which even then someone could break for the right price. Do you know
how much money a trash magazine or the press would pay to get their hands on information like this? One whiff of this story and it’s a scandal across America’s front page newspapers and television screens. Not to mention your families and by families I mean Josie.” He directed his pointed look at Blake and the pro tempore winced.

“We just can’t, Gwen. So we need to go in there and tell the room and hope like hell no one threatens to kill anyone.” Tom finished, looking between them both.

A sick feeling crawled its way from her toes until it took root in her throat, preventing her from speaking. Blake seemed to understand her hesitance and turned her to face him.

“Listen to me. This isn’t the most craziest thing we’ve ever done.”

“It’s not?” She asked, finding that hard to believe.

Blake shook his head. “It might be the most terrifying thing we ever do telling them all but to me...to me Gwen, it’s like finally stepping on that plane.” Her breath hitched at his words and she stared up at him with all the trust and faith that she had left in the world, that she had left in him--in them. He smiled at her. “It’s time to come home. Will you let me come home now? I want to come home, Gwen.”

And how could she refuse him? How could she have pushed him away when all she ever wanted was for him to think of her and the kids as such?

“No more running?” She looked up at him.

“No more running.” He agreed.

“Come home?” She asked.

“Always.”
She did not want to be the thing that tore down his bright and brilliant tower. She did not want to be called the mistress or the whore or the liar. She did not want to be made to feel cold and sad and ashamed for falling in love with a man that was the other half of her soul.

No matter what she did or did not want, Gwen steeled herself to receive everything she deserved. She did it for Silas, but who she really did it for was herself. She did it for happiness, even if she never saw a glimpse of it ever again after.

Blake led them in the room. And she was so thankful for the man that he’d become. He took charge, he was willing to take everyone’s pain, everyone’s anger, and everyone’s hate so that she didn’t have to. In this moment, Gwen was the coward, and Blake every bit the soldier fighting this last battle for them.

The room fell into a silence once the inhabitants noticed her and Blake standing together, Gwen just over his shoulder, next to Tom, who had put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. It was unexpected, but appreciated nonetheless.

Blake cleared his throat once. “I have something to tell you all.”

Gwen saw the moment recognition dawned on Josie’s face and the only regret that Gwen had was that they didn’t pull the younger woman aside to warn her before they revealed to their children of their betrayal. It was too late, and she and Josie knew it. It didn’t stop her from trying to intervene anyways, standing up and coming near her ex husband to placate him.

“Blake..Blake don’t. Not like this.” Josie pleaded.

Blake shook his head. “I don’t have a choice.”

Josie’s face contorted into a mix of emotions: raw anger, pain, bitterness, pity, and finally, acceptance. She stepped back and swallowed harshly, knowing that in a couple of minutes from now, her embarrassment would be revealed to those whose opinion she probably valued most, if not the public’s even more.

Blake sighed. “I took the test to see if I was a match to be Silas’s donor.” Another deep breath. “I am.”

Shuddered breaths. Lani and Manó sighed with relief, if not half confusion. Gwen took a step forward, wanting to tell Blake to just forget it all, suddenly. Don’t say anything. Don’t tear us apart. We just got back together. We’re in a good place, finally. Don’t ruin it.

But he shook his head and ignored her. “It’s good news. I’m happy and relieved, as I know you all are. But this is--the reason I’m telling you this really is because...in a couple of hours...the world is going to know that Silas is--”
“Blake, stop.”

His mouth shut firmly as Gwen cut him off. She stood by his side now and looked up at him, conveying what she couldn’t say aloud. She had to be the one to say it. He understood.

Preparing herself and not looking at anyone in particular as she found the words, Gwen tried to spill her guts, and was horrified when nothing came out. It was several moments before Tom stepped up but Blake spoke before the man could.

“Thirteen years ago...I slept with Gwen.”

Seven words should not have the effect that they did on a room full of people but Gwen was staring at an impact so strong she’d have thought Blake told their families that he murdered someone. And as if things couldn’t get any worse, Blake tried desperately to make them so.

“Silas is my son ...and the only thing I can say, the only thing I want to say is that I’m sorry. I know it doesn’t make a difference but I am. I thought I wouldn’t ever have to tell any of you this but the world is going to know eventually and I wanted you to hear it from us first.”

Gwen couldn’t deal with the silence like she thought she could and opened her mouth to speak, but once again, nothing came out. She was truly at a loss for words.

This time, Tom was successful in getting a word in. “I know this is a shock. But I urge everyone here to remember where they are and who they are. This is a...delicate...situation and it will soon be privy to people that will not treat it as such.”

“Why does it have to leave this room at all?” Josie spoke, barely containing the hiss in her voice. “That was the agreement was it not? I keep my mouth shut and no one has to know of my husband’s betrayal.”

“You knew?” Lani asked the former first lady.

“Let’s not get off topic.” Tom intervened, sensing the younger girl’s agitation. “The truth is going to come out whether we want it to or not. This hospital will know, and we can’t take the chance of someone speaking. We have to reveal this ourselves or it will look bad.”

“It’s going to look bad either fucking way.” Teddy snapped, eyes burning with barely concealed anger as he looked between his parents and Gwen.

“Regardless,” Blake gritted out. “This is happening.”

“Blake’s right. So we have to come to terms with it right now or at least in the next couple of hours or so. We need to prepare. We need to come up with a statement and release it to the press--”

“I’m sorry but absolutely not. I’m not putting the children through that.” Josie interrupted.

Tom looked ready to choke her out. “With all due respect, they’re no longer children. The only child here is Silas and he’s waiting to get a kidney from his father so that he can live to see himself not be a child any longer.”

“Tom.” Brad admonished, not liking the way the conversation was heading.

“Look,” Josie breathed in Gwen’s direction. “I know you don’t have much of a heart to take another woman’s man from her, but I know you care about your children. You can’t possibly be on board with this.”
The mother of three flinched at the mention of her infidelity but held her ground. “Tom is right. Our kids are adults now. I’ve tried to protect them from this for too long. I have to tell the truth now. If it helps Silas—”

“But not the rest of us! Am I the only one who sees how messy this will get?” Screeched Josie. “They’re going to want details, Blake. You know how this works. The reporters, the public court of opinion, dates, times, and locations.”

“We only give them what we need to.” Tom spoke for the man.

Josie scoffed. “I’m not ready to be accosted outside my front door or on the sidewalk when I decide to walk my fucking dog. Are you?” She asked Gwen. “Because they’re not going to stop. You have a child with a former president, one you conceived while he was still in office, married with children of his own. They’re going to want to know when the affair started, when it ended, how long did it last, what happened when, what did Josie know? And my favorite, when did she know it?”

“I’ll handle Gwen and her family. I know you’re more than capable of not answering anything you don’t want to, Josie.” Tom said, with a bite in his tone.

“You’re treading on thin water here, Tom. Let’s not forget what else I know here, too.”

In that moment, Gwen hated her, if not for the severe reaction she’d given, than the threat of mentioning Lani’s biological father. She expected Blake to feel the same way but he rubbed his forehead and regarded his ex-wife with a weary expression.

“Josie,” Blake began. “I’m asking you not to.”

“You didn’t ask when you offered half your fortune to keep my mouth closed.”

He sighed. “You say you’re thinking about the kids, right? But this is thinking about yourself.” Blake said, calmly.

“Because no one else will! What the hell did you ever give me but the money?! Our marriage was a sham! You never loved me. You never gave me that unwavering devotion that you offer up so sweetly to your mistress. What do I have to show for knowing and loving you, huh? Some sealed divorce papers, a dead baby, and some money to keep my mouth shut? So, excuse me if I make sure that I make it out alive of this mess you put me in!”

“I offered you an out years ago!” Blake yelled, his patience snapping like a rubberband.

“And I should have took it! You’re absolutely right. I regret holding onto a man who didn’t have a care in the world whether I let him go. But I refuse to allow my life to be put in the media’s crossfires now. If all we had to talk about was a blue dress and a Happy Birthday Mr. President, I’d be fine. I would not give a damn. But I am not going to stand anywhere near you and smile while you tell the entire world that you had an affair with Gwen Stefani, a woman who used to work for me, a woman who you used to know before you ever met me and carried some sick torch for ages while I carried on none the wiser, giving you sons and a whole life most men would fucking kill for.”

“I offered you an out years ago!” Blake yelled, his patience snapping like a rubberband.

“And I am certainly not going to answer any questions about how you couldn’t keep your hands off her while staying at Camp David, an invitation I extended out of the kindness of my heart because I didn’t want you to fucking be lonely up there or worse, not go at all, so that you could grieve your
dead mother without me. And if you think for a second that I’m going to talk about how you screwed this woman at her own daughter’s wedding in an electrical closet while you thought I was oblivious to the looks you were both giving to each other just moments before, then you have another thing coming. Or maybe you want me to talk about all the late night phone calls, or the trip to Portland, or how when you were shot the name you called out was Stella.” For just a second, Josie caught her breath and looked around the room, eyes unseeing until they landed on Blake, again. “I can think of so many more ways you chose to degrade our marriage. And I will not admit to the world that what you did was just a simple mistake. Because that Blake...that is not you making a mistake. That is not you cheating on me. That is not you succumbing to the base needs of your dick over my heart and feelings, that is you--that is you...that is--”

“That is me being in love with another woman.” He answered, voice calm, regrets none, heart open, and every bit the man Gwen had fallen in love with.

And for a moment, she wished she hadn’t. For a moment, Gwen wished she’d never met Blake Shelton, because then that would have erased the look of complete and utter suffering from Josie’s face. And just as quickly as the mother of two had revealed her pain, she sobered up in much the same manner.

“If you try to tell that disgusting fairytale to the press, I will make you wish you never set eyes on me.”

The threat was clear to Gwen’s ears, and the only thing that ran through her mind was how sorry she was to have caused this woman so much pain. She thought she knew where Josie was coming from, but she had never been used, Gwen was the user. She had never been cheated on, Gwen was the cheater. She had never lost a baby, Gwen had been blessed with three, instead, one of which was a girl, something Josie longed for the most. And knowing that Josie came out on the losing side once all of this was out in the world, had Gwen actually reconsidering what she thought was her only option. It didn’t matter that Josie had practically outing almost every indiscretion she and Blake ever made to their children, the dressmaker wanted to right all the wrongs she had done to this woman, to this mother.

“Josie--” She tried but Blake put a hand on her arm, silencing her for good.

“...I know I hurt you. And I know that word doesn’t even begin to explain what I did to you over the course of our marriage.” Blake began. “And I can’t take any of it back. I know that to ask you for this one last sacrifice would be the most selfish and arrogant thing I could ever think to do. But I’m doing it. I’m doing it because if we don’t say openly what we feel, what we want, who we really are, then a part of us dies, and the people we lie and deceive ourselves with die with us. I don’t want to bring you down any further than I already have, Jo. You think the truth won’t help you but it's the only thing that ever has. So please. For our children, for yourself, please. ”

Gwen would admit to any one who would listen that Josie was a better person than she was. She was a thousand times better. She surpassed Gwen as a woman, maybe even as a mother, and it did not take any ounce of effort to extend that compliment to her, albeit silently and in her head. But Gwen had given it nonetheless, watching with her own two eyes Josie’s decision. All it took was a blink, a hitched breath, and a mere look filled with so much hesitation and caution, suddenly flooded with resignation. Whatever came next, Josie was determined to come out on top of this even though her name was to be dragged through the mud along with the rest of them. She would sacrifice another piece of herself for this man, and Gwen would swear it up and down, Josie was a better woman than her. This sacrifice was proof of it.

If it had been Gwen in her shoes, would she have done the same?
Gwen knew not to thank the woman or directly speak to her now that she got what she wanted. Cooperation, acceptance, no further hostility, at least not to her face. But now that Josie had been taken care of for the time being, Gwen knew the kids would be much less forthcoming, if not at all. She was proven right when she looked upon their chilling faces.

Teddy’s was most disturbing. It seemed like all the fight had gone out of Josie and right into her son. Manó had been faring better, judging from the quiet contemplative expression in his eyes, but he still looked disgusted. It was an emotion mirrored on Lani’s face. She couldn’t quite believe what Josie had revealed, and Gwen was right back to wishing the woman hadn’t said a word.

“Look,” Tom began. “Why don’t we take a break? Let’s get some air, stretch our legs, and we’ll come back to this once everyone has settled down some.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me right then.” Lani spoke up, eyes looking upon her mother. Gwen’s breath caught. “When I asked you about him. Why didn’t you just tell me then. I thought we had a better relationship than this?”

She half expected someone, even Blake, to defend her to her daughter but her love stood off to the side. Years earlier he would have and it would have caused a scene. Gwen gathered an imitation of a breath and addressed Lani with a steady voice.

“I didn’t tell you because I had to protect a lot of people from the truth. You won’t understand until you have children. It would have confused you and Manó and Silas. It would have hurt your brother and Blake and his family and--”

“Not that. About Blake. Why didn’t you just tell me that you loved him? That you’ve always loved him?”

The words took the wind out of her lungs once again and this time, Blake came to rescue her sails.

“I know I’m probably the last person you want to hear from right now but this thing...you can’t know how to tell someone. There isn’t a right time. There isn’t a place in the world that we could go to tell you about all of it. There’s too much and there’s not enough words. Maybe one day, we’ll find them. But right now...right now, I’m afraid you’re gonna have to accept whatever your mother can tell you. Whatever and whenever she manages it.”

Lani looked like she wanted to argue but the only thing she said was, “If it was me...I wouldn’t have done it this way. There’s a right way--”

“There’s no right way to lie to your children.” Blake cut her off. “There’s no right way to fall in love with someone. There’s no right way to hurt the people closest to you. I have my way, your mother has her own way, and you have your way. As for the right way, the correct way, and the only way, it doesn’t exist. That’s why we’re human. It’s why we’ll never be without flaw.”

“This coming from the perfect Blake Shelton. Former President, without blemish. Pro tempore, without scandal. I for one can’t wait to see the media eat you alive, Dad.” Teddy voiced from his corner.

Blake’s eyes froze over. “I know you’re angry, Teddy--”

“Angry doesn’t even begin to cover the half of it, Dad. Were you angry and disappointed earlier because I messed up or because I hurt your precious new son?” He spat.

“Teddy, slow down.” Brad tried to comfort him but the twenty-two year old dismissed him in favor of confronting his father.
To Blake’s credit, he didn’t react with anything but silence. It was a moment before he ventured to use his words. “I was angry because three of my children were doing something particularly stupid, and dangerous, and all three of you could’ve been killed. I’m disappointed because you didn’t think about your mothers, and how much pain and grief you would have caused them if you died.”

This shut Teddy up, but it didn’t quiet the rumbling pit of anger rising in his stomach. Gwen could see a blow up in the near future and she prayed with everything that she had left that it wouldn’t destroy Blake’s relationship with his son. She couldn’t handle it if it did.

As if the universe knew they needed a brief reprieve from the building tension and emotion trying to suffocate the room, a knock on the door sounded and Dr. Lupin walked in. He could sense some type of distress in the room but chose not to comment or acknowledge it.

“I’ve heard that we have a donor match.” He said, voice laced with happiness.

Blake stepped forward and regarded the man. “I was hoping, if it was possible, and if Silas was strong enough, if we might be able to push this surgery up today--tonight even.”

The doctor nodded, enthusiastically. “Children have a high recovery rate after surgery because they tend to heal faster than adults. Their ability to bounce back is astounding. And although we would typically advise to do this tomorrow morning, I’m positive Silas will be ready to go back under the knife and anesthesia by tonight with no problem. With a kidney transplant, it typically takes about two to three hours. I’ll have an O.R. room booked by no later than ten tonight. This will give Silas plenty of time for his body to rest and recover before we go back in. We will get you settled into a room and prepped a couple of hours before the surgery. Before that however, we have to go over an in depth medical history record and take a few other tests. Kidney transplants are typically not fatal but it’s always best to know the risks and consequences. You’ll be briefed about what living life will be like with just one kidney. All the medication and therapy that goes along with it will be informed to you at a later time. I suggest you have all your affairs in order and see to anyone you wish before the surgery, just in case.”

Blake nodded, expecting as much.

“Well then. I’m happy things worked out. I’ll have a nurse come and retrieve you shortly to get started on this long process.”

“Thank you Doctor.”

Tom waited for the door to close before he addressed Blake. “I’m gonna call the lawyers. You need to look over your will and assets one more time. Then Judy will be here to draw up this statement. I’ll release it as soon as you make it out of the surgery.”

Blake leaned down closer to Tom and lowered his voice, although Gwen could still hear him. “Find me a conference room in this damn building. I need to get away from everyone--except Brad. I want him with me.”

Tom nodded, eyes glossing over Gwen quickly. “Will do. We can start now if you want? Before the nurse needs you.”

Blake agreed. “Brad, come here.”

His friend obeyed and Blake put a hand on his shoulder. “I need you. You good?”

Brad nodded. “Yeah, whatever you need.”
“Blake.” Gwen said his name in disbelief. She could understand needing to get away from everyone else, but her?

The father of four looked at her, giving her a brief smile and leaning down to kiss her on the cheek. “I’ll be back.”

There was a question in her eyes but he avoided looking at them as he pulled Tom and Brad out of the room. She had to remind herself to trust him. If they were at odds, their families would eat them alive, and she’d have no one on her side.

The men’s absence from the room was most certainly felt, and seeing as how she didn’t have an excuse to leave, other than to sit with her unconscious son, Gwen took a minute to herself and sat down in the closest chair she could find. Thankful beyond reason that no one tried to talk to her or insult her any further, the dressmaker put her head in her hands and willed herself to a place anywhere but that hospital room.

She was vaguely aware of people coming and going, no doubt getting that much needed air that Tom suggested earlier. She could sympathize. Gwen wouldn’t want to be in a room with her either. Keeping her eyes closed definitely helped and for a moment, she even managed to drift off to sleep before her awkward sitting position stopped her from falling into a deep sleep. Her neck was strained, her elbows dug into her thighs at a tired disposition. She’d been awake for far too long.

By the time she managed to peek at the clock on the wall, it was nearing evening. God.

The only other person in the room was Will, who was sleeping in the corner. Gwen let out a sigh of relief. Will might hate her too but he didn’t seem like the type to have an opinion where it didn’t concern him.

She shifted slightly and drawled her knees to her chest. She missed Blake. She missed her kids. She especially missed Silas. She would have taken his brooding silence and less than pleasurable attitude over the boy lying limp in that hospital bed.

The thought led her to Wyatt for some reason and she pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed her ex-husband’s number.

He picked up on the fourth ring. “Gwen.” He breathed, and the sound of his voice calmed her immediately. She stood up and walked from the room and into the deserted hallway.

“Wyatt.” She found herself crying out the name.

“Lani called me. I know. I’ve--We’re trying to get a flight out but planes are difficult--”

“No, I know. You don’t have to tell me. I wasn’t sure if you even should now that the surgery is going to happen.”

Wyatt breathed. “I thought the same but Lani seemed like she really wanted me there...You told them.” It wasn’t a question.

She nodded even though he couldn’t see it. “We did. We had to. I’m sorry I didn’t include you in that decision.”

“I just...I don’t want things to change between me and Silas when he finds out--”

“They won’t. I told you a long time ago with Lani. They’re still your kids. Blake doesn’t want to replace you. He didn’t even want them to find out now that we were--” She cut off, knowing
revealing to him that she and Blake were as good as together wasn’t something that he would be
too excited to know.

“It’s okay. Lani told me.”

Gwen leaned her forehead against the wall. “Of course she did. She’s so angry with me.”

“...They’ll come around, eventually.”

“Yeah…”

“...I’m glad he was a match. Wish him...Please thank him for me, and tell him I wish him a speedy
recovery.”

Gwen smiled, tears forming in her eyes. “I will.”

“I’ll get the next available flight out when it comes. Keep me updated. Kiss our boy for me.”

“Of course. Thank you, Wyatt ...You know I love you.”

He laughed. “I know. I love you too, Gwen.”

The phone clicked. Gwen turned around and leaned her back against the wall, sighing. Her eyes
were closed. When she opened them again, she saw Blake standing just a couple of feet away from
her, eyes blank, expression unclear.

“I didn’t know you were there,” she said, regretting the words the second they were out of her
mouth. Her calm mood was deserting her by the seconds that passed.

His lips twitched. “I can see that.”

They stared at one another and she saw neither scorn nor jealousy, not even the slightest
discomfort. Just indifference. She couldn’t take it anymore. She wouldn’t apologize for seeking
comfort. He had left her. He left her all alone.

“Did you want to tell me something?” Gwen asked.

“No. Did you?”

He was being so cryptic. She hated it. Was he affected or not?

“No,” she said shortly, turning her back on him and looking at the wall. There was a picture of a
little boy in a hospital bed smiling. She stared blindly at the frame, which reflected her tired face.

Was this where things started falling apart? Is there where she was proven wrong? What did she
think was going to happen? But Gwen guarded herself from those thoughts. This was about Silas.
So if she and Blake didn’t make it out together after all this, at least she’d have her son. She wanted
both but she couldn’t always get what she want--

His body was suddenly flushed against hers, her back pressed against his chest, his legs bracketing
hers as he wrapped strong arms around her flat stomach. A hand came up and swept her hair out of
the way, caressing the skin of her neck. Warm breath ghosted over her ear as he leaned down and
began to nuzzle the sensitive skin there. Her hands went to his own over her abdomen, tightening
around his fingers as she arched her neck to give him better access.

“You’re mine.” He breathed.
She tried to calm her racing heart. “I know that.”

He nuzzled closer. She tensed slightly, turning around in his arms. “Earlier...Why did you leave me like that?”

His eyes darkened. “…I didn’t want you around for---You couldn’t be around for the decisions I had to make.”

“What decisions?”

He shook his head. “Just don’t worry about it. It’s over and done with. Now kiss me.”

Her hands came to rest on his chest. “Blake--”

“Kiss me. You know you want to.”

She smirked. “Of course I do.”

“Our nice morning was interrupted.” His hands trailed down the length of her back, resting just above the curve of her ass.

“We’re in a hallway.” She murmured, eyes flickering to the waiting room door.

“Very observant.”

She slapped him lightly on the shoulder. “I mean it. I don’t want anyone to see us like this.”

“Then kiss me quickly.”

Gwen sighed, exasperated, but couldn’t see him dropping the matter if she didn’t. With one last look around the hall, Gwen leaned up on her toes and pecked him lightly on the lips. Blake smirked, amused.

“That’s all you get.” She said, knowing the teasing glint in his eyes.

Blake stepped into her, bracketing her against the wall once more, but this time, they were face to face. Quietly, he said to her, “I want you to know that I intend to marry you.”

He pulled her tighter against him and Gwen latched onto his arms, fingertips digging into cloth. She thought she wouldn’t be able to speak with something like that said to her in such a serious and yet nonchalant tone. But she found words, and looked up at Blake as if he was the reason that she had any to begin with.

“Is this a proposal?” She asked, tentatively.

Blake shook his head. “No...but I wanted you to know my intentions...just in case--”

It suddenly clicked. “Nothing’s going to happen to you, Blake.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Just like you told me Silas would be fine, I know you will be too.”

He sighed. “Just--if I don’t--if something happens--”

“It won’t--”
“If it does...I wanted you to know that I wanted nothing more than to be your husband.”

He looked into her eyes with such intensity that she could almost feel him probing inside of her heart. She said the only thing that came to her in that moment.

“Do you remember when I told you a long time ago that maybe someday you’d kiss me back to life?” He thought for a moment, and then nodded, eyes glossing over. She smiled at him. “You did. You have. And even though you’re not proposing, I’d spend the rest of that second chance at life with you by my side in a heartbeat.”

Blake’s hands tangled in her hair, and when he gently tilted her head back so that she was looking up at him properly, right into his eyes, he lowered his lips to hers.

They had shared many kisses in the past two days, but Gwen felt a change in this one specifically. This embrace was simultaneously more passionate and yet more tender than any they had shared in the past. Gwen could feel hope and love swell within her chest, and tears of pain and happiness sprang to her closed eyes. Wrapping her arms around his broad shoulders, she put everything she had into that kiss, willing him to feel how much she loved him, and how much she desired to never let him go.

A throat clearing tore their mouths apart and Gwen looked over to the waiting room door, blush tinting her cheeks as Tom stood there with Brad and Manó. Tom looked exasperated, Brad somewhat smug, and Manó clearly uncomfortable.

Blake pulled away from her and sent the men a guarded look. “Sorry, Manó.”

Her eldest son regarded Blake with an impassioned stare but there was no real contempt in his eyes. He seemed to be accepting the idea of Blake and her together better than the rest of the kids.

Tom looked at his watch. “It’s almost time.”

Gwen looked at Blake. “What time are they taking you back?”

“Doctor said in about half an hour.” Tom replied.

“Do you want me to go with you?” She asked, hesitantly.

“Go sit with Silas, first. You can come and see me off if you want to.” Blake said.

She nodded. Taking his hand confidently, Gwen led him over to the waiting room. She saw Manó’s eyes flash at the gesture but she ignored it. Once inside, Gwen made the former president sit in a chair closest to the door and sat beside him.

“What are you doing?” He asked.

She took both of his hands in hers and turned to face him. “We’re gonna pray. For you and Silas and Jackson.” Blake looked unsure. She squeezed his fingers. “Just trust me. It will calm you before they take you back. You must be nervous.” His answering squeeze was all she needed.

“Close your eyes.” She murmured and watched as he did. Gwen closed hers too and dipped her head. Silently, she prayed to God, and knew that Blake was doing the same, in whatever capacity and words he was able to conjure, knowing the practice was foreign to him.

She was vaguely aware of the door opening some time after, but she willed Blake to keep praying until the nurse came for him, which was sooner rather than later. A soft, “Mr. Shelton,” interrupted
them and she opened her eyes to already see Blake staring at the lithe woman dressed in light blue scrubs. “We’re ready for you.”

Blake nodded and looked over to her. She smiled encouragingly at him. “You got this.”

He tried for a smile but it came out more as a grimace than anything else. Looking around the room, he made eye contact with Teddy. The young man had taken residence once again in the corner, but he wasn’t sulking any longer. His eyes had widened when he met his father’s gaze. Blake stood up and went to him. Teddy stood as if on habit.

“Dad--”

“Listen to me for a minute...It’s in your right to be mad, or upset, or even disappointed in me...I just want you to remember that I love you, and I made a mistake. But that doesn’t erase the fact that I should have been better where you and your brother were concerned. If anything happens to me...I’m so proud of you. I want you to know that. And please...I don’t want you to blame Silas. He’s innocent in all this. He’s your brother and he needs your love more than he does your hate right now.”

Theodore hesitated walking closer to his father after such words were spoken. He felt like he had the right to be angry, but he also felt like his anger had been misplaced. Gwen could understand the sentiment, and she was ready to agree with the younger man before she realized that all Teddy’s anger now wanted to be directed at her. She didn’t feel it until after Blake and Silas left for surgery.

After saying her goodbyes to both her son and love, feeling more nervous by the minute once she realized that both men would be under the knife, Gwen returned to the waiting room, hoping that she could find some comfort and solace in her two remaining children. It was like a slap in the face when Lani completely ignored her presence, and Manó preferred to wait the surgery out alone. Those reactions, coupled with the clear disdain for her person that radiated off of Josie and her son like a blazing star, Gwen had been in no mood to remain where she was, at least not without confronting those who were determined to make this the worst experience of her life, like it wasn’t already shaping up to be just that.

Had she made some grave mistakes in the past? Yes. Had she hurt her children and those close to her? Absolutely. But at the end of the day, she stood by the reasons she had to lie and deceive in the first place. She didn’t do it because she wanted to or even because she found some type of joy out causing those close to her pain. She did it for reasons that made sense to her and she was not going to made out to be the only person that tried to fend for themselves in a world filled with people who really wanted to do real harm.

Her son was in his second surgery for the day, waiting to receive a kidney from his father, who happened to be the love of her life. She has been to hell and back with Blake, for Blake, and all these people could think about her was that she was the devil, the reason things didn’t end up going their way in life. She was tired of it. She was exhausted. All she wanted, all she needed was a little sympathy. She’d even except an insult if it came with a reluctant hug or kiss, a reassuring gesture or word of some kind after. There was a time to be angry, and there was a time to know when to set aside that anger and come together for a common cause. Blake and Silas weren’t just hers. They were someone’s father and brother respectively. And if they cared enough about both of them then they would refrain from condemning her to hell in their time of need. Blake wouldn’t want that, and Gwen had to believe that if Silas knew the truth about his father, he still would have wanted his mother to be treated with some form of respect and patience, even if no one believed she deserved it.
Finally, after three hours of surgery and still no updates on the progress of the transplant, Gwen snapped. It was bound to happen. She couldn’t take the discrete stares any longer, or the awful snide remarks that were made when they thought she couldn’t hear or wouldn’t even care to notice, too caught up in her bouts of prayers and phone calls to her mother and father, as well as Wyatt.

Gwen stood up and turned to the faces that she tried so hard to protect. Even down to Josie.

The group seemed to wait with bated breath as she gathered the words she wanted to say, no longer at a loss for them like she was earlier.

“I’d rather do this now before Blake and Silas are out of surgery. I don’t want them coming back to,” she waved a hand around in the air between them all, “whatever this is. So if you have something to say to me then please say it.”

She expected no one to be brave enough to say any of their hurtful things to her face. And looking around the room then, all she saw were blank stares. So, it was a complete surprise, and yet the most expected thing in the world, when Teddy stood up and regarded her with hard eyes.

“You were in a relationship with my dad.” He stated and Gwen fought very hard to control the emotions on her face.

“No. I wasn’t in a relationship with him. It was never like that.” At least not in the way you mean, she thought.

“But you slept together.”

A pause. “Yes.”

“And he was married.”

“Yes.”

“And you were married.”

She breathed. “Yes.”

Teddy blinked. “And what now? He’s all of a sudden your boyfriend? You two are in a relationship now?”

Gwen sighed. “We have...agreed to try and be together, now, yes.”

Teddy frowned. “Are you sorry?”

Gwen looked confused. “I beg your pardon?”

“Do you feel remorse? Are you sorry? Do you wish to apologize in any way for the things you did? Do you feel bad for lying and cheating and carrying on as if it was the easiest thing in the world to do?”

Gwen reared back from his intensity. “Of course I’m sorry. I wish that I did things different where you all were concerned but I acted at the time with what I believed were the right reasons for doing so. I can’t change the past but I’m trying to make sure that going forward everyone is okay.”

“But everyone is not okay. You just drop this big bombshell on us and expect everything to be rainbows and hearts.” Teddy snapped. “You screwed my father and then had a kid with him. I have a brother I never knew about. In a couple of hours, the whole world is going to know something I
just found out this fucking morning. I barely have time to process this and now I have to go through it with the rest of the fucking planet.”

“Teddy--” Brad tried to interrupt but Teddy rounded on her in a flash, causing Gwen to take a step back.

“Do you even know what you’ve done to my mother? My parent’s marriage blew up in her face. She was distraught after the divorce. My father changed into a completely different person because of you. I had to endure the endless teasing and commentary and insults about my personal life for several months while at school. Nobody is fucking fine and they never will be after this comes out.”

“That’s not fair, Teddy.” Manó said. “My mom wasn’t the reason your parents got divorced.”

“Wasn’t she?” Teddy spat at the older boy. “Last time I checked, my parents were still married at your sister’s wedding. I don’t think cheating again really helped matters in my parent’s marriage after the fact.”

“There are things that you don’t know, Teddy--” Gwen tried but was cut off.

“I wonder what those things are. I was clearly naive to think fucking my father would be the extent of your lies.”

“Teddy!” Lani, Brad, and Tom both yelled at the boy.

But Gwen had heard about enough and stepped forward until she was almost nose to nose with the twenty-one year old. “First, that’s sexist and insulting. You’re a grown man now and I know you’re well aware of the mechanics of sex. It takes two to lay down and make a baby. I didn’t seduce your father. We made a choice to sleep together. I’m not proud of it, but I did not cross that line alone. So I’d think twice the next time you’re itching to indirectly call me somebody’s mistress or whore. Second, the lengths you’re going to blame me for your parents failure of a marriage is very telling of your mother’s influence on you. I don’t deny my part in that breakup but I am not the sole reason your parents split up. It’s not my business to tell you but I suggest you ask them some time about it. Third, that brother you’re complaining about trying to accept along with the rest of the world is the only one here who will have to bare the brunt of this truth. The world is going to fixate on the actual child, the real proof of your father and I’s infidelity. So while I know everyone here will be affected by this, my main concern is my child. Not you. With that being said, I suggest you get your head out of your ass and stop being so selfish about this. I understand you’re hurt, but your father has instilled way too much integrity in you for you not to rise above.”

“Four, in the past three minutes, you’ve called me a whore, a liar, tactless, and pretty much a god awful human being. I am not your punching bag. Despite what you’ve all been trying to make me feel, I am a great mother. Wyatt was the best decision for a father, and Blake would agree. My kids grew up happy and healthy and loved, something I can’t say the same would have happened if things had been different. Furthermore, I am a good person. I sacrificed my own happiness so that you and Jackson could grow up with two parents together. And if for a second, I thought that you both weren’t happy or that you were growing up in a broken home with parents who fought all the time, I would have intervened a long time ago. But you didn’t. You were happy. And I’m sorry if some of your college experiences were ruined by some awful children who don’t have any respect for your well-being, but you’re criticizing a woman who wanted nothing but the best for you, and still does, despite whatever you may believe. And five, I am tired. My child has not opened his eyes since he got into that awful accident and he’s in pain, he’s probably scared, and I can’t do anything for him but wait. The only man that I’ve ever loved wholeheartedly has me in the same predicament so I’m not faring too well over here either. So when it comes to you and every other
person in this room, I’m gonna say this once and I’m never going to repeat myself again. Who I am or am not screwing, what I am or am not doing is no longer any of your guy’s damn business.”

Gwen expected to be out of breath. She expected to look and feel much like a woman who had been scorned. But when she gathered herself after the long speech, she found herself to be much better off than anyone who had gone through what she had in the past several hours. She wasn’t sure that she was allowed to feel this good but she stopped worrying about anything that wasn’t her son and Blake.

Stepping back, Gwen surveyed the room. She was only able to decipher a few of the shock faces before she found herself not caring about them, as well. She needed air and some space away from all these reminders of her past.

Turning around, the mother of three was about to head for the door when it suddenly opened. Doctor Lupin walked in, scrubs in disarray, surgery cap clutched firmly in his hand. His eyes were downcast, and that earlier smile and easy going presence he exuded was gone, like it had all been a dream. Right away, Gwen faltered, hands catching her on a nearby chair. She was vaguely aware of hands clutching at her form the next second, helping her stand. *God.*

*Which one?*

*God, no, please...which one?*
Chapter 35

“Which one?”

It was Tom who spoke for her, by her side, clutching her right hand tightly, arm wrapped around her back protectively. Such kindness from a man who didn’t even know her, all because his client held such affection and love for Gwen.

Dr. Lupin let out an exhausted breath and regarded the room with an air of sympathy. It made Gwen sick to her stomach.

“I’m so sorry.”

Gwen closed her eyes. “Please…”

The man’s voice was shaky as he told them the news. “Silas’s body accepted the donor kidney…”

Her head shot up but the seemingly good news did not change the doctor’s forlorn expression. Her face twisted in confusion. “He’s okay?”

Lupin nodded. To her left, Manó squeezed her shoulder. Gwen let out a relieved sound but then it was like a wave had crashed into her the next second. “Blake…oh God, please—”

The doctor looked away. “The pro tem suffered a massive stroke during surgery…it happens rarely with this type of procedure but the risks are higher in patients with advanced age. His kidney was perfectly healthy but sometimes…it was unexpected…I’m sorry to—”

“He’s dead?” Teddy breathed out, eyes wide and afraid.

The doctor’s head snapped to the younger man’s. “No. Of course not. I’m sorry if I scared you into thinking so. I was trying to inform you of his condition…Mr. Shelton is in a temporary coma.”

Gwen’s body went numb.

“What are you saying? He won’t wake up at all?” Manó asked.

“Every stroke is different. The duration of the coma will be different for everyone. Some people never come out of a coma after a stroke. But some people do make it through. He could wake up after a few days, maybe weeks, the longest maybe a couple of months. After that…we can only assume that he might never wake up. But that’s a long ways away from now. His body suffered a lot of stress during the transplant. He needs rest now, and the coma he’s in is the safest place for him to recover. I know it sounds bad but it’s not completely. Our hopes are that he wakes up before Silas’s full recovery here. Which I wanted to talk to you about, Ms. Stefani. Your son will be here until he’s well enough to be transferred to a facility for more extensive physical therapy. I’m sure however that right now your only focus is seeing your son. Both are being settled into private rooms on the sixth floor. I took the liberty of putting them next to each other for convenience. A
nurse will take you to them once they’ve been settled.”

No amount of gratitude could be expressed to the man in that moment, so Gwen settled for hugging the man tightly. To his credit, the doctor didn’t put her off, and rubbed her back gently, wishing her and her family well, before exiting the room. The next moment, Gwen had her arms full of her children, both silently thankful that their brother was going to be alright. The minute she registered their contact, Gwen allowed herself to cry. She needed them more than they knew, especially now, when all she had left was them now that Blake was gone.

*Don’t think like that. He’s not gone. Not yet. He’s there. He’ll come back to you.*

A part of her wanted to think that he did it on purpose, so that she could focus on Silas and his recovery without having to split her time between her son and him. She knew it couldn’t possibly be that, but it gave her some kind of comfort and amused her to no end to think it.

Her nerves were frayed, and it became apparent the more she stood there, holding her two children, mind on a million things, the biggest one being Blake. She chanced a look at Teddy, and saw him enveloped in Josie’s arms. God, what must he be thinking? What will Jackson think when they tell him? Should she tell Silas about Blake or wait? Especially with him being in the condition that he’s in?

Gwen tore herself away from her kids and took a steadying breath. There was just too much that needed to be thought about, which in turn made too much to be dealt with, and too much to be felt then.

“Mom--”

“I need a second.” She told them, turning from the room the next moment.

Once outside, Gwen paced the hallway up and down until she couldn’t stand it any longer and began a trek to a room that she told herself she would not enter until Blake or Josie gave her permission.

That’s how she found herself outside of Jackson’s hospital room. The sliding door was ajar and Gwen peeked inside, startled to see the younger man awake, staring at the far wall on the other side of the room. Her appearance grabbed his attention and he smiled softly, weakly, and beckoned her inside. Gwen felt some of her stress ease at seeing his handsome face. His looks reminded her of Blake, especially his smile, and she couldn’t help but bask in the sight.

“Hi,” she whispered.

“Hey.”

She cleared her throat and remained by the door before Jackson gestured for her to sit down in a chair by the bed. She went willingly.

“Did the surgery go okay?” Jackson asked, voice hoarse.

Gwen flinched. “I didn’t think…”

Jackson smiled. “My dad came in hours ago and told me. I was surprised at first that he would do something like this but then..”

“He told you.” Gwen surmised.
Jackson nodded, quietly.

“So why aren’t you throwing me out of your room?” Gwen challenged, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The boy had the gall to laugh lightly, the noise sounding pained. “Because who my father decides to have children with, who he decides to give his heart to, has nothing to do with me.”

Gwen’s eyes glazed over. “Theordore doesn’t think so.”

“That’s because Teddy’s spoiled. Even when we were kids, he was used to getting all the attention and everything he wanted. He was the youngest. I didn’t care so long as I wasn’t completely forgotten, and I never was.” He tried to shrug. “It’s not surprising that he’s taken the news hard. He did have a hard time at school after the divorce but it doesn’t give him the right to be selfish about this. He’ll understand when he gets a little older. Give him some time.”

She shook her head. “I hurt you, Jack. I hurt all of you.”

He smiled, again. “You did. But you were hurting too. So was my father. I’ve forgiven you. I’ve forgiven Dad. You need to forgive yourself.”

Gwen stared into his hazel eyes, seeing a swirl of acceptance, love, and support. She shook her head once again. “You are one of my favorite humans, you know that?”

He chuckled, wincing when the action caused him some mild pain. “I’ve always thought of you as a second mother, truthfully. I know you weren’t around much after Lani’s wedding but you were a strong influence when I was a child. To be honest, I can see why he fell in love with you. You’re lovely.”

Gwen’s eyes flashed, tearing up slightly. “I would have come and visited you earlier if I knew compliments and a handsome smile were waiting for me.”

Jackson smirked. “I take it you’ve been subjected to a tough crowd.”

“You have no idea.”

“Yeah, well…” He looked away, suddenly far away from the room. “Another little brother...I never thought.”

She shifted uneasily. “He’s still the same Silas you’ve known all this time.”

“I don’t doubt it...Did everything go okay with the surgery? How are they?”

Gwen winced, “God, for a moment I forgot.”

Jackson frowned. “Not good?”

She sighed, “The surgery went well, I guess. Silas is okay. Your father...They said he suffered a stroke...He-he’s in a coma.”

To his credit, the young man didn’t flinch or give any sign that he must have heard her correctly. He just stared, until his eyes became unfocused, unseeing.

“Jack?”

He blinked, and in a rough voice, said, “I’m so very sorry.”
Gwen frowned. “What for?”

Hazel focused again and met her soft brown. “If we hadn’t been racing...I wouldn’t be here, Silas wouldn’t have needed this surgery and my dad wouldn’t be in a coma right now.”

Gwen shook her head. “You can’t think like that. For all we know, things could have gone much better or much worse, and if they had gone better, you wouldn’t be saying the things you are right now. Please don’t blame yourself. I’m so tired of blame being passed around like a piece of candy. Life isn’t always what we want it to be, but it is as it should. It’s what my father used to tell me when I was a little girl. Your dad will be fine. He has to be fine because I need him to be and I trust that God will make him so.”

Jackson sighed and closed his eyes. The exhaustion seemed to be wrapping him up in warm arms and Gwen thought it best to let it. He needed rest. They all did.

She stood up and slowly leaned down to press a quick, gentle, kiss to his forehead. Jackson startled slightly but his smile returned and he thanked her quietly.

“Get some rest. I’ll be back when I can.”

He nodded, eyes already drooping closed. Gwen patted his shoulder softly and exited the room just as quietly as she had entered. She ran into Tom outside. The fixer gave her a soft look and seeing her perturbed and tired face, pulled her instantly into a tight embrace.

Gwen breathed and closed her eyes. “What the hell am I gonna do?”

Tom pulled back and regarded her quietly. “Whatever it is...you won’t have to do it alone.”

She attempted a smile. “All this for a client?” She asked, pulling out of his arms, knowing Tom would understand what she was implying.

He sighed. “I’ve known Blake for a long time. I’ve been employed by him for a long time. Whatever he needs, I’ll always provide.”

This time, her smile pushed through. “I’m grateful.”

He took her arm gently and led her away from the boy’s room. “They’ve got the two of them settled now. We can go see ‘em.”

The mother of three remained silent and let Tom lead her to the fourth floor. Once they reached the level, they passed many large and private rooms on their way to the end of the hallway where Silas and Blake were staying. Outside of the doors, she saw their rather large party and a couple of security agents that had gone otherwise unnoticed before. Her children, Dicky, and Brad were standing outside Silas’s room while Josie, Teddy, and Will were outside of Blake’s. Their faces were rather disturbed, some might even say angry, and Gwen frowned, turning to Tom.

“Why aren’t they going inside?”

Tom winced slightly. “I have to tell you something.”

“Is this a joke?” Josie screeched, suddenly.

Eyes turned to her and Gwen recoiled. “What happened?”

Tom glared at Josie but took a deep breath. “Blake has given you power of attorney over all of his
estates and assets. He was adamant that should anything happen to him, you would be the one to assume his fortune and take over as medical proxy should he be incapacitated in any form post-operative. He also laid out in specific terms that you and only you should be the deciding factor on all visiting guests, medical procedures, and if it comes to it, pulling the plug.”

Gwen shook her head. “Tom...what the hell. No, I can’t--why would he do that?”

He sighed. “Gwen...I know it’s a lot. But you’re in charge here. No one goes into his room until you give permission and they’ve been cleared by his detail, including me. It’s not that uncommon for this type of security, especially with the condition a very high-profile senate member is in. Normally it would fall to the agency and the family as a whole, but Blake wanted you to call the shots.”

“What exactly did you do to him?” Teddy asked, red-faced and tired beyond reason.

Gwen gave him a confused look. “What are you talking about?”

“To make him decide something like this? We’re his family. You’re a--”

“Teddy, shut up!” Manó shouted, frustration clear on his face.

“That’s my fucking father in there and you want me to get permission from her to go and sit with him?!” He yelled, exasperated.

“Your father didn’t mean anything by it, Teddy. It’s just what’s in the fine print. Gwen isn’t going to deny you entry.” Tom told the young man.

“It’s bullshit Tom and you know it.” Josie spoke up.

“Okay, listen,” Brad started. “I was there. Blake didn’t do this lightly. He didn’t want to do it at all but he had his reasons. So let’s respect them considering he’s the one lying in the hospital bed unconscious.”

Gwen ran a shaky hand through her hair and turned to Tom, voice steadier than any of them anticipated. “Tom, I give all of them permission to come and go as they please. I’m gonna go sit with my son, now.”

The fixer nodded, giving her a sympathetic look. She ignored it and ventured closer to her son’s room. Without looking at her children, Gwen put a hand on both of their arms and led them inside, shutting the door with a resounding click. The noise outside disappeared as she looked at the boy on the bed.

His eyes were closed and the lids were a soft lavender. The swelling on his face had subsided somewhat but his limbs were bandaged, his body elevated at a rather uncomfortable looking level so that it didn’t bother his hip and leg from healing. His skin had lost all of it’s color and Gwen flinched at the sight. This was how people looked when they were on the verge of death. Her baby boy had just been given a new lease on life, he shouldn’t look this way.

“He’ll have to get worse before he can get better.” Manó said, as if reading her mind.

Lani moved to her mother’s side and took her arm. Gwen squeezed her hand gratefully.

“Let’s sit with him. I want to be here when he wakes up.” Gwen told her children. They nodded and the three occupants sat down around the bed.
They passed the time telling stories about Silas, when he was just a small boy. The nurses came and went, but the family of four never paused in their storytelling. For just a couple of hours, Gwen even forgot about Blake in the next room. When he woke up, she would have to tell him all of these stories one-on-one.

It was nearing two in the morning when Manó and Lani moved to the adjoining common area that was in between Blake and Silas’s rooms. Neither wanted to leave the hospital to sleep, so they opted to stay. Gwen remained where she was, clutching her son’s hand, trying to keep her eyes open herself.

They were closing slowly when a knock sounded on the door and Brad came in. He looked just as haggard as she felt. He sat down in the chair next to her that her daughter had vacated just moments before.

“All of the kiddos are falling asleep on us.” He whispered, looking at Silas with sunken eyes.

Gwen followed his eyes. “I know. They’re so tired. We all are...How did he look?” She couldn’t resist any longer. She hadn’t had the courage to go and see Blake yet, even if it was just for a moment. That, and she didn’t think Josie or Teddy wanted to see her right now.

Brad sighed next to her. “He looks like he’s dreaming of a real good dream.” Gwen frowned. Brad caught the expression and shook his head amused. “He doesn’t look like he’s in pain. It’s different with him and Jack and Silas. They have bruises and their skin is all lifeless. Blake really just looks like he’s sleeping. It’s a comfort really.”

Her frown subsided and she almost smiled. “I hope he wakes up soon. I need him right now.”

Brad nodded, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “He will. Now get over here and get a couple of minutes of sleep. I know you’re not leaving his side until he wakes up but you need to rest too. I’ll stay here and watch him for you.”

She turned to Brad, surprised etched on her face. “You’d do that?”

“Of course. Until Blake is awake, you and your kin are mine to look after. He’s my best friend, you know I’d do anything for him.”

She grinned tiredly and leaned into him, resting her head on his shoulder. She closed her eyes and whispered, “thank you,” before the pull of sleep sneaked up on her so quickly. She was unprepared for how comfortable Brad would be, and fell into a slumber longer than she would have liked.

When she woke, Gwen was disoriented. She’d forgotten for a moment everything that happened, and the soft hand running through her blonde hair soothed her back to sleep. She snuggled even further into a warm throat, the smell of firewood and spice so strong it filled her senses. It reminded her of Blake, but it wasn’t, because something was just a tiny bit different. And then she heard Brad’s voice, and then another, lighter.

“Her necks going to be sore when she wakes up.” Silas said.

Brad shifted slightly, still holding her in his arms. “It will be but I’m glad she got some sleep. I didn’t expect her to be out this long.” His fingers scratched her scalp lightly and Gwen tried not to react to the sensation.

Her son sighed. “...Have you known her all this time? Considering…”

Brad exhaled. “I met her when your father introduced us. This was a long time ago. I knew her until
they broke up.”

Gwen tried to keep her breathing under control. Did he tell Silas about Blake? Why would he do that? She was supposed to tell him.

She couldn’t see Silas’s face but the silence was slowly suffocating her until he finally spoke again.

“I look like him.”

She could feel Brad regarding her son. “You do. When you allow yourself to think it...it’s plain to anyone with two eyes.”

“He told me he’d come and see me play if I wanted him to...Do you think he’ll wake up ever?”

“I don’t know. If I can be blunt for a moment, Silas...your dad is a very strong man. He’s been weak at heart, yes, but never in mind. He’s one of the best politicians in my opinion to ever serve his country, and he’s got a way with words. But he also has a way with people. That’s why so many people like him. Over the years, he’s seen how important life is. And I think he wants to be here to watch you live it. That’s why he donated his kidney to you in the first place. Yeah, because you’re his son but also because he thinks you deserve to be here, living whatever life you choose.”

“He missed thirteen years of my life.”

“...He told me he’d come and see me play if I wanted him to...Do you think he’ll wake up ever?”

Silas inhaled. “Are they--Is she in love with him?”

She felt Brad hesitantly nod. “Your mother is the only woman your father has ever been completely in love with.”

“And did you tell me? Why not wait for my mom?”

“Because I know firsthand the anger you feel when someone close to you, someone you trust, tells you something that changes your world forever. Your mother has been through hell and back these past few days, I’m sure. She won’t admit it but she was scared to feel your anger and your resentment, on top of everyone else’s. It would have just put her down even further and Blake wouldn’t want that. I don’t want that for her. So this way, when she does wake up, when she does tell you, you’ll already know, and you can have a better reaction than the one you had when I told you. She doesn’t have to know, and you don’t have to hurt her.”

Gwen sniffed, burrowing further into Brad’s neck. She did it to conceal herself, but she also did it to thank him. This man thought about her in such a way that she could not even fathom and although at first she was mad at his audacity, she was now completely thankful for it.

“Do my siblings hate me?” Silas asked after a moment of watching her with Brad.

The question took her out of her gratitude and broke her heart.

“Absolutely not. No one loves you any less. If anything, you gained more family than you realize.”

“I should start calling you Uncle Brad now, huh?”

Brad chuckled, the action caused his chest to bounce up and down. Gwen hid a teary smile.

“Yeah, you better.” He laughed some more before sobering up. “In all seriousness. You call me whatever you want. And that goes for Blake too. You already have a dad. I know he wouldn’t want
to replace Wyatt. So you can call him Blake if you want or Dad if you want too, or even Mr. Shelton.”

She heard Silas laugh quietly. It was several minutes before either man said anything.

“Will you tell me about him?” Silas asked.

It took Brad a moment, but then the next words out of his mouth were the beginnings of a story about the time Blake and him spent all night in the White House tp-ing offices and pulling pranks on some of the staff.

Gwen fought a smile and tightened her eyelids. She thanked God for all he had given her and allowed herself another few hours of shut eye because when she woke up, her son would be there, awake, talking, and smiling.

She willed Blake to do the same tomorrow.
Chapter 36

I posted two chaps in one day so if you're here and you haven't read the previous chapter, go quickly and do that now! :)

She knew how two days in New York managed to turn into two weeks but it didn’t mean that Gwen still fully understood how her life had become what it had.

She practically lived in the hospital. Her mornings consisted of talking with Silas, helping him with his physical therapy, and eating breakfast and lunch with the boy. Then her evenings were spent with Blake. She’d sit with him and tell her all about Silas’s recovery, about her own days, which really consisted of the two of them. He never spoke back but he was there, breathing, and that was all she needed.

He hadn’t woken up, not even once. He didn’t flinch, he didn’t make any sounds, but Gwen could still see the color in his skin. It gave her hope.

Throughout those two weeks, Josie had been staying with Teddy. She frequented the hospital in the mornings and sat with Blake while Gwen tended to Silas. At first, Gwen couldn’t understand the woman’s behavior but seeing as how she was once married to the man, shared two kids with him, Gwen didn’t think it was her place to say anything.

Teddy visited with Will every other day, if only to see some progress in his father’s debilitating state. He avoided her when he was there and Gwen avoided him. Brad came every day, sometimes in the mornings, others at night. He chose to stay in the flat Blake used when he visited the state to see his son. The older man had been a gift from God in these past couple of weeks. To sitting with Silas in the evenings so Gwen could be with Blake, to helping the boy with his homework so he wouldn’t be too behind at school when they returned to California, to even keeping Gwen company when she needed to get away from Blake’s silent form and Silas’s irritable and frustrated one.

Manó visited a couple of times a week to see her and his brother. Lani went back overseas to finish the last of her documentary but made sure to call whenever she could. Even Jackson, once he was free to check out from the hospital, went back to D.C. He healed the rest of the way at home and went right back to work, trying to show a good face of support for the family and resolve any lingering rumors or opinions about the accident.

Since Tom released the statement about Blake’s paternity to Silas and his condition in the hospital, the media had been a shitstorm. But they expected that and with Lani overseas, Silas and Blake in the hospital away from prying eyes, Josie holed up in Teddy’s flat with her son and son-in-law, and Gwen never leaving the hospital, the relentless questions and comments weren’t getting too close to the family. It would be awhile before she faced the public.

It helped that she had returned to California after five weeks in New York. It had been a hard decision to return, and there had been a lot of tears and fights and poorly spoken words hurled at vicisou[s speeds when she told everyone that she would be taking Blake with her. As his medical proxy, and power of attorney, Gwen had the right to move him where she saw fit. He couldn’t stay
in New York without a support system, and Teddy wasn’t going to be able to take up that responsibility. He was just too young. And she couldn’t very well send Blake back to Washington. The media would be worse there, and the only people who would be able to look after him were Josie, Brad, and Jackson. As much as Gwen trusted the oldest Shelton son and wouldn’t want him to be away from his father, Gwen did not trust Josie. She was the ex-wife. Blake split from her for a reason. If he wanted her to care for him, he would have given her POA and not Gwen. It was an agonizing decision, especially when she knew Brad would be the next best candidate but she didn’t think that he should assume all of Blake’s care just because he was the best friend. He had his own life, not to mention a wife. Him staying in New York no doubt put a strain on him and Stephanie.

Blake was her problem. He was her world, and she would do anything for him. That meant bringing him home. That meant him remaining by her side.

At first, it was hard. Silas had been sour with her for the first couple of months. Surprisingly, it had not been about his finding out of Blake’s blood relation to him. They had talked that over the day after she heard Brad and his conversation when she was feigning sleep. But Silas had been cooped up in the house, bed ridden, ever since they got back to California. With the knowledge that she oversaw Blake’s assets, Gwen took the liberty of getting their son two highly qualified nurses to take up his physical therapy needs. That meant he wouldn’t have to be transported anywhere to get the help she knew would be acquired for a speedy recovery. That left Silas in the house all day, every day. His mood grew more and more sour and Gwen had become more and more irritated with him and the situation.

She was spending her time going back and forth between home and the hospital to see Blake. She didn’t have to go everyday but when Silas became unbearable, Gwen found herself spending more hours there with her love. It helped slightly when Wyatt came to stay with them for a week. Seeing his father had definitely put Silas in better spirits. Even despite knowing the man wasn’t his biological father, Silas’s love had not wavered in the slightest for the man and when Wyatt had to go back home, Silas was sad and angry all over again.

Her parents visited their home every weekend and spent the afternoons with their grandson. Their fresh faces subdued her son’s terrible attitude long enough for Gwen to take a deep breath and remember why she had done all this to begin with. He would understand when he was better. That kept her hopeful.

But when not even the sight of Dennis or Patti could lighten her son’s miserable state of being anymore, Gwen got desperate and called up Brad. She didn’t really have anyone else to turn to but Blake’s best friend. Tom checked in every now and then but he was busy and she didn’t know him all that well. With Brad, she knew he’d come in a second if it was for Blake.

She was proven right when he procured a flight the next day and made it to California by the morning. She picked him up from the airport and hugged him within an inch of his life, much to his amusement. She gave him the bed in the guest room and let him have free reign of anything he wanted in the house, which turned out to be only Silas’s company.

From the moment Brad arrived, he spent every waking moment trying to give the boy a new memory. He kept him on his toes, introduced him to new stuff, and taught him things that only a man could to another young man. With Wyatt having a new family for himself, and Blake still in the hospital, having a father figure around to help Silas, especially as he went through such a trying time, improved her son’s mood tremendously, not to mention his recovery.

What was supposed to be five days turned into a whole month. Gwen got used to Brad’s presence around the house. He kept his things to himself but helped around the home as much as he was
able to. He fixed the things that were broken, cooked dinner for her when she was just too tired to muster the energy herself, and managed to brighten up the place with music and movies and awful jokes.

He went to the hospital and sat with Blake on the days she didn’t, choosing instead to spend time with Silas, cashing in on his improved spirits. Things weren’t the best, but they were definitely far from how they were when they first got back. Her only qualms about the situation was taking Brad away from his own life. It was a conversation she tried to have with him many times, mostly when it was just the two of them. It became almost like a ritual to have him sit down on the couch with her and drink awful cheap wine and tell her some story about him and Blake over the years. It was one of those nights when Gwen just outright asked him.

His eyes strayed from hers for a moment before saying, “I remember when Blake told me he slept with you at Camp David.” Gwen sucked in a breath, not intending for him to say that. “And I always thought that he was throwing away a good thing for something he thought was some big romance. I didn’t see it—I didn’t see you as such. I thought you were the epitome of heartbreak for him. I see all you’ve done since the accident and I can’t help but think...Blake was right. He was right to love you. He was right to want to be with you. And he’s lying in that hospital and he’s all alone, really. I love him and I just want him to wake up. I just want him to know that I’m taking care of his girl and his kid so that when he does wake up, they’re okay.”

“Brad…”

“He’s been my family for the longest time. He helped me get sober. He helped me get to a place where I could enjoy myself and not indulge like I used to.” He said, gesturing to their empty glasses of wine. “I’m only doing what he would for me.”

Gwen found his hand and squeezed tightly. “What about Stephanie?”

He sighed. “She understands wanting to make sure I do right by him but she will never understand what really goes into that. I’m doing everything I can. I even told her that she could come up here and we can figure things out, just until he wakes up. She keeps saying you don’t know if he ever will and I just...we’re at odds right now. She doesn’t want to be here and I can’t go back there. Not now.”

Gwen swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

His eyes snapped to hers. “Don’t be. I was worried sick when you got back here. I was relieved when you called me. At least here, I know I’m doing something to help.”

She smiled softly at him, noting the way his grey hair curled slightly around his ears, or how his dark blue eyes flickered in the soft glow of the light. “Maybe you should go back for a week, or even a couple of days. Just to spend some time with her.”

He nodded. “I will.”

She patted his hand before letting go. “Good. Now tell me more about his inauguration party.”

Brad chuckled and continued his story.
Somehow, the time had gotten away from her.

It seemed as if eight months hadn’t taken any time at all to creep up on her. It felt like once things started growing happier, less subdued, less sickly, she didn’t pay attention to how long something took, or how long someone would be.

It started with Silas. Every month the thirteen year old would get closer and closer to walking by himself, without the help of a walker or somebody’s hand. His hip had all but healed for him. The torn ligaments were growing stronger by the weeks, and his left kneecap seemed to be bending without much difficulty. When he no longer needed assistance to get to point A to point B, Silas moved onto building to the point where he could run again. It would be another year before he could even feel like he once used to when exercising, but her baby boy was walking around the house now, even going outside to catch some fresh air. He spent the summer working on himself, and by August, returned to his studies to finish his last year of middle school. His friends were happy to have him back in the classroom, and so was Silas. Knowing one of the former presidents was his father had only served to make him more popular, and Gwen preferred that than the opposite. It was painful to think that Blake’s still fragile state in the hospital helped any asshole kid from making any heinous remarks but she couldn’t change that even if she wanted to.

Gwen was thankful for her son’s progress, and even more thankful that his body hadn’t rejected Blake’s kidney. She had joined a support group for parents with children who were donor recipients and some of the stories she heard had been way too hard to hear. She just hoped the meds would continue to work for her son.

Once Gwen could shift some of her focus away from Silas, it landed right on Blake. There hadn’t been any improvements in his condition over the summer. And each time she went, Gwen had to look upon his sallow skin, closed eyes, and greying hair. His beard had grown significantly long since she had last let the nurse shave it. The image of him lying there haunted her dreams and Brad suggested that she not go as often as she once did in the beginning.

She listened to her friend and only went every other week. That certainly made the time pass as fast as it did. When she looked at her life now, the night of Halloween, the mother of three couldn’t quite believe it.

Her parents were still with her and visited often. Her brother had made the decision to move his growing family back to California and now lived just a neighborhood over from her. Lani had bought a house with Dicky in Anaheim and Manó moved back in with her and Silas once he lost his job at the museum. Brad had not been able to reconcile with his wife, who felt like her husband had chosen his friend over her and their marriage, and subsequently made the move into her own home as the two separated. It garnered a few unsavory opinions to allow the man to live with her and her children but Gwen didn’t care what people thought. He was her friend, he was Blake’s friend, and he had helped her more than anyone else. So she helped him clear the space in the basement and told him to stay as long as he needed, or at least until he could reconcile with Stephanie.

Jackson remained in touch with her. He didn’t follow everyone’s footsteps in moving to California, as he jokingly put it, but he came up for two months in the summer to see his father. She entertained the young man, who was excited to see his uncle, and get to know his little brother a little more. Silas had been eager to spend time with his oldest brother, as well.

Gwen still hadn’t heard from Teddy. As far as she knew, he hadn’t visited Blake, and neither did Josie. Gwen knew Brad must have kept in touch with them but she never had the courage to ask.

She didn’t need to concern herself with them. Her priority was her family. And right then, her priority was stitching the button of Silas’s flannel shirt back into its original place. His costume this
year was a bloody scarecrow. The shirt was actually Blake’s, something Brad recovered from his place back in D.C. when he thought it was important to have a few of Blake’s things for when he woke up and they were able to retrieve him from the hospital. Her heart leaped at the idea of Silas wearing one of his father’s shirts.

“It doesn’t have to be perfect Mom. Just enough so I can button it.” Silas said impatiently from his perch on the sofa. He was sitting next to Manó, who had dressed up as a surfer.

“Stop being so impatient, S.J. Your mother is doing you a favor.” Brad scolded him as he walked in from the kitchen. He had a Halloween cookie in his hand, and plopped next to her on the couch, hiking his feet up on the coffee table as his attention focused on the television. The movie Hocus Pocus was on.

“You’re such a lazy git, Uncle Brad. You gonna pass out candy with Gwen the entire night until you get bored and eat the entire fridge?” Jackson smirked from his place on the floor. He had decided to come up for the weekend and join them in trick-or-treating and later, the parties that the older kids would get up to. He was dressed in a smart suit, with a presidential pin on his lapel. He was the 47th President of the United States. Gwen smirked at Jack.

“I don’t think that’s any of your business, President Shelton.” Brad said, imitating one of the Bush’s.

The room gave way to laughter. Gwen grinned as she finished the last stitch and handed the flannel to her youngest.

“You sure you don’t want to come with us, Mom?” Lani asked.

Her daughter was dressed as a fairy, while Dicky had been placed in a pirate costume.

She shook her head. “I’m gonna spend the night with Blake.” Her voice sounded more sad than she anticipated but no one commented on it.

Silas hopped up from his perch, excited that he could do that now without stumbling or putting himself in pain. “Well, I’m ready!” He leaned down to kiss her on the cheek, an action that never failed to startle her. Ever since he could make it to the hospital to visit Blake, he’d been much more affectionate with people. Gwen had the sneaking suspicion that it was Brad’s doing, having reminded the boy that Blake gave him a kidney for a reason, so that he could love and live and be surrounded by the people who cared about him the most. Seeing Blake not being able to do what he could, kiss the ones he loved, hug them whenever he pleased, got to the boy.

“Say hey to Dad for me. Come on guys.” Silas gestured for them to get a move on and they obliged, kissing her on their way out. Even Jackson planted a kiss on her forehead before following the gang of trick-or-treaters. When it was just her and Brad, the older man put an arm around her and she snuggled closer into his chest.

He often did this when she would be off to visit Blake. He seemed to understand that she needed comfort, and going to the only man she wanted it most from, who couldn’t give it to her, had definitely taken a toll on her emotional state. So Brad would hold her long enough that she didn’t notice that Blake couldn’t when she saw him.

“You sure you want to spend the night in the hospital? He’ll be there in the morning.” Brad breathed, planting a kiss to the top of her head.

Gwen closed her eyes. “I don’t want him to be alone on a night like tonight. He should be here to
see the kids. At least I can go and tell him what they’re wearing.”

Brad ran a steady hand up and down her side. “Okay. You want me to drive you?”

She shook her head. “Stay here. Pass out candy to the kids. I’ll be back in a little while.”

She pulled away and gave him a kiss on the cheek, which he smiled at. Gwen sighed and stood up, reaching for her jacket. Her eyes strayed to the screen and then to Brad, who had been watching the movie intently. His profile was certainly handsome, and his curls reminded her of Blake. His presence had comforted her over these past few months and she couldn’t think of where she would be right now if it hadn’t been for him.

“You good?” He asked her.

She startled, not realizing he had turned to look at her. She nodded. “Do you want to come with me?”

“Not tonight...he just seems like he’s in too good of a costume for today. I’d be afraid the whole time that he’d open his eyes and start talking to me.”

“That full moon is getting to you.” She joked.

He smirked. “Maybe. Tell him I said hello, and he’s a jackass, and he better wake up for Thanksgiving. I can’t cut a turkey to save my life.”

Gwen laughed and threw a pillow at his head before heading out the door. On the drive over to the hospital, her thoughts, which would normally stray to Blake, had gone back to Bradley. He was an anomaly as far as she was concerned. He reminded her so much of her love that she understood why people called them two peas in a pod. But it wasn’t just that he was so much like Blake, but how unlike he was to the man she loved, as well. Brad was patient, and worldly, and quiet. He came from old money and a happy childhood. Despite his addiction, he thrived in virtually every setting that he had ever been placed in, and his uncanny ability to relate to children despite not having any for himself was no small fete.

Looking back on their moments together these past eight months, Gwen couldn’t find not one single fault. Sure he had the tendency to shut down when his wife was mentioned, and she knew he had difficulties being alone and without the one woman he loved all this time, but other than that, he had made Gwen’s difficult and melancholy days some of the best.

If Blake woke up-- when he woke up--she would have to tell him about all the times Brad took her and the boys to get ice cream, and proceeded to get his tongue stuck to the ice machine. Or how he taught Silas how to skateboard, or her to how to bake the best damn pie crust you ever saw. Or how when she broke down in tears one particularly hard week for Silas and his physical therapy, Bradley brought out the old battered radio he found in the basement, kicked it on, forced her to dry her tears on his shirtsleeves and pulled her into his arms and danced with her underneath the stars.

Gwen snapped her thoughts away from that night and the man altogether. She was going to see Blake, now. Her beautiful Blake. Her poor sweetheart who laid there day in and day out and didn’t even give her a sign that he knew she was there, that he heard her when she said “I love you” or even felt her touch when she kissed his chapped lips or ran her hand through his dry, greying, hair.

She sighed, thinking back to the night in the hotel room, just before she got the call. They had made love, made up, and made plans to be together. It was bittersweet looking back on it now. As she pulled into the hospital parking lot, she wondered if Blake felt the same that night.
He probably did. The thought didn’t comfort her, nor did it pain her. Gwen dismissed it as quickly as she did Brad and made her way inside. She knew the journey to his room backwards and forwards, and could do it with her eyes closed. As she made her way to the sixth floor, she greeted some of the hospital staff that were all too used to seeing her there. Having placed Blake in a private wing afforded her the luxury of privacy and the only other people there with her as she entered his room were the security agents that stood outside of his door. They were his trusted detail and she smiled at them as she passed them on the way to Blake’s bed.

Gwen sat down and took his hand immediately, frowning at the coldness she felt. She would have to tell one of the nurses to turn the heat up in the room for him. Looking at Blake, the mother of three prepared her for the sight of her love. His skin was always pale and sunken in, the parts around his eyes were a deep purple, and his mouth was set in a straight line. He was clean shaven for the day and would have looked so much younger if it wasn’t for his perpetual state of unconsciousness. He had lost weight since February and Gwen could see the effect it had on his features. He was rather gaunt looking but that didn’t matter to her. He was still as handsome as when she first met him.

“So today is Halloween.” She began, voice quiet. “I know I told you what everyone was hoping to be. Lani and Dicky decided to change last minute and go as Tinkerbell and Captain Hook.” She paused, waiting for any indication that he heard her. There wasn’t one. She tried not to deflate and kept speaking. “Silas is wearing one of your old flannels. He’s a bloody scarecrow. I know, not really original. But he’s happy. He says hi. He called you Dad and everything...Brad wanted to say hello too. He wants you to wake up before Thanksgiving because he can’t carve a turkey to save his life. His words not mine.”

She sighed and rubbed his his thumb lightly. “I want you to wake up. I want to hold you. I want you to hold me.” She felt the tears but she refused to let them fall. “I don’t know if I can do a whole year with you like this…”

He didn’t respond.

“But you know I want you to come back to us when you’re ready...and if you’re never ready...that’s okay, too.” She choked slightly on the words but it was something that she had been meaning to tell him for a long time now. “I wanted to thank you for S.J. If you choose this to be the last thing you do in this world, I’m forever grateful it was for our son, Blake. I love you so much.” She leaned down and kissed his hand before leaning up and over to kiss his lips. She got nothing in return but this time, it didn’t hurt her.

She sat back and pulled the book she had been reading to him for the past couple of weeks out of her purse and began to read where they had left off. That was how she made the time go by. Other times, she’d put her phone by the bed and play some music for him while she sketched. Her career had taken a backseat since the accident but the time to draw had never gone away from her.

It was closer to ten when she found her eyes drooping closed. She shook herself out of her exhaustion and snapped the book closed. She looked up at Blake and saw him to be unchanged. She bit her lip and stood up, stretching. Looking out the window, Gwen saw the full moon and thought back to Brad’s words about Blake suddenly coming to wake. She laughed. If only.

Turning back to the body on the bed, Gwen jumped at the sight of him. His sallow skin was paler than ever and suddenly slick with sweat. His jaw was clenched so tightly that a muscle twitched in his cheek and his eyes were squeezed tightly shut. His whole body was shaking with the muscle spasms and convulsions his body was going through. The monitors started to go off and before she knew it, several nurses rushed into the room, one even pulling her gently out of the way.
“What’s going on? Is he waking up?” She asked over the noise. She was ignored but even Gwen couldn’t seem to care when she looked at Blake’s seizing form on the bed. And that was it. He was having a seizure.

Horrified, Gwen turned away from the sight and moved to the door. She wouldn’t leave him like this but she wouldn’t allow this to attack her dreams either. She already had difficulty sleeping.

For what seemed like hours but what could have only been a few minutes, Blake’s body was subdued and the seizure nonexistent. Once again, he laid lifeless on the bed, eyes closed, breath shallow. Gwen couldn’t fathom any words, any thoughts, as she looked at him. When a gentle hand touched her arm, she looked into the eyes of a nurse and saw a flash of pity there.

“What--is he okay?” She finally stuttered out.

The nurse nodded. “I’ll have the doctor look at him and she can let you know more. Do you want to wait somewhere else?” She nodded, but she didn’t think there was anywhere else. “Come on. I want to show you something.”

The nurse led her away from the room and Gwen allowed herself to be shown to a floor below Blake. It was a children’s ward and from the moment they stepped foot into the hallway, kids in costumes greeted her. Some had IV’s with them, others were in casts, but the majority were alright to walk without any assistance.

For several minutes, Gwen walked with the nurse, Cathy was her name, around to all the rooms. The smiling faces of children and the unavoidable laughter that came from their small chests had succeeded in taking her mind off of Blake. They made her think of Silas and the kids and she wondered if they were having a good time. Eventually, Cathy led her back to Blake’s room, but not before getting her a cup of hot chocolate. The doctor was inside, and she shook her hand softly before her attention went back to Blake’s still form.

“He gave us quite a scare.” Doctor Evie said, looking back to her. “It’s not uncommon for a coma patient to experience a seizure. The stroke he suffered was very damaging to his brain. We gave him anticonvulsants and we’ll continue to monitor him overnight to make sure this isn’t a recurrence.”

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“Is this a sign...or something? Is he any closer to waking up?” Gwen asked hesitantly.

“...Seizures are dangerous for coma patients ...on the spectrum, speaking bluntly if you’ll allow me to, seizures are going in the opposite direction of progress. But that does not mean that he won’t wake up. He still has four months before we can start to assume the worst. Don’t give up hope.”

Gwen nodded, ignoring the tears falling from her eyes. “Thank you.”

Doctor Evie nodded and exited the room in a flourish, leaving her with Blake. She hadn’t seen the man move once in these past eight months and to see the seizure he suffered through just moments earlier had shocked the last bit of her nerves. If she stayed any longer, looking at him, she’d surely go insane. Gwen sniffed and wiped her tears before moving over to Blake. She gave him one last kiss on the lips, for the first time in awhile, truly afraid to touch any part of him.

“I love you. I’ll see you...” She faltered. Usually she knew when the next time she would come and visit again. She wasn’t sure she wanted to anymore and that thought pained her the most. “I’ll see you soon. Happy Halloween, Cowboy.”

She was proud of herself as she kept her tears in check until she got into her car. She was even
prouder that she managed to discard of them when she pulled into the drive. She didn’t want Brad to know that she had been crying. When she settled down some more, she would tell him about Blake’s seizure and what the doctor said, but for now, she needed to get her emotions under control. If not for her own piece of mind then for the kids. It would not do any good for anyone to see her like this.

Once she deemed herself well enough to walk inside her home, Gwen made the journey up the driveway, passing by trick-or-treaters as she went. Her fragile emotions subsided as she saw Brad sitting on the porch, a bowl of candy in his lap and his phone in his hand. He was watching something on the screen and looked up every now and then when a kid demanded some candy.

When he saw her, Brad smiled. “I’m glad you brought the king size. It’s been a hit with the neighborhood. I heard a batman tell a joker that he came to this house immediately because dracula told him that we were giving them out.”

Gwen couldn’t help but laugh at the man as he told her the news. “Sounds like your more excited than the kids.”

Brad shrugged. “It’s the small things, you know?”

She nodded, smile disappearing as her eyes landed on his phone screen. It was a picture of Blake that he’d been staring at, and when she came closer, she realized it was a video of him at the White House, greeting all the trick-or-treaters. She couldn’t stop the wave of tears that threatened her resolve and Brad saw the change in her face almost immediately. He stood up and set the bowl and phone down.

“What’s wrong? Did I say something?” He asked, hands coming to grasp her arms gently.

She shook her head, unable to find the words she needed to tell him. Brad frowned and turned away from her. He picked up the candy and mobile and grabbed her arm again, leading her inside. He turned the porch light off and closed the door. Gwen walked to the fireplace and leaned down. She was cold all of a sudden even though the temperature outside wasn’t.

“Gwen, talk to me. Did something happen at the hospital with Blake?”

She nodded mutely. Brad sighed and crossed the living room to sit on the couch. He let her have her space and she was grateful for it. She gathered the words she wanted to say and finally turned around to look at him.

“I was just looking out the window and the next thing I knew he was moving. He looked to be in so much pain…” She drew in a shaky breath. “He had a seizure.”

Brad closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them again, his eyes were a darker blue. “Is he okay?”

“They managed to get him settled again and told me they would monitor him overnight to make sure another one didn’t come back but it’s the opposite of good news. The doctor said it wasn’t a good sign.”

“But he’s okay?”

She nodded, tongue going dry in her mouth. She bit back a moan. Brad moved from the couch and sat with her on the floor.

“But you’re not okay.” He stated, voice distant.
She shook her head. “It’s been eight months, Brad. He’s not waking up. He’s not getting better. He’s just lying there, wasting away, and I can’t—I don’t know how to bring him back.” The tears started and she was aware of his arms wrapping around her, voice shushing her, but Gwen couldn’t help the sobs.

“Don’t give up hope.”

She pushed away from him and stood unsteadily on her feet. “What if he never does? They’re all waiting. Jack, Teddy, Silas, hell even Manó. You’re waiting, I’m waiting, the whole country is waiting for him to open his eyes and he just won’t.”

Brad stood up and regarded her cautiously. “These things take time—”

“He’s dying, Brad! He’s gone! He’s not coming back!”

“Stop saying that! You don’t know. Okay? I know you’re scared. I know you miss him. I miss him, too. But we just have to wait for him to come back to us when he’s ready. He will come back.”

Gwen pulled at her hair and turned away from his words. “What was all this for if he’s not going to be able to see it with me?” She turned back to him. “I didn’t want this. I never wanted this for him. How am I ever going to face him again?”

Brad drew closer and took her face in his hands. “You can’t blame yourself. He did this out of love. He did this for his own child. He knew the risks—”

“It’s not fair.” She whispered, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’m gonna be alone for the rest of my life. He’s gonna leave me all alone.”

“You’re not alone. You never will be Gwen.” She shook her head. His grip tightened. “Listen to me. You are exquisite. From the moment I saw you on that beach. I even thought I was in love with you, so I knew Blake sure as hell was.” She whimpered, hands latching onto his shirt. His words had startled her into a memory that she hadn’t thought of years, when they all were much younger, less equipped to handle the tragedies of life.

She squeezed her eyes shut. “What do we do without him?” She whispered. It was her biggest fear. Knowing Blake was somewhere in the world but just not with her was easy to fathom, she had endured it most of her life, but to live and breathe in a world where he no longer did, where she couldn’t seek him out, was something too unbearable to even think about.

Brad’s hands slid from her face. He looked at a loss for words. “Gwen…”

“What do we do?” She pressed him, hands still clutching his shirt.

He exhaled and looked into her eyes. “We keep going. We love each other and we love the kids and we keep going for him. We make ourselves happy because that’s what he would have wanted.”

“He would have wanted to live Brad.”

The words stung, and he recoiled from the emotion she emitted in them. But after a moment, his eyes bore into her. “He will live. He is right now.”

She shook her head, defeated. “Lying in that hospital bed isn’t living. Living is getting ice cream on the weekends. Living is watching his son walk and run again. Living is teaching him new things and dancing with me in the moonlight and holding me while I cry!” Her hands pushed him away forcefully. Her voice rose but she was helpless to stop herself as she pounded at his chest.
“Living means breathing and walking around and talking back to me! All he ever does is lie there! Living is loving me Brad! Living is growing old with me!”

“Gwen--”

“He’s not living!” She cried again. His hands shot up to hold her to him but she struggled against him.

“Gwen, please, stop--”

“I want him back! Make him come back! Make him, Brad! Make it stop! I just want it to stop!”

The next moment seized her yells, her tears, and her pain.

In an act of desperation, Brad drew her into his clutches and forced his lips upon her, kissing the woman his best friend loved with a zeal and mania that shell-shocked her to her very foundation. Gwen pried at his chest, trying to pull back, but Brad heaved the back of her head against him, deepening the kiss. His lips were altogether different from Blake's and brought with them a flooding array of emotions. His lips were larger and more pronounced, wet, yet palatable, and a bit salty. They moved differently than the way Blake kissed, but Gwen could not comprehend the differences at that moment. Her mind was foggy and paralyzed.

She grew exhausted with trying to fight him off and, as a result, Brad kissed her more gently, his grip on her arms loosening as he intensified their locked lips. Her mouth grew numb, her body grew numb, and a warmth surrounded her the next moment.

She had forgotten how it felt to be kissed with such intensity, such love, such adoration. She had been so desperate for contact with Blake, this kind of contact, where mouths met and hands roamed, and they ended up stealing each other’s breaths away, that kissing Brad had quenched some of that desire building up inside of her for the past eight months.

But this wasn’t the man she wanted. He might have been at one point in this long, exhausting summer, in the nights she was too weak to hold herself together long enough to see Blake open his eyes, but not now, not anymore.

Gwen suddenly shrunk from his embrace, her mouth tearing from his. Her breathing accelerated and her eyebrows came together. She thrust a hand over her trembling lips, the ones her friend, not her Blake, had just touched. She could hardly believe what occurred and felt immediately sickened by it.

What would Blake think? What could she possibly say to him that would make this okay? He was lying there, trusting her to be faithful to him, trusting her love to never wane from him, just as his love had not gone anywhere for her. They were betraying his memory. They were hurting him. He was already sacrificing so much and she was causing him pain.

“Gwen,” Brad mumbled softly, but she shook her head violently and turned away from him.

She had to get out of this stifling room.

Why did it feel like she had nowhere to go anymore?
Gwen peered at the sky from her perch on the backyard terrace. It was cloudy, fitting for the day after Halloween. There was a slight chill in the air and Gwen pulled her thin cardigan around herself. The scent of rain hung in the air as she watched the sky darken.

A gentle hand startled her a moment later and the seamstress looked over her shoulder. A scalding coffee mug was stretched out to her, almost like a peace offering. She looked into Brad’s dark blue eyes and studied the pain and regret she saw there. Finally, after a long moment, she took the coffee, taking a hesitant sip before placing it in front of her on the railing.

Brad moved to stand next to her, hip firmly planted against the damp wood. He regarded her with sleepy eyes, a handsome face, and tousled hair. Gwen swallowed.

He chewed the inside of his cheek and looked down at their bare feet.

“I owe you an apology.”

His voice was rough from sleep. It twisted her insides.

“I accept.” She murmured.

His eyes snapped to hers quickly. “I mean it. I shouldn’t have done it. I was caught up in the moment…”

“We both were.”

“But I should have respected you enough not to do something like that. Not to mention Blake…” He trailed off, wincing as he said his friend’s name.

Gwen let the sounds of their breaths fill the air before she exhaled heavily. “I miss him, and I think you miss Stephanie. We...we’ve grown close these past couple of months. Things like this happen-”

“Please stop being the voice of reason for one moment.”

Gwen promptly shut her mouth and watched him gather his thoughts.

“I can’t help but think about you in ways that I know I shouldn’t...and I know it’s the same for you. I see it when you look at me sometimes. I never thought I’d be here. I thought I’d be with Stephanie forever. But people grow apart...What I’m trying to say is that I’m not in love with you. But I respect you. I think the world of you. You’re an amazing friend and a beautiful woman and the best mother. You don’t deserve to be alone for the rest of your life. So I guess I’m telling you that if he never wakes up, if he never comes back to us, I’m here. That’s all. No more, no less. I want him back. I want him back to make you happy. But if he never does, the only thing I can think...”
of to honor him, to love him, is to make sure you and your kids are good in his absence.”

“Brad--”

“I don’t want anything. I’m not expecting anything. Like I said, I shouldn’t have kissed you. And I’m not in love with you. I know you’re not in love with me and that it’s Blake that you really want. To be honest, it’s still my wife that I want. But I wanted you to know how I felt about you. It has the potential to be something if we let it. That isn’t necessarily the worst thing in the world because you never know who you’re going to need in the future, Gwen. I’m just letting you know that I’m here to be in your life in whatever capacity you need. I’m just trying to figure it out with him gone, just the same as you.”

Gwen’s hands were wrapped around her mug but the coffee no longer felt hot. It was lukewarm, just like them. They weren’t off, cold, or even forgotten. But they weren’t on either, scalding hot, steaming with possibilities. They just were. She and Brad were stagnant. They fell somewhere between existing and sleeping.

Is this what old age was like? You either grow old with somebody or live life long enough to find someone else to die alongside of. The lucky ones got to have both with the same person. Judging by her past, Gwen had never been that lucky in life.

She deflated almost immediately at the thought.

Brad’s hand found hers, fingers stretching between hers around the glass. “Gwen...Are you alright?”

She wasn’t. The closer they came up on a year, the more Gwen felt like withdrawing from life. The sight of Blake convulsing on the bed, eyes firmly shut, mind elsewhere, so far away from her and the kids, had managed to burn something rotten inside of her. She felt stained, tainted, damaged. And here this man was, promising her care and support and maybe even love if she never got it from his friend again. Everything was so personal and yet impersonal at the same time, like a business transaction between family members.

But Gwen didn’t want a proposal for the sake of logistics or out of some sort of obligation. She wanted Blake’s caress on a rainy afternoon, his mouth on a hot summer day, his light blue eyes in the morning, and his smooth words in a quiet night. She wanted to marry him. She wanted to be buried beside him. She wasn’t alright and she would never be again if he didn’t wake up.

Looking to her friend, Gwen nodded her head slowly, showing him she’d heard his question and wanted to dissuade his concerns. He looked like he didn’t believe her, like he wanted her to elaborate on what he’d said. Gwen didn’t have a response. She couldn’t entertain his own fears and desires because her own were too loud, too demanding, too harsh.

She simply unlaced their hands and leaned up to kiss him briefly on the lips. It was chaste, and held nothing of last night’s heat and passion. It was to show her vulnerability, as well as her appreciation, and acceptance.

When she pulled away, she saw a longing in his eyes. For what she didn’t know. Maybe it was for his wife, maybe it was for her, it might’ve even been for Blake, but Gwen turned away from it too quickly to be held responsible for the answer.
“I don’t even know what I want to make this year.” Gwen sighed, setting her pen down on the counter.

Patti regarded her daughter with a peculiar expression as she went about cutting the stems off some roses she bought at the supermarket.

“I’d start with a turkey.” Dash piped up from his perch on the floor. He was sitting with Silas, helping him build the train set that Jackson gave the younger boy when he was cleaning out his studio apartment. It was a gift from Blake and Jack thought Silas would enjoy it as much as he did when he was younger. He had no use for it anymore and the youngest Shelton boy didn’t mind taking it off of his brother’s hands. He was rather obsessed with all the pieces and the mechanics that went into it.

Manó chuckled at his uncle’s quip but Gwen sent the two men a glare. “Thank you captain obvious but I meant for dessert. I know you guys want a pumpkin pie but peach cobbler is Blake’s favorite...I thought making something for him would be nice even if he can’t be here.”

The room fell silent, as it often did when Blake was mentioned. It was a week before Thanksgiving and there still hadn’t been any signs of improvement in the former president’s condition. He hadn’t had any more seizures, which Gwen was thankful for, but that was about it. She visited him yesterday and shaved his face for the week and even allowed a haircut to take place. His hair had grown considerably long and even though it suited him in his old age, Gwen thought it best to trim the dead ends. She couldn’t wait to see him again later that evening and talk to him about the holiday plans. She had a feeling that if he was awake to enjoy them, he would have loved them.

“Why not make both?” Silas suggested, focus on a train track he was gluing back together that accidently got damaged in the mail.

“You guys will eat it?” She asked.

Silas shrugged. “I’ve never had it before but if Blake likes it then I guess I’ll try it.”

Manó wrinkled his nose. “I kinda want cheesecake this year.”

“You gonna help make it?” Dennis asked him, coming in from the back yard. He had mowed the lawn for his daughter while Brad was out of town. He was visiting Stephanie for a week, and Gwen secretly hoped that the visit was a success in getting her friend back together with his wife.

Things had been awkward at first between them after the initial kiss and conversation that followed after but eased over time as they headed into the holidays. There was still a tension there and they didn’t quite interact the same way they once did before the embrace, but it was nothing that Gwen couldn’t handle.

“Nevermind.” Manó mumbled.

Silas snickered and leaned back against the fireplace. “Hey, Mom? Can I go to the hospital to see Dad with you?”

Gwen tried to keep the surprise off of her face as she replied. “Of course.”

He nodded and went back to his work, asking Dash a question about one of the construction directions.
The mother of three stood up and went to the fridge. Her father nudged her as she grabbed a bottle of water. He gave her an apprehensive look before speaking.

“I was wondering..” He cleared his throat. “If it’s not too much trouble...I’d like to visit the hospital, too.”

Gwen couldn’t keep the shock off her face this time.

In all the time that Dennis had known Blake, he never liked him. Gwen knew this and although it was heartbreaking at first, she learned to get over it. But she’d seen a change in her father’s attitude toward the comatose man ever since he learned that Blake donated his kidney to Silas. The change was subtle. He didn’t scowl at the mention of Blake anymore. He didn’t grumble underneath his breath. He didn’t even look at her with a faint trace of disappointment when he noticed her thoughts on the man. If anything, Dennis had been remorseful, understanding, and even a little sad for his daughter.

But he never visited Blake in all these months. Gwen didn’t think he ever would which was why she was so surprised that he brought the topic up.

Clearing her own throat, Gwen nodded. “I think he would love that.”

Dennis shifted uncomfortably. “…Is it--I mean do you--is he--” He cut off, frustrated all of a sudden.

“Dad?”

He sighed. “How do you do it?”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“With him lying there like that, unable to talk and look back at you? Doesn’t it upset you?”

She smiled softly at her father. “In the beginning it did, and then somewhere in the middle, and even last month, but you get used to it. They say it helps if you visit and talk to them. I don’t know if he can hear me but I like to think he can...It’s not so bad when you see him. Silas barely even notices his condition I think. He just goes and sits with him and talks for hours about school and therapy and everything in between. It can be the same for you if you let it.”

Dennis looked at her confused. “I don’t--I’m not--”

“I just meant that you’ve never got the chance to know him like we do. You hated him--”

“I didn’t hate him--”

“Regardless, I can tell that you have some things you want to say to him. You can do it now while he’s still asleep and you can do it again when he wakes up.” She swallowed. “If he wakes up. And if you find that the experience was a good one then you can go back and see him anytime you like. You’d be surprised at how calming it is to talk to someone who can’t react to what you say. He’s just somebody who’s there, listening or not listening. Go talk to him and tell him about your day or even just go and sit with him and read a book. I like to think that he knows we’re there and enjoys the company. I can’t imagine lying there every waking moment in a day by yourself. I don’t like when he’s alone. He deserves better than that.”

Dennis looked at a loss for words but Gwen didn’t hold it against him. Her father wasn’t the type of man who showed his emotions easily. Just knowing that he felt something at hearing her words
was enough.

She smiled and squeezed his shoulder briefly before turning back to her list of desserts. “I’m leaving for the hospital around seven so whoever is going today better be ready by then.”

“That late?” Patti asked.

“I’m not staying long and I have a million things to get done before I can go see him.”

“We should get some ice cream before we go to the hospital. We’ll get Dad chocolate and I’ll eat it for him.” Silas told them.

Manó threw his head back and gave out a raucous laugh. Gwen smiled at them, the skin around her eyes crinkling more every day. It saddened her sometimes to look in the mirror and see more grey hairs, looser skin, and even tired limbs and bones, but she knew that was normal and she should count herself lucky that she was allowed to age as gracefully as she had. Things could be worse. She could be lying in a hospital bed, wasting away, getting closer by the minute to a living corpse.

Gwen shook her head, ridding herself from the disturbing thought. As much as she hated to see Blake like that, she knew that he was actually fairing better than most comatose patients, if judging by the faint glow in his pale skin, and healthy amount of hair growth he’d managed to sustain while unconscious.

Things could always be worse. She just had to remember that. It was especially hard during the times that things seemed to be better than okay. Those were rare moments that Gwen didn’t see too often but they were the kind that revealed her to be at her most happiest. They came to her in unexpected moments.

That evening at the ice cream shop had been one of those unanticipated joys of life.

She started off as one for the evening hospital trip but managed to get her entire family to come along. It was the first time that everyone would be together, excluding Brad, and Gwen almost wished that he was there with everyone as she looked around at her family.

The ice cream shop they frequented was an old one. Her parents had taken her and Dash there plenty of times when they were children. Over the years, minor advancements had been installed into the place, including a miniature arcade filled with the oldest pinball machine games in the world. The inside resembled an old malt shop while the outside looked like a fancy movie theater. Currently, Gwen was watching Silas and Dennis beat each other’s high scores in Galaga. Manó and Dash had ordered the biggest dessert on the menu and were tackling it together over a conversation of politics. Meanwhile, Gwen sat with her mother and enjoyed some peaceful silence that she didn’t seem to get enough of most days.

It was a while before Patti ventured to get her daughter talking.

“It’s a shame Brad can’t be here. How is he? Have you heard from him since he left?”

Hearing his name never failed to make her insides twist. Ever since that damn kiss. Gwen schooled her face and shrugged. “I told him to text me when he landed safely and he emailed me a couple of pictures of some flowers he saw when he was out for a walk the other day. He thinks we should plant them in the backyard. But other than that I don’t know what he’s up to over there.”

Her mother hummed. “I hope he and his wife are working things out.”

“Me too.” She replied, earnestly.
“Do you think he’ll live with you guys forever if they don’t?”

She shrugged again. “I honestly don’t know.”

“How have you given it any thought?”

Gwen stared at her mother for a moment before nodding. “But I really don’t know, Mom. That’s all I can say.”

“I just think you should tread carefully with the situation. You have to think about S.J.”

“I only ever think about him. Him and Blake are my top priorities.”

“But if Blake doesn’t wake up soon, you have to consider that he never will and help Silas face that. You’re going to have to help yourself face that inevitably, too. You can’t lean on Brad if that happens because he’ll be hurting just as much. I’ve seen this before. You can’t hold each other back from moving on.”

“Mom...this is wholly irrelevant right now. Blake still has a couple of months before we have to start thinking about things taking a turn for the worse.”

“I just want to make sure you’re prepared.”

“I am. You don’t have to worry about me or Brad for that matter. He’s a big boy and he’ll survive. In fact, I think he’s done more thinking and preparation for the future than I have.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Just something he said.”

“What was it?” Patti asked, now fully intrigued.

Gwen shook her head. “Nothing, Mom. Don’t worry about it.”

“...Well, I’m glad he’s thinking ahead.”

The dressmaker hummed and looked off into the distance. The sight of her son and father playing together helped calm some of her nerves about Brad. She didn’t know why she had this reaction to discussing the man but it felt like it was taking more out of her to keep up this false pretense of wellness. She hoped their tension could go away soon because she didn’t know how long she would be able to handle it if it didn’t.

Another hour passed before Gwen thought it best to head on over to the hospital. Piling in two cars again, they drove to see Blake. The night hadn’t cooled off one bit, the temperature resting at an even seventy-six but the warm breeze felt comforting, like something or someone was trying to wrap her up in a blanket but just kept nearly missing her.

Despite their joyful evening, the family remained silent as they walked into the hospital and made the trek up to Blake’s floor. Dennis pulled her mother close and kissed her on the forehead. Gwen watched with a smile. He must be nervous.

She wasn’t. The times she got to see her love were the most sobering if not therapeutic experiences of her life. The closer they grew to seeing him, the warmer Gwen’s heart became.

The sentiment had been shattered the moment they arrived to his room and saw three or four nurses swarming around the body in the bed. Silas and Manó had been walking ahead of the group and
Gwen pushed past them to see what was happening.

Her eyes flashed with pain as she saw what all the commotion was about. She told herself she wouldn’t subject her mind to another image of Blake seizing, and didn’t have to since the occurrence only happened once since his condition. But as she watched his body convulse wildly, his limbs jerk spasmodically on the bed, only one thing ran through her head in that horrible moment, his eyes are open.

The last time she had seen him like this, his body may have been responding to the jolts and pained nerves but his eyes and mind had pretty much stayed closed off to the rest of him. Gwen watched with something akin to disbelief as Blake stared painfully at the wall, racked with the effects of his debilitating condition. And then he started to cough and choke on his own tongue, vomit coming up the next instance. From there, it seemed as if his body had lost all control and yet gained all of it back as his bladder gave out and the catheter put in place did it’s intended job. Saliva flecked his lips and tears ran down his face, but he wasn’t crying.

It wasn’t easy to watch, and as she remembered that she wasn’t alone, Gwen turned around and saw Silas staring at his father with a mix of horror and trepidation. She sprung into action and moved into his line of vision, asking a stunned Manó to take him from the room. Her son didn’t seem to register her request and her father stepped in, leading everyone but her away from the sight of Blake. If she could wipe that terrified look off of her mother’s face, she would in a heartbeat.

As they tried to leave the room, Dr. Evie entered it, rushing straight to Blake’s side as a couple of the nurses moved out of the way. She heard very little from her place by the door but when one of the nurses mentioned him waking up, Gwen’s ears perked.

It took several more minutes for Blake to stop seizing. When the shaking subsided, he looked all but passed out, except for his eyes, which remained open and fixed on a point in the room Gwen couldn’t see.

Her heart was beating loudly as she watched the nurses clean his face. The doctor checked his vitals and shined a light in his eyes. She must have seen something there because she turned to Gwen suddenly, the older woman wasn’t even aware that the doctor had registered her presence before.

The dressmaker stepped forward, just an inch, and she could feel herself leaning into whatever the professional had to say.

“Gwen…” A slow, small, grin poked at the corners of her mouth. “He’s awake, love.”

It was the first time that his doctor ventured to be anything but personal with her, and in that moment, Gwen knew it to be true. It was a fact of life, now.

Blake was awake.

Gwen willed herself to look over at him, afraid that it would be some joke and his eyes would be closed, body back in that haunting position it had been in for almost a year now. But when she set her sights on him again, his eyes were still open, blinking sluggishly. She willed them to move over to her but they never did.

“Gwen, why don’t we clean him up some more and I run some test to assess his state of mind. I can’t say it will be quick but if you intend to stay I can give you and your family the community room. How does that sound?” Dr. Evie asked.
Gwen nodded absently, eyes glued to Blake’s.

“Okay. I’ll have Nurse Jacobs show you where to wait. I’ll come get you personally when we’re finished.”

A small hand touched her elbow and she was led from the room before she could do or say or look at anything else. Outside, her family stood dutifully, waiting for her return. The nurse, sensing she wouldn’t be able to talk anytime soon, lead them all away until they reached the so called community room. It was empty and decorated for the holiday. The nurse left her with a squeeze to her shoulder.

Once the door closed, her father pounced on her immediately, wrapping her up in his arms. He was mistaking her reaction to Blake’s ailment for the worst but Gwen couldn’t have been more happy in that moment. She was still trying to find something to say that would do this miracle justice.


She shook her head and wiped at the newly fallen tears staining her flushed face. “They said--she said--” Her voice was unsteady and Gwen closed her eyes to regain some sort of self control. She exhaled before whispering, “He’s awake.”

Just as she had been paralyzed by the news, her family members stood around her with equally shocked expressions.

“Are you serious?” Silas asked, voice suddenly smaller, reminiscent of when he was just a little boy.

She nodded, swallowing harshly.

Dennis wrapped her up in his arms again.

“Thank you, God.” She whispered over and over, until her tongue tired and her lips stopped working. It was around the time the doctor knocked gently on the door, coming into the room with a completely expressionless face, that she stopped repeating the mantra. They all stood up the moment she began speaking.

“I know you’re still wondering if his alertness is in any way a side effect of the seizure. I can tell you right now that he is fully awake and coherent.”

Gwen’s heart skipped a beat.

“I asked him a few questions. He does know who he is. He can remember a lot, most of everything leading up to the day of the surgery. Some memory loss is to be expected, however, as well as some paranoia and mood swings. Typical coma patients who have been under this long tend to react violently once they wake up and even days or weeks after. Trying to find your way back into a life that’s been going on without you can be distressing. He could be prone to emotional outbursts, staring spells, some confusion, and even some minor loss of function in his arms and legs. Right now, he’s very quiet. He’s unsure of his surroundings, but he’s stable. The standard procedure is to keep him for a couple of days.”

“But can he--will he be better by Thanksgiving? Can I take him home by then?” Gwen asked.

“If he manages a liquid diet in these next couple of days and doesn’t have any episodes...I know you’ve been waiting a long time for this but I’ll have to see. His legs and feet have feeling in them, but his reflexes are a little slow. We have to make sure he’ll be able to walk on his own, or at least...”
use the aid of a caine. Sometimes, coma patients have to relearn how to do the most basic things. Eating could be one of them, speaking is another...we’ll just have to wait and see, okay?”

Gwen nodded. She was trying to process all the doctor was saying but she could only really focus on the fact that Blake was awake.

“Can we see him?” The mother of three asked, tentatively, afraid the physician would say no.

“I think it’s best if he only has one visitor tonight. He’s already overwhelmed as it is.”

“Of course.” Dennis said, turning to his daughter. “You go see him. We’ll leave you the one car and we’ll head back home.”

“But I want to see Blake, too.” Silas interjected.

Manó wrapped an arm around his brother. “You’ll see him tomorrow, S.J. Come on, let Mom have a moment with him. He won’t be ready to talk a lot until tomorrow anyway.”

Gwen gave her oldest boy an appreciative glance and turned to her mother. She still had traces of that terrified look on her face when she’d seen Blake writhing and convulsing on the bed.

“Mom...you okay?”

Patti nodded a little too quickly.

“Will you and Dad stay with the boys until I get back?”

“Yes.” Her father answered for his wife.

Giving her mother one last sympathetic look, Gwen gave her kids kisses and followed Doctor Evie out of the room.

As she walked side by side with the woman, Gwen fidgeted with her hands. Her nerves were starting to get the better of her.

“If it helps...he’s probably more nervous than you are right now.” Dr. Evie murmured.

Gwen looked over to the woman. “Why would he be nervous?”

“I doubt that.”

The doctor sighed. “You’re thinking about how much things have changed since he’s been away. You’re wondering if things can ever go back to normal. You’re nervous about him changing. I have a feeling he’s worried about all of that, as well...When I asked him if he had a family, he nodded. Just a slight nod. He hasn’t said a word since he’s been awake. He’s probably been thinking about his entire life before the coma and wondering the same things you are. How so much has changed, and could they ever go back to the way they were, and what if he’s not the same man you or your family once knew?” The doctor suddenly stopped her with a hand to her arm. “I’m telling you, Ms. Stefani. He is just as scared as disappointing you than you are of disappointing him. Everything has changed, and they can never go back to being normal. He’s been through a life altering condition but he made it out. He’s here with us. So the best thing you both can do for each other is have patience. Remember your life before but don’t try to repeat it. Be good to one another. I can see you love him very much. Your devotion and your determination has never wavered in these past
nine months for him.”

Gwen felt herself growing unsure at the doctor’s words. She looked around the deserted hallway and found her fears, confronting them out loud for the first time. “What if it’s her he remembers the most? Or them? What if what he wants is so far in his past that I can’t be it?” She asked, not sure if the woman would even know what she was talking about. Of course she did, Gwen thought the next second. Blake was the president for crying out. Josie was the First Lady. She would be here if things were different.

To her surprise, the surgeon took a hold of one of her hands and squeezed them tightly.

“Think of this time as a moment for your lives to start anew. Everything’s changed, but the thing that hasn’t is fate. I didn’t want to say it before because it’s highly inappropriate and none of my business. But I believe in God, Ms. Stefani and I believe in medicine. With coma patients, there’s no medicine in the world to change something like life or death. Lives our left in God’s hands. He’s decided to give you and Mr. Shelton a new one together. Don’t let fear of the past hold you back from dreaming of the future.”

Gwen had had enough of crying for a lifetime, and even though she felt the tears, she refused to let them out. This was one of the happiest moments of her life. Blake was awake. Her children were happy and healthy and here. Her family remained intact. She wasn’t hurting for money or food or shelter. She wasn’t trapped in a loveless marriage, or sick in a hospital, or stuck with a job she hated. She wasn’t wishing for the person that she loved most in the world to want and love her back. She believed in Blake. She believed in them. She believed in their love.

For that fact and that fact alone...there was no reason for her to cry anymore.
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

So...we broke this chapter up because the pacing of this chapter felt like a stand alone. The next chapter is set in one place and just focuses on one event.

A part of her, the weak part, hoped he’d fallen asleep before she got the chance to talk with him. The knock on the door was soft and gentle, like she endeavored to make every part of her so as his eyes drifted from the window to her own.

Her breath caught for a moment, suddenly all too aware of that shade of blue fixed on her person. She had not looked into his eyes in almost a year. To do so now was a stretch above her imagination and any memory she possessed before them.

There was no raging storm in his hues, no intense passion, not even a hint of shine. But in them, she saw recognition. That tasted sweeter than any emotion ever could. Gwen had already shared time with love, and happiness, and pain, but to brush death and forgotten moments and stolen silences, that was something she never wanted to give time to again.

Quietly, with the caution of approaching a scared animal, Gwen ventured further into the room. Blake’s eyes followed her path. His body did not react to her closer proximity but she was aware of his weary form.

There were no words. She was afraid to say any. She was upset that she had been at a loss for them in the first place. This was the man that she had shared children with. This was the man she had invited and pushed out of her life so many times to keep count anymore. They had something the books talked about and the people dreamed about and she couldn’t find one word to face all that. He saved her the next moment from having to.

“Are they still here?”

Blake’s voice was rough from underuse and his mouth moved in a peculiar way. It sounded as if someone punched him repeatedly in it, trying to rip his throat out of his neck in the process but it made her tear up all the same. His words registered a moment later and she tilted her head, confused.

“Is who still here?” She asked softly.

He cleared his throat, looking away. Quite, he said, “My sons.”

Her lips curled. She nodded, feeling more stable. Hesitantly, Gwen moved to sit down on the bed. Blake watched her uneasily as she did but didn’t object.

“Jackson is pretty much the pillar of health.” She smiled. “He’ll be on the next plane out to come and see you once I tell him you’re awake, and Silas...he’s walking and is back in school. He’s doing amazing thanks to you.”

Blake shifted slightly, eyes impassive, body tense. Gwen almost frowned but remembered the doctor’s words. He wouldn’t be his old self right away, maybe never again. She had to be patient
and give him time. Mustering the courage to ask the question she’d wanted to ever since he woke up, Gwen reached for his hand. He didn’t recoil and she let out a breath before speaking again.

“I know you must be scared. I know it’s not easy waking up after all this time...I understand if you need a couple of days to process and regain your footing. But I...” She faltered, the courage leaving her all at once like the air going out of a balloon. “Thanksgiving is in a couple of days and we didn’t think--we hoped--I thought that it would be nice, for everyone, if you were able to come home for it.”

He blinked. There were several moments between them that passed before he replied. “I remember you...I love you...I know that. I knew that ever since I woke up. The moment I started remembering, you were the first thing on my mind.” His words were everything she wanted to hear but somehow, they were laced with sadness. Like a ‘but’ would soon follow his words. She didn’t have to wait too long to be disappointed.

“But I get this feeling...” He looked away from her. “I know I love you but I can’t feel it right now.” Gwen willed herself to remain breathing as he continued speaking. “I think I’m--I’m confused.”

She nodded, even though he wasn’t looking at her any longer. “That’s okay,” her voice sounded stronger than she felt. “The doctor said that was common for coma patients. You just need some time. It was stupid of me to push you right now. You’ll come home when you’re ready.”

He glanced at her. Seeing the tears in her eyes, his fingers squeezed her lightly. “Why are you crying?”

She shook her head, ridding the tears as quickly as they’d come. “I think I’m just scared like you.”

He watched their entwined hands for a moment. “I think...I don’t want to disappoint you.”

She almost laughed. “Now you’re starting to sound like the old Blake.” Gwen winced immediately after the words left her mouth. “I’m sorry. That was--I shouldn’t have said that.”

Blake didn’t give off the impression that he was offended either way and it was like a punch to the gut. He simply brought her hand with his and rested it over his chest. Surprised at the action, Gwen met his eyes.

“I do love you.” He said.

She closed her eyes. “You just can’t feel it right now.” When she opened them again, he nodded. Exhaling, she extracted her hand and rose from the bed. “But you’ll try.”

“Keep asking me.”

She frowned. “Keep asking you what?”

“To try. To come home. Ask me.”

Gwen looked around the room, feeling lost. “Come home, Blake?”

He looked at her, and for the first time since she set eyes on him, his own blue orbs flashed with something. They looked to be straining, like he was searching for something, trying to remember anything. Finally, with a voice that sounded like pain and heartache and regret all mixed together, he said, “Good night, Gwen.”
Friday saw her returning back to the hospital. She went late evening so that Blake had some more time to himself.

Silas had wanted to come but Gwen flat out refused the boy. If she was getting such a dispodent reaction out of the man they both loved then the mother of three had no idea how Blake would receive their son. She didn’t want to upset Silas and she couldn’t guarantee that a visit this soon wouldn’t prove to do just that.

To her surprise, Blake was in a much less confused mood than he had been the day before. When she arrived to his room, he was sitting up, flexing his arm around a large rubber band that was wrapped around his chest. He looked up when she entered the room and beckoned her in.

“Hi.” She greeted him softly.

“Hey.” He looked her up and down, and Gwen fought the urge to fidget.

“What’s that?” She asked, gesturing to the band.

“The nurse started me on a physical therapy plan. I need to regain some muscle mass if I’m gonna walk out of here by Wednesday.”

Gwen noted that he still talked a little funny, but his voice sounded much better. “What’s Wednesday?”

“Nothing if I remember correctly about the days of the year.”

She tilted her head before the statement hit her. He was referencing coming home for Thanksgiving. She squealed internally but kept her mouth and face shut. She had to remember that he loved her but he just didn’t feel that love yet. But he was trying.

Changing the subject, the designer walked over to the empty chair by his bed and sat down. “How are you feeling?”

He shrugged. When it became apparent that he wouldn’t elaborate or say anything further, Gwen realized that she was intruding on a man who couldn’t eat anything solid because he wouldn’t be able to keep it down, and couldn’t use the bathroom on his own because his legs didn’t work, and couldn’t talk to her because he was emotionally and mentally unstable. She wasn’t helping him, she was just in the way right now.

She left as soon as one of the scrub nurses came in to give him a bath.

She cried in the car on the way home and refused to talk about the visit with anyone once she arrived there.
Saturday was the first time she saw one of Blake’s confusion spells. It was another late visit and he reacted to her presence much in the same way that he’d been doing ever since he woke up. She brought a book with her this time and sat in the corner and read as he watched the small television mounted on the wall. She was turning a page when she glanced up at him. He’d already been staring at her.

She fidgeted and asked if she could get him anything. His reply cut her chest open.

“Who are you?”

Gwen blinked. “I’m Gwen. You remember me, right?”

Blake recoiled at her words. “Could you leave, please. I don’t--I don’t know--where am I? What are you doing here?”

She stood up, unsure of herself at his panic-stricken expression. “Blake, you’re in the hospital--”

“Why?”

She found it difficult to answer him without setting off further alarm bells in his mind. “Let me get the nurse, okay?”

He didn’t respond but Gwen didn’t wait for him to. She grabbed one of the nurses at the station desk and waited outside until she came back out. When she did, the nurse informed her that she’d given Blake a sleep aid to help calm him down.

Gwen waited until she was in her own home and bed this time to let out her cries.

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Sunday was a better day.

Gwen visited in the morning, and found Blake standing up, holding onto the man that was to be his physical therapist for the rest of his recovery. The former president smiled at her when he saw her, all of yesterday’s confusion gone.

She smiled back, settling herself on the bed as she watched Blake move around the room with great difficulty. It was a long process but he eventually made it. Gwen held back a scream of excitement and instead vacated the bed so that he could lay back down. He was sweaty and exhausted now but he still looked so beautiful to her. Even his scruff was making a welcome appearance again.

She sat down next to him and ran a soft hand down his arm. “That was amazing. You did great.” Gwen complimented once the therapist left the room.

Blake grinned. “Not bad for an old guy who was in a coma for nine months.”

She laughed. “You feeling better today?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I am. Although the crap they’re feeding me is disgusting.”

Gwen looked over to the container of green liquid that she was used to seeing the nurses feed him. “It’s getting you healthy enough to enjoy a Thanksgiving feast.”
“My mouth is watering already. I can remember what a turkey taste like.”

“You think you’ll be up for carving one? Brad refuses and my father is too lazy to.”

The mention of his friend wiped the smile off of Blake’s face. “Brad...how is he?”

Gwen swallowed. “He’s good. He’s in Washington with Stephanie.”

“Where else would he be?”

She paused, knowing that she would have had to tell him eventually. “Actually...he lives with me and the boys.”

Blake’s eyes snapped to hers. “Why?”

“Because when you...I brought you here because I felt like I was the only one who would take care of you in the way you deserved but then it just got to be too much with Silas and you both and I needed help. Brad came to the rescue. It wasn’t supposed to be as long as it was and then he and Stephanie separated.”

Blake frowned. “They’re not together?”

She shook her head. “He’s actually visiting with her now to see if they can reconcile. I don’t know. It’s none of my business. But he needed a place to go and I offered one with us.”

Blake was quiet for a long moment before he took her hand, a movement that surprised her. “That was nice of you. You keepsurprising me. It’s like I know you but I don’t.”

She smiled softly. “There’s so much that has happened since you were gone.”

He hummed and leaned back against the pillows more comfortably. “Why don’t you tell me, then?”

So she did.

Gwen told him about Silas’s road to recovery and Brad’s help and Manó’s firing and subsequent move back home. She told him about Lani and Dicky moving to California and wondered if he remembered that he had a daughter, too. She told him about the months she lost hope and the months she regained it all back again. She told him about those conversations in the hospital with Teddy and could see on his face that he was sad about Josie and Theordore.

She told him all of it.

Almost all of it.

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Monday came and she didn’t visit the hospital.

Instead, Gwen had several fights with several people that day.

The first started with Brad. He was upset that she didn’t tell him right away when Blake woke up.
She apologized, they fought over him coming back so quickly when he was supposed to be patching things up with Stephanie. In the end, Gwen found out that the two were getting a divorce and he was catching the next available flight out. He would see Blake on Tuesday, and that was the end of it.

The second was with Silas. She still hadn’t budged on her youngest visiting the hospital. He was adamanent and couldn’t understand why she was being so difficult. Part of her told herself that she was doing this to protect him but the other part knew that she wanted to keep Blake in this bubble all to herself. Even though he wasn’t completely all the way himself, he was there, and within reach, and completely hers. She would have to share him soon, with everyone, including Teddy and Josie. It’s why she didn’t tell Jackson and Brad before then. It was wrong, and she knew it but it had been a decision made with her emotions instead of her head.

The third fight had been with Jackson. It was the same argument she had with Brad but instead of things ending the way they did with her friend, Jackson had forgiven her right away. He asked if she would lend him a room on his visit to California, and she readily extended one to him.

Before she knew how it happened, Tuesday saw her staying away from Blake once again as he was visited by his best friend and children. She was only privy to the fact of Teddy’s arrival in California once Brad and Jack made it back to her place and told her.

She didn’t feel anything by the news. But she was a little anxious to get back to Blake and see how he was doing for herself.

“Stop worrying. Nothing was said. Nothing happened.” Brad assured her that night in the kitchen. The kids were upstairs and otherwise preoccupied as she was diving head first into a glass of wine.

She looked up at her friend with a weary gaze. “I just need to see him.”

He walked further into the kitchen and sat down at the bar. “I’ll go with you tomorrow. I just saw him and I feel like I can’t let him out of my sight again. I can’t believe he’s up and talking.”

She nodded, knowing she’s been feeling the same way for the past couple of days. “I’m trying to have him home for Thanksgiving.”

“He told me.”

Her ears perked up. “Did he talk about me?”

Brad nodded. “He just said that you want him to be here. He knows how important it is to you...he seems different, Gwen.”

“I know. The doctor said it’s just going to take some time. He knows who he is and what he had before but he just can’t get in touch with those feelings yet. Not when he’s worried about getting healthier and his body is all but trying to keep him trapped with the mood swings and paranoia and the confusing spells he sometimes gets.”

“He talks different.”

“It’s the stroke--or the seizure...I can’t remember any more.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “Teddy was thrilled to see him.”

She hummed, keeping her mouth shut on the matter. “How’s Stephanie?”
Brad flinched. “It just didn’t go the way we thought it would. I think she met someone...It’s the only explanation I can think of as to why she wouldn’t want to try again with me.”

“Did you really want to try again with her?”

He scratched his head. “...I don’t know.” He looked at her intensely.

Gwen swallowed and looked away. “Well, I told Blake. He was surprised to hear about your separation.”

“...What else did you tell him?”

Her eyes darkened. “Nothing. There was nothing else to tell him.”

“Gwen--”

“Just don’t. You said your peace. I heard you loud and clear but it doesn’t matter anymore because he’s awake. He’s here and he’s coming home and so I don’t need anymore promises or reassurances unless they’re coming from Blake.”

“Understood. I didn’t mean anything by it. I just think you should tell him because I know him and he wouldn’t like to find something like that out by accident.”

“I will tell him...just not right now. When he’s better. When he’s more sure of himself and his place in our lives.”

Brad nodded. “Alright then.”

The older man stood up and bid her a good night. Gwen bid him the same as well, knowing neither of them would actually have one. There was too much on both of their minds for sleep to come too easily.

Wednesday would not be the day that Blake would be discharged. It was postponed till the morning of the holiday for no other reason then Blake refused to go with people he didn’t know.

It was a bout of paranoia that he was going through. It lasted the whole day. He was uneasy, on edge, afraid, weak, and tired. He wanted to stay. Gwen didn’t wish to make him go.

It was the exact reason she didn’t want Silas to see him. None of it mattered however because soon he would be living with the man 24/7 and she couldn’t shield him from Blake’s mood swings if she wanted to.

Silas made that point abundantly clear that night when he curled up next to her on the couch. She had been crying, and was positive that no one was still up to hear her down in the living room by herself. When he crawled his way in next to her, Gwen wiped the tears away quickly but the action was futile. He’d already seen them.

“Does he do it on purpose?” Silas asked in a mere whisper.

Gwen’s hands went to his dark strands of hair and she asked him what he meant.
“Does he make you cry on purpose? Is Dad the one making you sad all the time?”

She could feel that crack in her heart growing at her son’s words. “No. He doesn’t do it on purpose. He can’t help how he is right now, baby.”

“You won’t let me see him but he’s gonna be staying here. You should’ve let me spend time with him so I know how to help you when it gets bad.”

She closed her eyes. “I know.”

They held each other in silence, his head on her shoulder, her head on top of his.

“Why did this happen to us?” Silas asked out of the blue.

Gwen opened her eyes, seeing nothing but a flash of the future. Where Blake held her on the couch as they watched some Christmas movie with all of their children. It was a nice dream.

“I ask myself that every day.”

“Can I go with you in the morning to bring him home?”

She didn’t hesitate in saying yes. There was no room left to fight, no more energy left to give to keep things from falling apart or getting worse. They already had. All she could do now was truly give it all the time it needed to rebuild itself again.

She wondered why everything important in her life took so long to heal itself. Twelve years to heal the wound of her daughter’s existence. Eight to heal their infidelity. Five more to heal their separation. Nine months to heal her Blake. It seemed like the number was getting smaller. Gwen hoped the same would be true about this time.
“Remember, he’s...he’s a little different from the Blake you know--”

“Mom, we talked about this already.”

Gwen gripped her son’s hand tighter as they walked through the halls of the hospital. “I know but I just don’t want you to be taken by surprise.”

“You do realize that I don’t really know the guy, right? Not like you do or Uncle Brad and Lani and Manó. I only know what you guys tell me.”

“Well...It may take awhile before you really know him like we do. Until then I just want you to be mindful that he’s a work in progress right now.”

“Got it.”

Gwen steered them in the direction of Blake’s room and prayed like hell that today was a good day. So far, she hadn’t gotten any calls to suggest otherwise, but she just never knew with the man. As they arrived to his room, Blake was standing up beside the bed, listening intently to one of his nurses.

Gwen’s breath caught when he turned around to look at them. He was dressed in a white shirt with a pair of faded blue jeans, the clothes she and Brad dropped off yesterday. He was wearing tennis shoes and his face was completely devoid of that paranoid look it had just the day before. His eyes were bluer, and his hair fell around his ears like silk. He was as handsome as he could’ve been in that moment. The best part was that he looked at her like he knew her, not just merely recognized her.

“Gwen...” He walked over to them, cane the color of deep mahogany, and stopped right in front of her. “Ask me.” He commanded her excitedly.

She had regained the air she lost back in her lungs just in time to give him a confused look and say, “Ask you what?”

“You know.”

She didn’t know and just as she was about to tell him so, Gwen saw a flash of the old Blake in his eyes and she knew instantly what he wanted. The wide grin on her lips split her face into two.

“Blake...” She shook her head, happiness bubbling up inside of her. “Will you come home?”

He matched her, smile for smile. “Always.”

She choked back tears and wrapped her arms around his neck, careful of his unsteady balance. She’d keep him up right if she had to. She’d always make sure he was okay.
His arms wrapping around her back was the greatest feeling in the world. He breathed into her neck and the old familiar nickname he’d given her so long ago fell off his lips like water.

She pulled back and planted her hands on his stubbled cheeks, eyes roaming over every part of him. “Is that you in there?”

His head moved slightly, just enough for her to see. “I woke up this morning and had the overwhelming urge to pull you close and kiss you senseless. Imagine my surprise when I woke up alone and you weren’t here.”

Her eyes filled with ushered tears. “You could have come home yesterday...You weren’t yourself.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be myself again but...I love you and if I ever tell you that I don’t feel that, know it’s a lie. I could never not feel what I do for you every second of the day.”

“Oh my God, stop it. You’re gonna have me looking a blotchy mess before I even get you through the front door.”

He chuckled and pulled her close, leaning down slowly to press a gentle, chaste, kiss to her lips. The feel of him this way had her paralyzed for a moment, and when she felt the air rush in between them when he pulled away, Gwen’s hands went to the back of his greying head and kept him within kissing distance.

“You don’t get off that easy.” She murmured.

He chuckled that deep laugh of his and returned his lips to hers. His mouth was so soft, tasting like strawberries and bananas, leftover from his breakfast, and oddly, spearmint toothpaste. The flavors shouldn’t have mixed as well as they did, but Gwen was starving for this man, and she wanted everything he was willing to give her.

When they finally pulled back for air, Gwen petted a hand down the side of his face, touching skin she never thought would heat under her touch again.

A young throat clearing startled her and Gwen released her hold on Blake as she looked to their son.

He was grinning like an idiot, and giving her a knowing look. She wanted to smack him but she knew he was just as happy for her as she was for herself.

Blake looked at their son for a long moment before shuffling closer to the boy. Silas’s face turned from joyous to apprehensive in a quick moment. He steadied himself and took a deep breath before looking at his father.

“I wanted to thank you, Da--Blake. Um, or Mr. Shelton..for the kidney. I really appreciate what you sacrificed for me...I’m sorry you had to go through this. It’s my fault and--”

Blake pulled the boy in by the scruff of his neck and hugged the teen with a strength Gwen was happy he now possessed. His body would be weak for some time, but he’d come a long way in just the week he’d been awake.

Silas all but melted in his father’s arms, and he gripped the former president with a desperation that Blake felt every moment since waking. The older man leaned down and kissed his son on the top of his head.
“One day when you have kids, you’ll understand that there is nothing you wouldn’t do for them. Sometimes, things happen and you don’t know why, but it’s no one’s fault.” Blake told the boy.

Silas nodded, clutching him closer. Gwen smiled at her boys and ran a hand down Blake’s back. He smiled at her, and leaned over to kiss her on the lips once more. She sighed, never tiring from the feel of him.

When the two men pulled back, Silas wiped at a lone tear and grinned up at the man whose kidney saved him from a miserable existence and eventually, a final act.

Blake regarded him with an amused expression. “And you can call me Blake if you want, but please don’t hit me with the “Mr. Shelton,” it makes me sound like a substitute teacher.”

Silas nodded, abashed. “If it’s okay with you...I’ll just call you Dad.”

Blake nudged his son’s shoulder. “I like that.”

A sound of pure contentment rose from the back of Gwen’s throat and she distracted the two men from acknowledging it by moving around the room and gathering Blake’s things. “Well, let’s get home because Pa and Grandma are waiting for me to get back. There’s so much to cook and we gotta get Blake settled in and used to the house. Brad is dying to get you home. He wanted to come with us but I thought this could just be a me and Silas moment, right baby?”

Silas nodded, smiling up at Blake as the older man wrapped an arm around his son’s shoulder.

“I tried to convince Mom to let us get ice cream on the way home. I’ve been eating your share for months now.”

Blake pinched Silas’s ear and then rubbed it softly. The boy laughed.

“I didn’t think you’d want ice cream this early.” Gwen defended, looking back to her love. He was staring at her with an unreadable expression.

“What’s wrong?” She asked, suddenly worried.

He shrugged. “Nothing. You’re just beautiful is all.”

She blushed and S.J. gagged.

“You’re getting soft in your old age.” She teased, secretly overjoyed by the comment. She knew they were both older than they had been before all this grief and pain happened to them so suddenly. But she still found him attractive, always would, no matter how much his skin sagged or his hair fell out. She hoped it was the same for him.

“I am. Which means we have to get ice cream. Silas wants it.”

“You’re gonna spoil him aren’t you?”

“I have to. He’s my youngest. It’s in the father handbook.”

Gwen and Silas chuckled. Blake grinned at them.

“Fine but you can’t tell Manó.” Gwen pointed at her son.

“Scout’s honor.” He replied.
She grinned from ear to ear and led two of her favorite people out of the suddenly cramped and depressing hospital room. Closing the door to it was like closing the final chapter on a part of their lives. The feeling was gratifying for many reasons.

The fact that she was taking him home was enough to fuel her for the next storm, which she had no doubt was brewing right underneath them. They were the weather, the two of them, and sometimes it rained, and other times, the sun would heat everything in existence. But at the end of the day, nothing was left untouched.

The drive to the ice cream shop had been a quiet ride. To his credit, Silas held back from telling his father any and everything he could think of while the man had been away. The boy could clearly see, even from his perch in the backseat, that Blake was semi-uncomfortable. He hadn’t been outside the hospital in months, let alone in a car. California was new for him, considering he’d never spent much time in the state before.

The former president just looked out the window, familiarizing himself with his surroundings. The radio played softly in the background, some country station that reminded Gwen of her cowboy. She thought about reaching out a hand to comfort him but kept her distance, feeling like he needed just that.

The ice cream shop was mostly empty as they walked inside. It was still early morning, so Gwen led Blake over to a table in the corner and gave Silas a ten dollar bill to get what he wanted and something for her and Blake to share.

“The cookies and cream is really good.” She said conversationally as she slid closer to the man beside her.

He hummed and looked at their son ordering at the counter. “I don’t remember what type ice cream I like. Isn’t that weird? It wasn’t like I was asleep for years.”

“Yeah but you were still gone for a pretty long time. And the doctor says that memory loss is common. You might not ever remember what type of ice cream was your favorite.”

He nodded, eyes still on Silas. Gwen sighed and finally reached out to touch him. He flinched slightly, not expecting it, but allowed her to wrap an arm around the back of his neck. She tried to turn his attention on her, and succeeded after a moment.

“Don’t get lost in yourself. You’re here. You’ve got a long way to go before you can stop feeling like this but I’m here to help you. We’re gonna be okay.”

He searched her face for several moments. “I feel like the world kept turning without me...I have so much to catch up on, so much to face. What about my job? My kids...Teddy is miles and miles away, and so is Jackson. Silas barely knows me, God knows how your kids feel about me, or your parents for that matter.” He stopped talking for a moment, as if a thought struck him harshly. “...Lani--”

Gwen drew in a breath, eyes looking to Silas still at the counter. “The kids don’t know about that, especially her.”

He nodded. “We’re not ever going to tell her are we?”

“...I don’t see the point. She’s grown now. She’s started a life with Dicky. It would just hurt more people than we already have.”

He sighed and leaned into her, nuzzling her neck softly. “What are we going to do?”
She understood what he was asking, just didn’t have the answer he wanted. “Right now, you need to focus solely on getting better. You can’t go back to a job like this. You can’t fix anything when you’re not completely altogether yourself. So what we do is go home, enjoy Thanksgiving, and take it one day at a time.”

She felt his lips lightly kiss the skin under her ear. He was smiling.

“At least I remember this. This feels right.” He whispered.

Gwen pulled back to look him in the eyes. He was still grinning. She kissed him softly, whispering against his lips. “Don’t you ever forget it again.”

“I got cookies and cream and peanut butter swirl.” Silas declared, breaking their tender moment as he slid into the booth across from them. He pushed the ice creams toward Blake and let him take the first spoonfuls.

Gwen watched as they took turns eating the desserts, and finally sparked up a conversation that wasn’t so heavy. They talked about sports, and Silas trying out for the football team next year when he was all the way healed. Gwen interjected only when she was asked a question, but otherwise stayed silent, content on letting them create this memory for the three of them.

When the cups were empty, and their words faltered slightly, Gwen reminded them of all the things she had to do that day, and the family of three left the shop and started on their way home. This time, the ride back was filled with even more chatter. Blake found himself wanting to talk about Christmas traditions, genuinely excited for the upcoming holiday. It was his favorite, apart from Halloween, and Silas backed his sentiments.

As Gwen pulled into the driveway, she tried to calm her racing heart. This was it. This was the moment she had dreamt about every night, waited for every single day. Silas hopped out of the car and ran into the house as Gwen opened her door slowly, keeping an eye on Blake as he exited the car. He grew quiet, his pace grew hesitant, even with the help of his cane. She grabbed his bag from the backseat and walked around the front of the car to meet him.

“Welcome home, babe.”

He tried to smile but it came out more like a grimace. She sighed and wrapped an arm around his back, looking up at him with a reassuring expression.

“You’re okay. We’re okay. Come on. You can go in and lay right down if you want.” She told him.

“I think I need a drink, actually.”

She laughed and guided him up the porch steps. “I can get that for you, too.”

“And a long shower. Maybe a bath. God, I don’t even fit in a bath.”

She squeezed his side. “Breathe. I love you.”

They stopped at the front door and he looked down at her. “I love you, too.”

She stood on her toes and stole a kiss from him before opening the door.

When she parted that morning, she left a messy house and four occupants inside of it. Coming back to a clean home, and nine people suddenly standing around her foyer, faces wracked with
anticipation and nerves, was not something she expected.

It was not something Blake expected either as he was met with a chorus of “Welcome home!”

Gwen felt the water lace her eyes as she looked upon her parents, her children, Lani and Dicky suddenly thrown into the mix. She hadn’t expected them until later. It wasn’t a shock to see Brad, but it was to see Theordore and Jackson next to the man, faces blooming with joy.

Blake tensed beside her but when she looked at her love, she saw genuine happiness taking ahold of him. He hesitantly took a step forward, leaning heavily on his cane. Teddy was the first one to pull the man into a hug. Blake closed his eyes as he breathed in the scent of his son. Jackson joined the embrace, and Silas hesitantly threw himself into the small little huddle. Teddy laughed, and threw his arm around his little brother, pulling him closer, a moment that stabbed her in the chest quite literally.

“What are you guys doing here?” Blake murmured.

“I invited them. I hope that’s okay? They wanted to be with you today.” Brad said, looking between Blake and Gwen.

Eyes slowly roamed over to her and Gwen bit the inside of her cheek. It wasn’t reasonable to think that one visit at the hospital after Blake awoke would be enough for the boys. “…I guess I have to make some more stuffing.”

Quiet laughter filled the foyer and Gwen smiled, eyes meeting Teddy’s briefly. There seemed to be none of the hostility and disdain in his eyes that she remembered so well just months ago.

“What do you want to do first, Dad?” Silas asked. “Do you want to see my room? Or we could go outside and we can show you the--”

“S.J.” Gwen interrupted. “Dad needs to rest for a little bit.”

Silas deflated but nodded.

“I can show you to the bedroom.” Brad offered, grabbing Blake’s bag.

Blake untangled his kids’ limbs from around him and moved to Gwen’s side. She knew he didn’t want that. “How about I show Blake to the bedroom and you help my dad with the turkey fryer.”

Brad caught her eye and relented right away. Blake gave his friend a smile and wrapped an arm around Gwen’s shoulder, leaning on her for support as they headed for the bedroom. He stopped to say hello to Lani and Dicky and Gwen’s parents briefly before they disappeared entirely.

The bedroom was on the first floor and in the back of the house. It was away from noise and perfect for Blake to catch up on some rest. He barely looked around the room before he settled somewhat awkwardly on his back, limbs sinking into the comforter. Gwen dropped his bag at the foot of the bed and went to untie his boots. They fell to the carpet with a soft plop. Gwen’s eyes traveled to Blake’s face and she smiled when she saw his eyes already closed.

She left the room quietly, grinning to herself. It felt good to have him back, even better to know that he was just a couple of footfalls away from her at any given moment.

Gwen ventured into the kitchen instead of the foyer upon hearing her brother’s voice. She was greeted with the sight of Dash stuffing his mouth with the sugar cookies they’d bought from the store as he embraced their mother. Gwen grinned as she greeted him and his wife.
“You just got here?” She asked, wiping crumbs from the sides of his lips. He nodded. “Where’s your offspring?”

“They wanted to ride bikes before we forced them into child labor.” Lani smirked from her perch at the kitchen island. “Funny how Teddy and Manó went with them.”

“Your husband is currently doing wheelies outside as we speak, so you can’t judge them much, L.” Jackson griped, laughing when Lani flipped him off.

Patti finished topping off the last of the lemonade drinks she made every year for Thanksgiving preparation and started handing them out to everyone.

This year, as a gift to Gwen, her family decided to help cook everything on the menu. Everyone would have a job to do and the mother of three didn’t know how much she would appreciate the kind gesture especially now that Blake was out of the hospital.

Lani handed her a glass of lemonade and Gwen thanked her softly.

“So how is he?” Dash asked, gesturing to the hallway.


Dash nodded, dropping the subject of Blake as quickly as he picked it up. “Mom said we all have work stations to head up. Where do you want me?” Dash asked.

Gwen leaned over the counter and snatched the list of dishes they were going to attempt to serve for tonight’s dinner. Her eyes scanned the parchment up and down, making a mental checklist in her head.

She looked around the kitchen and thinking of Blake in the other room, thinking of their children together, the holidays upon them, the hard conversations and the nice ones approaching, she took a deep breath and set everyone to work.

Jackson opened a bottle of chateau and poured everyone a glass, even Silas.

Lani and Teddy set the dining room table, while the younger kids went about setting the train set underneath the table, weaving the tracks in between chairs and legs. Gwen thought it was a horrible idea, but Brad convinced her to let them be.

Patti was finishing plating some of the food with the help of her daughter-in-law. Dash was outside with their father, helping him plate the bird. Manó and Dicky were moving the sound system from the basement up to the living room, so that they could play music throughout dinner. Everyone was dressed and ready, taking turns throughout the evening to shower and freshen up, all except Brad and Blake. The former had to run out to the store and buy a couple more aluminum containers for the food, and decided to wait to shower until after. The latter had still been asleep when Gwen started ordering everyone to get dressed. She wanted Blake to sleep as much as possible so that he could feel well rested for dinner.

As Gwen looked around at each and every one of her family members, a growing feeling of
contentedness blossomed inside of her chest. She was weary of it, knowing that life had a way of snatching happiness in just a heartbeat. But looking around her, she didn’t think anything could ruin this evening. Not some natural disaster, or some news reel, or even the doubt still creeping in the back of her mind, waiting to strike. She was going to have this perfect dinner whether it killed her. She deserved it. They all deserved it.

“It’s funny how I can tie a bow tie for someone else but can’t get the damn thing on myself.”

Brad’s voice cut through her happy fog, and she looked over to the man struggling with the black fabric. It had little turkeys printed on it. They got it at the mall several months ago on an outing with Silas, and the younger boy wanted to match with his uncle.

Gwen smiled and beckoned him over. “These things look ridiculous.”

Brad smirked. “You sound jealous.”

She scoffed as she looped the two ends together. “As if.”

“You could have gotten one for yourself. No one said you needed to wear that dress.”

Gwen pulled the ends tight around his neck, choking him for a second. Brad coughed through his laughing. She grinned as she looked up at him. “I made this dress.”

His smile faltered slightly, and something warm fell over his eyes. “I forget how talented you are sometimes...It looks amazing...You look beautiful.”

Her eyes caught his and her fingers shook slightly. Swallowing harshly, she finished off his tie. “Thank you.” She whispered, fanning out the material at his throat.

“You’re welcome.” His voice was low, warm, always warm. Gwen hated this. She hated him for putting them there.

Pulling away altogether, she looked over his shoulder and saw Blake standing in the hall, one hand on his unclipped cufflinks, blue eyes looking at them from afar. Gwen brushed past Brad without hesitation and went to the former president’s side.

He scanned her form up and down. Gwen tried to decipher what was in his eyes but he gave nothing away. Looking down at his wrist, he offered the one arm out to her.

“I can’t get it for whatever reason.” He said, voice soft.

She took the cufflink and fabric in her gentle hands and did it for him. She felt his eyes on Brad above her and she willed her heartbeat to stop racing.

“That tie is hideous.” Blake teased.

She didn’t see Brad’s smirk. “Your son picked it out.”

“I know. I just saw him.”

“All done.” Gwen said, releasing his wrist.

He looked down at her and smiled. “You look like a dream, you know that?”

Her cheeks colored. It was the one thing she noticed about the two men before her. When Brad complimented Gwen, it struck her differently. She had to pause to take it in. There was an unease
that accompanied it. But with Blake, he still never failed to make her blush, never failed to make her feel like that woman he’d met once upon a time in a small cafe. It put her at ease instead of the other way around.

“You look very handsome. I didn’t expect you to dress up like this.” She replied, hands going to the front of his chest. He was wearing a silk white button up that fell around his frame. He’d lost weight but he still looked amazing in her eyes. He always would. That president side of him would always be in there but it was a nice change to see him in dark washed jeans tonight and nothing else from his former days as the leader of the free world.

“Why not?”

“Because no one would fault you if you wanted to show up wearing your pajamas tonight.”

Blake chuckled, wrapping his arms around her waist. “I’m pretty sure your mother would kill me for ruining the pictures.”

“That woman loves you. I’m convinced you can’t do anything wrong in her eyes.”

“I could just pull the coma card if I ever do. That always draws sympathy points.”

Gwen smacked him lightly on the shoulder as he and Brad laughed. “You’re awful.”

He shrugged and leaned down to capture her lips in a chaste kiss, pulling away after a second. “Come on, you two. I’ve been getting fed from a tube in the past nine months. I want some real food.”

He turned on his heel, arm taking her with him. She noticed his cane was gone and he was trying to lean his weight on his legs instead of her. Gwen rolled her eyes and wrapped her arm around his back.

“Use me. Always use me.” She whispered up at him.

Blake glanced at her, biting the inside of his cheek. But then he relented, and Gwen felt the pressure of his limbs weighing her down. It felt good. Every part of him felt good to her.

The dining room table was covered in food and desserts as they walked into the madness. The family were finding their seats, trying and failing not to step on the train that moved around the tracks underneath their feet. Blake laughed as he watched Jackson try to step over a couple of chairs to get to the seat he wanted, which was in between Manó and Lani.

Gwen helped Blake into his chair at the head and instead of moving to the opposite chair on the other end of the table, she settled into the seat on his left. He smiled gratefully at her. Once everyone was situated, Dennis said grace before giving everyone free reign to start making their plates.

Gwen made Blake’s first after he cut the turkey. She piled it with fried meat with sprigs of rosemary threaded through the skin and stuffed with bacon and rye bread and dressing. She layered marinated ham onto the plate, along with grilled trout with lemon, smoked sausages and pineapple glazed chicken, mounds of fragrant wild rice, sweet potatoes and diced pumpkin. She knew he wouldn’t be able to eat it all but she didn’t want him to want for anything.

Dinner started off quiet, the only sounds coming from the radio and cutlery scratching glass, everyone too consumed with their food. Eventually, Jackson brought up the football game and the conversations flowed from their. Gwen spent the majority of her time eating and talking with the
women about black friday shopping. She looked over at Blake every now and then to make sure he was doing alright and didn’t need anything. He was content to pick at his food and listen to Dennis and the boys talk about the season.

Underneath the table, he held her thigh in one hand, squeezing every so often. Each time he did it, Gwen looked at him, thinking he wanted her attention, but he seemed to just be doing the action to ground himself in the moment, as if he felt himself drifting off every now and then to that world where things didn’t make sense and he was out of touch with his feelings.

Once the desserts were handed around, Gwen excused herself from her conversation with her sister-in-law and shifted closer to Blake. She ran a hand down the back of his head, clutching at his grey curls. His head rolled lazily to look over at her, and she saw the exhaustion, that faraway look in his eyes.

“Do you want to call it a night?” She asked him softly.

Before he could answer, Jackson asked if they could put the game on. Gwen hesitated because she knew the boys would insist on Blake joining them.

“I don’t--” Gwen started before she was interrupted.

“Yeah, go ahead.” Blake said, giving her a look. “I’ll be there in a second.”

The boys asked to be excused and practically ran from the table with their plates in hands, occupying the living room in a matter of seconds. Dennis stayed behind and offered to help clean up but Patti waved him away.

The women were left with Blake, who was squeezing her thigh almost insistently now.

“Hey. Don’t push yourself. They’ll understand if you need an early night. Today was a lot for you.”

He sighed and beckoned her closer. Gwen leaned further into him until their foreheads were touching. Blake closed his eyes and exhaled heavily.

“I don’t want to disappoint them.”

Gwen smiled softly at his words. “I know.”

With one last labored breath, Blake pulled away. His lips were soft,
pliant, eager. Even despite exhaustion, Blake’s passion for her was palpable. His desire for closeness had been the most rewarding revelation all evening. She only had to wait a couple more hours to be by his side again. The last time she shared a bed with this man was in a hotel room. She wanted to rectify that fact as soon as possible. It might be a long time before they were ever really intimate like that again, but they weren’t exactly teenagers anymore, and she was happy and content to just wake up next to the father of her kids for the rest of her life.

“I’ll see you in the morning then?” He asked her, voice laced with uncertainty. She had no idea why he would be so unsure but she reassured him nonetheless.

“When you open your eyes tomorrow, I’ll be the first thing you see.”

Blake grinned at that and slowly made his way to his feet. He bid the women a good night and headed for the bedroom. Gwen watched his back, the way he limped without the use of his cane to help guide him, the way his shoulders hunched forward, unimposing.

There was a sickly feeling in her gut all of a sudden, and she knew it had to do with everything they weren’t saying to each other, everything that needed to come out in the end. But she wanted one morning, one day to just be happy with him. Jobs, and kids, and money, and midnight kisses could wait. They had to wait because she just got him back. She just heard his voice again, felt his lips against hers, looked upon his fragile form.

They were old now. Less equipped to deal with the world’s tricks, and its jokes, and its games. If she could only have the rest of this time to focus on their love, nothing else would have the potential to fuel their hate.

And yet, despite knowing that life will never work out that way, Gwen convinced herself to wait anyways. She wanted more nights with him, slowly coming back to himself, slowly coming back to her. She wanted more mornings watching the sun rise together, more dinners, more moments with their kids, more memories to stand the test of time.

The problem with waiting however was the inevitable. It was certain to happen. It was unavoidable, and in some ways, completely predictable.

What was one more storm to drive them home for good?
Chapter Notes

Long chapter here folks. We're in the homestretch now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The thing about asking for some, for little, is that once you get it, once you even taste a small bit of it, you want more. You become greedy. You think you can have more, bigger, once you’ve had virtually nothing. And you wonder if it will ever be enough. Will you ever have enough to come back to your senses and stop your good fortune willingly before life takes it reluctantly.

These thoughts swirled around in Gwen’s head as she watched Blake sleeping next to her, the morning light casting dancing figures across his skin. Skin that now pulled tighter across bones, a healthy bit of weight added in the past month to make it so.

It was December 21st, three days until Christmas.

Gwen smiled sadly, overcome with emotion at this early hour, where she didn’t have to pretend or put on a brave face for anyone. It was another end to another year, and looking back at how much she endured in the past twelve months, she could honestly say that she was glad to see it go. She wished she could bring a new year in with no worries, no doubts, no strange feelings, but she wasn’t positive that she could, because she had wanted one day, so now, she’d been given many.

Gwen scanned her love’s silhouette another moment before unconsciously reaching a hand down to his lower abdomen, a sight that routinely made her heart lodge in her throat. The scar from the kidney surgery was still prevalent, and always would be.

Her fingers traced the disfigurement with care. The unnatural dip of skin in the man’s skin was never visible in the light of day. It was a rare occurrence even then. Blake almost always slept with a shirt on. Last night, he’d been hot to the touch, and Gwen had no doubt that he’d come down with a nasty fever, again. He absolutely refused to let her check or take care of him, so she let him be and he stripped off his shirt and pants and climbed into bed without so much as a word.

She knew he’d been having a rough go at his recovery ever since he got out of the hospital. It was a huge blow to their plans and good moods when his routine doctor visits revealed that Blake was suffering from a cognitive disorder, a crucial complication from the coma. He had a thought disorder, which explained his behavior for the past couple of months.

At first, Gwen thought it was all normal. He’d just had a rough start was all. The irritability was expected, even the social isolation and incoherence was somewhat predictable. But the irritability had been extreme, almost to the point where Gwen couldn’t stand to be around him sometimes. His emotional flatness had scared her more than once. To see him so unresponsive, staring into space, completely devoid of his surroundings. And then it was as if a light switched on other days, and he was over thinking, rapidly pacing the halls and the backyard, completely restless. It was all the highs and lows, ups and downs, fast and slow.

And then the depression kicked in, the feelings of worthlessness. She didn’t know how to handle it all, and neither did the family. They sought help, and Blake had been receptive to it, but he still had
his bad days. The most important thing Gwen had to remember was that his symptoms were not constant, just consistent. She had to find small fortunes these days, if only to continue carrying on.

Blake’s shifting beside her brought Gwen out of her thoughts. Despite his sickness and exhaustion, the former president fought to open his eyes, aware of Gwen’s fingers touching his scar, and his brown eyebrows came together. He stared at her questioningly.

“What are you doing?” He sleepily mumbled, stirring Gwen from her fixation on the horrible marking that caused all of this to happen to him.

“Sorry,” she hitched, swallowing hard. “I couldn’t help myself from...you know.”

Blake regretted the way she looked at him now, and especially the way the family tip-toed around the accident. It was a reminder of all that Blake had lost, and feelings of pity couldn’t help but be felt from the hearts of those closest to him.

But Blake didn’t like to dwell on it anymore then he had to. It probably had to do with the fact that he was reminded everyday of the robbery he suffered at the hands of that awful night. But he would never admit to having feelings of regret, because he sacrificed for his child, and that was enough for him, or at least it had to be.

With one awkward move, Blake whisked her hand away from his stomach and safe guarded it against his chest. “I can hear your parents in the kitchen.”

Gwen almost laughed at the random outburst but as she strained her ear slightly in the direction of the hallway, she could hear them, too. The sounds of pots and pans and running water filled the house swiftly, making her smile. She wondered how she missed the noises before, probably too wrapped up in her head and this man.

“I swear I told them not to come over this morning.”

Blake chuckled, voice still deep and rough from sleep. It was incredibly sexy to Gwen’s ears.

“They should just move in. Hell, Brad’s never leaving us.”

Gwen’s smile faltered somewhat. It was an empty comment, not laced with anything, but she knew that the subject was a sore spot for many reasons. Over the past couple of weeks, it had been very hard on Blake to have his best friend around, if only to save face and some dignity. Blake couldn’t do everything he once could, and simple tasks like mowing the lawn or spending a couple of nights staying up late to watch movies with Gwen and Silas had been taxing for him. Unlike Brad, who was the perfect picture of a clean bill of health, who had no problems keeping up with yard work, or going to the store to help Gwen with grocery and clothes shopping, or spending his nights willingly watching some cheesy family movie with his best mate’s girl and kid because Blake couldn’t.

Blake didn’t resent the man, and in fact, he was more than grateful to have him around. But it was a reminder of how much Blake had fallen short since the accident. He felt like he paled in comparison, and even made the comment one time in his less than forgivable moods that Gwen didn’t really need him for anything that Brad couldn’t already provide for her, even going as far as to suggest sleeping with her. It had been a slap in the face, but it was also something that needed to be talked about. The fact that the issue had been swept under the rug, like so many before, hadn’t exactly helped things.

And that wasn’t how Gwen wanted to start the New Year. They needed to sit down and have a
conversation about everything with everyone. Gwen still didn’t get a chance to talk with Teddy. The last time he visited was Thanksgiving, and there was so much air to clear between them that she couldn’t wait to have that one-on-one in the next couple of days when he made the trip up for the holiday.

She and Blake also needed to talk about his return back to work, and what he wanted out of the next couple of years of his life as far as having a job went. If it was up to her, he’d retire already and focus on them. But she’d respect whatever it was he wanted to do. Just like he’d respect her wants, especially regarding Brad’s presence in their home. It wasn’t as if she didn’t want her friend there anymore, but it was time that he went out and started finding a life outside of taking care of her and her family. It wasn’t his job anymore, never was to begin with, but it was time that he lived for himself. Losing a wife couldn’t have been easy, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t find love somewhere else.

“You there?”

Gwen’s eyes snapped to Blake. She shook her head. “Sorry. I was just thinking.”

“You’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

“There’s a lot to think about.” She defended.

He hummed. “Is it bad to want to lie here all day with you?”

“No. But we promised S.J. we’d go ice skating.”

“I’m not stepping foot on that ice. Not even a damn toe..”

Gwen scoffed. “I didn’t expect you to. But you’ll have to be there for the hot chocolate after.”

“I can do that.”

She grinned and moved closer until their noses were touching. She kissed his humming lips, the sound asking her quietly if she was in the mood this morning. Her answer was another press to his mouth, harder, eager.

His hand traced her jaw softly, then the dip in her neck, spreading his fingers along her collarbone. His movements took the night shirt she was wearing and crumpled it up further until it bunched just underneath the delicate slopes of her breasts. As his exploring continued, Blake never stopped kissing her.

When his hand reached her backside and delicately palmed it, pulling at the fabric that confined what he really wanted underneath, Gwen moaned into his mouth and drew her fingers up into his grey hair. The moment their bedroom door opened caused her hand to pull at the strands tightly as she pulled away from his ministrations.

“Sorry! I didn’t see anything.” Silas’s voice travelled over to them.

Considering the sheet was around their ankles, Gwen had a feeling the boy saw his father palming his mother's ass while they had each other’s tongues down their respective throats, and that was enough for her to be mortified as it was.

“What’s up, buddy?” Blake asked, more composed than she was, hand moving to the middle of her back, a much more respectable place. Gwen hid her face in the sheets.
“Grandpa wanted to know if you two were awake ‘cause breakfast is almost done.”

Gwen groaned into her pillow, and Blake chuckled.

“We’ll be right out.” He told the teen.

“K.”

The door was shut promptly. Gwen peeked a look at Blake. “I know it’s embarrassing and absolutely crazy but I never thought I’d see the day when one of our children would walk in on us.” She said.

Blake’s hand went back to her ass and Gwen fought down the urge to laugh in his face. He smirked at her playfully. “We came close at Camp David.”

“Yeah…but it’s just not the same.”

“It never was.” He said, voice laced with resignation.

Gwen pecked him lightly on the shoulder and rolled over, stretching up to her legs once her feet hit the floor. “The quicker you follow me into the shower the quicker that stays at full attention.” She said, keeping a blush at bay as she pointed to his obvious erection.

She never saw him get up so quickly, not even needing his cane to help him to her side. She laughed as he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her close, all the while leading her backwards to the open door of the bathroom.

“I only have eyes for you.” Blake murmured, stripping her of her top and underwear.

His words had seemed bizarre to her, as if he needed his desire to come as a reminder, as if she’d forgotten.

“Blake--”

He cut her off with a kiss to her lips. She got lost in the taste of him, in the pressure of his tongue and hands lighting her insides on fire.

When the water hit her, finally, it was ferociously hot and needle sharp and seared her skin, but she didn’t notice because he was there. The jet from the shower hit her neck and poured over her back to slide across her hips and run down her legs.

Blake held her head and kissed her, then turned around so that the water poured over the back of his head, soaking his hair.

“What do you think of moving?” Blake asked, just as she lowered her hand and took hold of him. Water ran between them and poured over his member as she started to stroke.

The question caught her off guard, and for the moment, she couldn’t help but thank God for giving them a good day with him. It was still early, but if he was asking these questions, and giving her these comments, then he was as close to the old Blake than he had been in the past couple of days.

“What do you mean, move?” She murmured, relinquishing her hold on him. He almost groaned at the loss of it but when she turned in his arms and pushed the softness of her backside, wet and reddened from the heat, against him he was back to feeling the edges of heaven again.

Gwen reached for the soap and passed it to him behind her. He held the bar at her hip but slowly
brought it up over her belly, leaving a trail of suds. Blake stared down at her. They moved a little to avoid the direct stream of water and he continued, rubbing the soap over her in gentle circles, watching intently as it lathered her body in a vanilla, soapy, layer. When he brought it to her breasts, she bit her lip and let her head fall back to lay on his shoulder. Blake pulled her hard back against him and continued trailing the soap over her and, where it left suds, he rubbed and stroked with his other hand.

“I want to move back to the island.” He breathed in her ear, bringing the soap down to her hip while his right hand reached between her legs and parted her gently. The suds followed his trail and aided his strokes. When she jerked upon him he continued, sliding a finger down and dipping it lightly inside of her.

She tried to speak but her breath had left her, mingling with the steam of the shower. The way he adored her in this way left her weak.

Blake moved her so that the water hit her belly and poured down between her legs. He nipped at her ear and whispered sweet things in her ear. When she was finally able to speak, Gwen twisted her face toward his neck.

“Not now. Maybe when Silas is finished with school. I’ve already moved him around so much.”

“Then when he graduates. You’ll come back with me?” He asked, hands roaming over her thighs now.

She nodded, eyes closing at the gentle pleasure he was giving her. “I want to get married.” She said offhandedly, not caring if it wasn’t the proper way to bring it up or discuss it. They were past the stage of fairytales and politeness.

Blake moved her to the opposite end of their shower and pressed her against the misty glass.

“Here or there?” He asked.

“There. I want it to be full circle.”

“Down.” He murmured, pushing on her back. She moved down the glass so that her backside jutted out for him. Pushing her legs apart with his knees, he positioned himself, opening her with knowing fingers.

He slid in easily, nudging her to stand taller again, but his cock remained embedded inside of her, bringing a new kind of pleasure at this angle. The water still poured down on them, the humidity making them high on sex and heat.

“Next year?” He asked, pulling back, then powering forward. She groaned, a strange guttural noise of complete abandon. Only he could have a complete conversation with her during sex and make it somehow more of a turn on.

“Uh huh. Whatever you want,” she breathed.

One hand gripped her shoulder, the other her hip, and he fucked her with brutal abandon, driving into her, intent on her pleasure alone.

Her eyes rolled back in her head and her mouth gaped. He went at her desperately, and Gwen wished he could always feel this way. They were finally able to love one another, openly, freely, willingly, but he was wracked with hopelessness and frustration every other day, robbing him of the good times because he was so focused on the bad ones.
“Blake...hold me.” She gasped out, reaching behind her to pull him closer.

His arms wrapped around her small stomach and the contrast between their heights made him fuck with increased certainty.

“I--ohh...” She said, speech gone. She slid a hand down the steam-frosted glass as sense started to abandon her.

Burying his head at her neck, Blake breathed against her, “I love you.”

He was moving faster, feeling her suddenly tighten around him in orgasm. He heard it next, the strange heaving sob as she came apart before his eyes.

The force of his own orgasm robbed him of sense and strength that he could barely stand afterwards. Gwen fell against the glass, pressing herself along it in recovery. Her chest heaved with a sudden laugh.

He joined her as he slipped out and rested against the opposite shower wall.

“We’re getting too old for this.” Blake breathed.

Gwen turned around, looking at him with such love and adoration that it made both of their hearts ache. “More vanilla sex. Got it.”

He smirked and allowed her arms to wrap around him. The water ran over them, rinsing the evidence of their releases down the drain.

“Was it good?” He asked her, voice suddenly too serious for her post coital state of mind.

She cocked her head to the side, eyes swimming. “Why would you even ask that?”

He shrugged. “Was it?” He pushed.

She nodded. “If I need a shower after a shower then it was amazing, Blake.”

The irony was not lost on him and he gave a slight smirk. “Repeat performance tonight.”

She cocked one eyebrow at him. “You’ll be freezing your balls off by the time we get back from the ice rink.”

“Very elegantly put, Ms. Stefani.”

She laughed and pecked him on the cheek before cutting the water off. “We should get out before they send the calvary in here and a lot of people see some stuff they really didn’t want to.”

“It’d be like having a dream and a nightmare all at the same time.”

Gwen punched him in the chest softly, pulling him out of the shower.

They dried each other off slowly, and dressed even slower.

By the time they made it to the kitchen, it was empty save for a couple of dishes in the sink. The dining room was less lonely, and Gwen greeted Brad, her parents, and kids as she sat down in her usual chair. Blake did the same, looking just as sated and wet as she was. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what they’d gotten up to.
Breakfast had been a quick affair. Once the plates were cleared, her parents ventured back home. Blake drove himself to the hospital for a routine check up, and Silas walked the couple of houses down to his sister’s to help Dicky repaint a bedroom in the home. Manó was visiting Jackson in D.C. and would be back with the eldest Shelton boy by Christmas Eve.

Gwen caught up on some designs for work and camped out in the living room on the floor. She put some old music on, lit a few candles considering the sun had chosen to hide behind the clouds all day, and went to work. Brad had come in from gardening outside several minutes ago and slumped into the couch with a beer in his hand.

He put the television on low, so as not to disrupt her music. Gwen smiled at him a couple of times when she saw him eyeing her ministrations. He seemed to be fascinated with her ability to create something when their seemed to be absolutely nothing to begin with. Every non-artist had that same look in their eyes. It was envy. They just didn’t realize that artistic people envied them just as much.

“Would you make something for me?” Brad asked, catching her eye.

“What did you have in mind?”

He shrugged. “Anything really. I want my name to be on it somehow.”

She shook her head, amused. “You should have asked me sooner. I could’ve had time to make it a Christmas present.”

“What did you get me for Christmas?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

Brad took a sip of his beer, pouting around the rim of it. She shot him an incredulous glare and went back to drawing a halter top on the figure before her. They sat in companionable silence for some time before Brad stood up, setting his drink on the end table. He walked over to the radio and turned the volume up slightly, the sound of some unknown singer’s voice infiltrated her station.

“This is good.” Brad commented.

Gwen focused on the lyrics and found them to be rather sad.

“Who is it?” She asked.

“I don’t know but I heard it the other day in the car.”

“Her voice is really nice.” She complimented.

Brad walked over to her and carefully stepped around her drawings and material. He sat next to her on the floor, bumping shoulders. He gave her a handsome smile.

“Can I ask you something?” He asked her, eyes going to the floor instead of her own.

“Of course.”

“...He doesn’t look at me the same way anymore. We don’t talk like we used to. He barely even says a word most days.”

Gwen exhaled. “You know he has a disorder--”
“I know that. I know he can’t help it. But even on his good days...he seems distant.”

“...Have you ever thought that maybe he’s...intimidated by you? That he envies you?”

“Why would he envy me?”

“Brad--”

Her friend’s eyes snapped to hers and the intensity of them startled Gwen to her core. “He’s got children, Gwen. He was the former President of the United States. The world loves him. They hear he’s awake and with family and they can’t help but send flowers to his office and give thanks to God in every damn interview. He’s got everything, Gwen...He’s got you. I don’t even have a wife anymore.”

“Brad--”

“Why would he envy me? Why won’t he sit down on the couch and have a beer with me like old times? It’s like we got him back but he’s not all the way there.”

She placed a hand on his arm and made sure he was looking at her properly before speaking. “You can do things he can’t. The same reasons you’re mad with him are the same reasons he’s envious of you. He can’t sit on the couch and have a beer because he’s afraid he’ll drift off and never come back. He’s scared of his own mind. You have no idea how taxing that can be for him. I don’t even know what that must feel like. But you’re able to make these memories with us. You don’t think it kills him that he can’t come to the stores and shop or go somewhere simple like the movie theaters? These episodes take everything from him. He’s depressed, Brad. This is something he has to work through, and with our help, we can help him. It won’t be like this forever.”

“It just seems like I’m...I don’t know.”

Gwen knew. As soon as he admitted to seeing a change in the way Blake looks at him, she knew. Blake was able to be at least a little more connected to her and Silas, but only because Gwen was able to provide intimacy in ways no one else could in his life. She was his woman, his safety net, his everything. She took care of him, mentally, emotionally, and physically. Even when he was despondent, there was some part inside of him that recognized her impact on his life.

With Silas, the boy gave Blake a sense of responsibility. He was dependent on his father, and therefore, Blake strived to make an effort to be there for his son no matter how much his body rejected himself.

Brad just felt like an outsider to his friend for the first time ever, and it wasn’t anything intentional that made him feel that way. After giving what he could, all he could, to his love and child, Blake simply had nothing left to give to his friend. And that was it. There was no animosity or single event that triggered Blake’s indifference. He just couldn’t be every man in the room anymore. He wasn’t what he used to be and would probably never be again. It was hard for someone like Brad to wrap their head around because he’d been with Blake the longest. He saw the man through every downfall and triumph. It was just taking a little longer for Blake to stand up again.

“You are his best friend. He loves you. Give it time.” Gwen reassured him softly.

He looked at her with a sad expression, and she saw the lone tear falling over his eyelid. It was an uncharacteristic sight on the man, a sight that tore at her heart strings.

“Brad...” Gwen shot a hand out to wipe away the tear. He closed his eyes, a sign that really told her of his vulnerable state.
How long had he’d been feeling like this?

She pulled him into a hug and the older man went willingly. He clutched her close but did not cry anymore. His limit seemed to be the one tear, and she couldn’t blame him. So she comforted him like she would her own child, stroking his back and kissing his hair. He hugged her tightly, and Gwen felt the air leave her lungs. If she knew her friend had been going through this, she would have set aside her turmoil with the man long ago and helped him with his own regarding Blake.

Gwen sighed. When she felt him pull away from her all too quickly, she looked at his warm face, his pink eyes that were looking over her head. The mother of three turned in the direction of his stare and felt her blood run cold.

The dressmaker stood from the floor, not too quickly, but fast enough. Her hands went to her stomach, feeling sickness build abruptly. “Hey you...how was the visit. What did the doctors say?”

Blake’s eyes looked between them. He stood motionless, barely breathing. His face was flat, devoid of emotion. When he spoke, his voice was monotone. “The same.” He replied.

Gwen took a couple of steps closer to him but he backed away, and moved to the hallway. She willed her heart to beat slower. She hadn’t done anything. She comforted a friend, that was all.

And for the first time since their kiss, her and Brad had interacted with each other with that being the furthest thing from their minds. It felt like their friendship had finally returned back to what it had been before he moved in with her.

“Are you okay? Do you want me to make you something to eat or run you a bath--” Gwen started.

“Come lay down with me.” He commanded, but it didn’t come out like a command. It was entirely up to her, he just hoped she’d do it.

As if she could deny him, not when she was sure she was on the cusp of an outburst just seconds ago.

“Okay. Are you feeling sick again?” She asked.

“I just want to sleep before the ice skating.”

“Okay.” She turned back to Brad. “We’ll see you later. You’re still coming, right?”

Brad nodded, not looking at either one of them.

Gwen sighed internally and linked hands with Blake, allowing the man to lead her to the bedroom. She wasn’t particularly tired but she would lay with him until he fell asleep, knowing how important it was for him to get his rest.

When they settled into bed together, fully clothed and on top of the sheets, Gwen frowned when Blake laid his head on the pillow next to her, hot skin brushing along hers. He felt feverish again.

“Blake…”

He hummed, eyes closed, content, almost resigned. She felt the air around them was off.

“Blake.” She said more forcefully this time. “What aren’t you telling me?”

She couldn’t see his face, so she ran a hand through his curls and waited for him to speak.

“Why was Brad crying?”
Caught off guard at the question, Gwen answered quickly. “He just had some concerns as of late. I was reassuring him.”

“You guys are close. I never thought you would be. My best guy and girl.”

Gwen swallowed, preparing herself for whatever he was willing to throw at her but it never came. He just pulled away from her and sat up on the bed. She followed him, staring at his back.

“Blake--”

“I’m tired of making you cry.” His voice hitched, like he was on the edge himself.

“Then don’t.”

He chuckled to himself quietly, hunching his shoulders in on himself. “If only you knew.”

“Blake...you’re scaring me. Whatever it is...we’ll get past it. We have so far, haven’t we?”

He shook his head, standing up. He paced the length of the floor, never looking at her while he did. “I’ve gained weight.”

The statement threw her off. “That’s a good thing. You were so skinny before.”

“But my weight’s been up and down, because of the disorder, because of the medicine, because of other things.”

“I don’t understand.”

He paused his pacing, eyes glued to the wall on the opposite end of the room.

“I have fevers because I’m sick, Gwen.”

“...Okay. Did the doctors say what you’re sick with? It could just be a cold--”

He shook his head, eyes snapping to hers. “You’re not getting it.”

“Because you’re not telling me anything up front.” She replied, impatient with him now.

“How am I supposed to tell you that I’m sick?”

“I don’t understand what that means--”

“The symptoms of Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma are fever, weight loss, fatigue, pain...” He rattled the list off on his fingers one by one, careful to pronounce the disease slowly so that he got it right. “Everything you’ve been yelling at me to let you diagnose in the past few weeks...I have a weak immune system because of the transplant, because I’m old, Gwen...and now I’m sick. I’m...Sweetheart, I’m sick and I’m tired...I don’t know what else to say other than that. Other than, I don’t want to make you cry anymore.”

Somewhere in his speech, he’d taken his eyes off of her, maybe at the first sign of tears coating her soft brown irises. Gwen couldn’t help them, even though her heart was faring far better than she would have ever expected upon hearing this kind of news. Maybe it was because she had been down this treacherous road with him before. They had been through separations, marriages, kids, gun shots, miscarriages, arguments, accidents, death scares, and comas. What was one more thing? What was cancer to top it all off?
Through her tears, Gwen felt the urge to laugh.

Seeing her internal struggle, Blake sighed and sat down on the bed. Gwen crawled over to him, and wrapped her arms around his shoulders, pressing her face into the side of his neck.

“I should have never bought those bikes.” Blake murmured.

She smiled into his neck. “You can’t say that. You might as well wish that Silas had never been born.”

“He could have been born. I fucked up in buying those bikes and you can’t convince me otherwise.”

“If your parents never met, then you never would’ve been able to.”

He sighed, defeated. “I need someone to blame.”

“I understand that but it’s not yourself. Things happen. It’s just life.”

“...I expected you to blow up on me, yell at me for gettin’ sick or something. Cry yourself a river, even.”

She kissed the skin of his swollen neck. “I might’ve, a long time ago. But what would that do? You’re here. You’re sick. All I can do is make sure you get better again. Screaming and crying won’t fix anything.”

Blake turned slightly to look at her. Gwen picked her head up and allowed him to see her dry eyes, now.

“The doctors said I can beat it. I’m old, and my body is weak,” he grimaced at the words. “But they caught it early enough. I won’t have to go through chemo. Just the drugs.”

She ran a hand down his aging face. “I wish I’d been there when they told you.”

“You didn’t have to be. It was all...painless really. They’re confident I’ll be alright. But I just knew this would break your heart.”

“It hasn’t. It might break our kids...”

Blake closed his eyes for a moment. “I don’t want to tell them until we have to.”

“What about Brad?”

“...I haven’t decided.”

She nodded, not pushing the matter any further. “It’s going to be okay.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Either that or I’ve lost the ability to care if it will be or not.”

She pinched him softly on the arm. “Don’t say things like that.”

He leaned forward and nuzzled her nose with his. “I have another visit tomorrow. You can come if
you want.”

“I’ll be there.”

He smiled and kissed her softly.

Without another word, Gwen laid them down on the covers once more and molded her body into his side, fitting perfectly in the places she was meant to be in.

As she lay there with Blake, listening to his heartbeat, all she could think of was the island they’d met on. How in a couple of years, they’d be married, living on that piece of land, truly together at last. It didn’t occur to her that they would end any differently.

Ever since he brought it up, she’d begun to believe in a new kind of hope. And it was so strong, not even cancer could persuade her otherwise.

=

Blake Shelton hated cold.

It wasn’t like before where he welcomed the snow storms, deer season, or a nice trip to the ski slopes even though he never skied himself once there. In his old age, in his fragile old age, he’d begun to feel the chill deep in his bones. It was surreal.

Sitting on the small park bench table by himself, hands stuffed in his coat pockets, teeth chattering quietly inside of his mouth, Blake felt a new kind of coldness creep toward him. It was the kind of cold he started feeling ever since he returned home with Gwen to a house filled with their children and his best friend.

Looking at them now, Gwen on the ice, Brad racing Silas across the rink, both laughing, practically in tears as the wind whipped passed them, Blake felt the cold like he never had before. It was just one of the things that fueled his depression.

He wished he could be out there with them. But he was tired, always tired, and now he was sick. The cancer didn’t bother him like he thought it would. In the grand scheme of things, it was just another hurdle, another side effect he would suffer at the hands of fate. It wasn’t a death sentence. Like Gwen said, it was just life.

But it was the old age that really bothered him. His father once told him when he was a young boy that getting old was a horrible, debilitating affair. If you weren’t relatively content with your life, then you’d be better off doing away with it early on. Any dignity and self-pride a man has is robbed of him in his later years; taken against his will and without the power to stop it. And the worst part of it all was that he was aging faster than Gwen. He was certainly dying faster than her.

It was something that caught him unawares. It kept him up at night. Even in his most disconnected moments, when his mind seemed to drift off to a place where everything was numb and nothing mattered, it was always right there in the back of his mind. She would outlive him. It seemed like with the way things were going as of late, he’d be out of the picture in the next couple of years. If the cancer didn’t take him, he was sure the old age would.

And what would she do then?
The thought of leaving Gwen by herself was too painful to even dwell on and yet, as he looked at the ice, at Brad and Silas and Gwen together, he couldn’t help but feel a sense of relief. They were smiling, touching, breathing in sync, whether they knew it, whether they wanted to admit it to him or not. He saw it. Even the past couple of weeks had showed him more than he ever thought to ask. They were familiar with each other, comfortable, at ease. They were friends, friends who had grown close in his absence.

Brad was a factor he hadn’t considered before. And he couldn’t help but think of the man in his place after he left.

Did he make her happy? How did Brad compare to him? Was it as good? Would she come to prefer the man over him? Was he in the way?

The thoughts had plagued him for a long time but unlike before, where he would have allowed himself to become consumed with jealousy and anger, Blake sat back and watched. He contemplated them, tried to make sense of what he was seeing. Every look, every touch, every word. There were lesser men for her, he knew that. He also knew that she’d need someone after he was gone. Was Brad not the best choice for her, second to him?

He made Silas happy. He knew Teddy and Jackson better than anybody, besides Josie. He clearly felt something for Gwen. He cared about them all. He loved them and would do anything for them. He proved that in the last year. What more could Blake want for his family?

His best friend was the best man for the job. He would laugh if he wasn’t aware of how fucked up that was. Any sane man would be hurt, angry, or at least confused. But he knew that most of what he was feeling was surrounded by speculation. He didn’t have any concrete proof that his best mate was sleeping with his girl. There was nothing he could go off on besides his own observations, and none of them proved to be bulletproof.

Blake sniffed and blinked away the sudden water in his eyes. He was feverish again, but he didn’t want to spoil the evening. Biting back a shiver, the former president’s eyes gazed along the ice again. It landed on his friend, who was stopping short of the gate where the ice met concrete, and eventually grass. Brad laughed as he shuffled his way over to Blake on his skates. He sat down next to his friend on top of the table, carefully hiking each foot onto the bench.

Blake looked down at his old skates, a hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “You’re good.” He complimented.

“Better than I thought.” Brad replied.

“You look good out there with them.”

He didn’t get a response, but Brad’s pleased smile was enough of a response. Blake looked back to his family, watching as Silas twirled Gwen around in a circle. He wondered if Silas would have been able to recover as quickly as he did without Brad being there to help the boy. Gwen had told him all about the struggles the both of them endured at the beginning.

“Thanks for taking care of them.” He said quietly, turning to the man for a moment. “I didn’t expect that.” He looked back down at his boots, the same time Brad’s eyes drifted to his face.

“It just comes naturally, you know?” He sniffed and looked back to Gwen and Silas. “It made me start to think...you know, about kids of my own.”

Blake nodded, understanding where he was coming from. “You have to find a girl first.”
Brad laughed. “Yeah, I know. I’m probably too old for that stuff anyways. I think that ship sailed with Stephanie.” He said, though his eyes followed Gwen.

Silas tried to lead them backwards and the two of them ended up tripping over each other. They caught each other before either of them could go down. Brad chuckled, looking at Blake to see if he witnessed the near fall. Blake grimaced and looked away. He laced his fingers together and willed himself to remain in the moment. All he could think about was Brad hugging Gwen on the living room floor, how he clutched her so close that Blake was afraid she might’ve burst from the force of it.

He looked at his love, who was smiling happily at their son as he raced around the rink now.

“Gwen is something, huh?”

Brad nodded his head, too busy with unlacing one of his skates to notice the implications of his friend’s question. Blake didn’t hesitate in grabbing his undivided attention when he asked the next second, “Did you fuck her?”

His friend’s head whipped around to face him so quickly that Blake was afraid he’d given the poor guy whiplash. Brad’s eyes grew wide, and his breath increased rapidly.

“What? Are you kidding?” He asked, equally perplexed and nervous.

Blake’s numb expression hadn’t changed, and his eyes remained focused and intent as he regarded a man he’s considered family for as long as he can remember. “I’d understand.”

Brad’s mouth quirked, a snort escaping his nose. “Stop it.”

“You thought I was gone...as good as dead. You two probably didn’t think I’d ever wake up.”

Brad continued to laugh. “Blake, stop it. Please, come on.” He kept shaking his head and Blake grew more cold. That creeping feeling of hopelessness was knocking at the edges of his mind.

“Bradley.” The use of his full name had Brad sobering up in an instant. He looked at Blake, eyes suddenly as serious as his companion. Blake’s voice didn’t waver when he spoke again. “I could forgive you.”

The two men stared at each other for a long moment before Brad’s hand cupped the back of Blake’s neck and pulled him closer until their foreheads were touching.

“What’s going on in your head?” Brad asked him. “What’s making you think that?”

Blake pulled away from him slowly, but allowed the hand at the back of his head to stay. It was warm, and Blake was very, very cold. He shrugged as he looked down at his boots again. “You two just look like...like you know each other. Like you’ve had each other before...like you’ll have each other again.” His eyes glanced to his longest friend. “You can’t deny that.”

Brad nodded his head, unsure now of where to go or what to say to him. Blake could feel his inner turmoil. His own capacity to feel was slipping away from him.

“Blake…”

“Dad! Dad did you see me out there?!” Silas came hurling at them, stopping just at the edge to sit down on the grass before he injured himself any further. His mother was right behind him, trying and failing to keep her eyes from scrutinizing the two men on the park bench table.
“I want hot chocolate, now. Can we get some?” He asked, eyes darting back and forth between his parents.

Gwen was taking off her skates and putting her boots back on. She eyed Blake’s vacant stare and turned to her youngest. “How about we make hot cocoa at home?”

Silas nodded his head, not really caring where he got the hot beverage from at this point in the evening.

Blake zoned out on the car ride home. He was aware of Gwen’s hand on his thigh, but now that he was thinking about her and Brad together, he couldn’t keep the image of her doing the same thing on every car ride over to the hospital to visit him while he was still in a coma. Everything about her, about them, was becoming tainted. He wondered why it was all happening now. Maybe because he was sick, and he knew it now. Or maybe because he saw the way things had gone before regarding his and Gwen’s relationship and old habits did truly die hard.

Regardless, Blake was exhausted. His thought disorder was draining his emotional state every waking moment he chose to remain up and the fever was keeping him in a nearly debilitating hold. All he wanted was to sleep when they got home. And if that didn’t come easy tonight, then death would be sweeter and much kinder.

He was nearly there when Gwen followed him into the bedroom instead of remaining in the kitchen where the hot chocolate making was taking place. He sighed when she closed the door, movements hesitant, like he was a scared and wounded animal and she just wanted to help. The problem was she couldn’t fix this. She couldn’t fix him. She couldn’t erase her emotions or feelings anymore than he could stop the scrambled thoughts poisoning his mind.

“Blake…”

He sat down on the bed and put his head in his hands. She wasted no time in confronting him, footsteps carrying over to him until she was kneeling before Blake, hands sliding around his forearms.

“Blake, what happened? What’s going on?” When he wouldn’t respond, the grip she had on him tightened. “Talk to me. What happened?...What were you guys talking about?”

He could hear the fear in her voice. It was barely there, hidden underneath genuine concern for his well-being, nearly undetected. But he couldn’t miss it.

“What happened with you and Brad?”

He didn’t bother looking up. He could feel her face contort into a million emotions. She must have landed on denial because the next words out of her mouth were anything but the truth. “Nothing happened with us.”

He raised his head, face soft, gentle, open. He just wanted honesty. He needed it. Because most days it felt like he was going mad. He just needed to know the truth before he could give her up. Somewhere in her eyes, Gwen saw that, that neediness, and amended her words.

“...We kissed, that’s it...I missed you. I thought...I thought you’d never wake up. It was so lonely, and hopeless...that’s it.”

He envied the way her breath came to him shallow, laced with fear. She was feeling so much and he was slipping away.
“You’re telling me the truth?” He asked her.

“You know I am. Now please tell me what happened? What’s gotten you like this?”

He wanted to tell her grief. It was grief that had made him like this. It’ll rise up and consume you when you least expect it. Until you’re able to accept the pain, to let it wash over you without falling into it, it will continue. This will continue.

Instead, he simply said, “I think you’re fucking Bradley.”

“Oh, Blake~”

He stood up, pushing past her as he walked to the door on unsteady legs. His mind wouldn’t let him process his emotions. They had to be there: anger, hurt, frustration, confusion, understanding, sadness, loss.

He was on the brink of something, but everytime he tried to jump off that cliff, something held him back. His name was being called, but all he could hear was the sound of waves crashing on the shore. He wanted to follow it, but hands held him suddenly.

“Blake. Hey, you alright?” Brad held him for a long moment, voiced concerned, eyes deceiving.

His hands felt like they were burning him. Was this how he would touch Gwen? Blake shook his head, shook his body, until those fingers stopped clutching at him.


“What happened,” Brad asked, ignoring the man standing numbly before him. He went to Gwen’s side, and wiped away the tears that were beginning to fall from her eyes.

Something inside of Blake snapped then. Like flood gates that were suddenly opened, he reared back from everything that he’d lost, that he would lose, eventually.

Images of her came flashing through his mind. Of her in the kitchen at Camp David, of her in that dress at the state dinner, of her underneath his bed sheets, of her smiling at him over breakfast. She invaded every part of his body in that moment, and for the first time since he woke up, he felt every excruciating detail of their love.

“You love her?” He found himself asking.

Brad let go of Gwen and swallowed harshly as he looked at his best friend. “…I love her like I love you.”

“You want to sleep with me, too?” Blake asked, noting the way Brad flinched.

“Blake…”

“No. It’s an easy answer. It falls into the “yes” or “no” category. You love her. Just say it.”

Brad’s weary gaze was unflinching. He swallowed once more before saying, “Yes.”

“And you decided this when? Before or after I woke up?”

“Blake, please. Silas…” Gwen’s eyes went to the boy at the kitchen counter, who was staring at the three adults with wide eyes.
“I’m sorry.” Brad interrupted, voice barely above a whisper.

“Of course. That helps.” Blake replied.

“I was never going to say anything. Nothing happened.” Brad told him.

Blake nodded, walking closer to the pair of them. He weighed his options, noted his feelings on the matter, but as much as he understood his friend’s predicament, Blake couldn’t help but feel like he’d been betrayed, for reasons that Brad had conveniently forgot about. And just like that, Blake had his longest friend up against a wall. His hands clutched fistfuls of Brad’s shirt tightly as he pressed up against him, leaving no room for anything else but his animosity and hurt feelings.

Gwen cried out for him to stop, to let Brad go, to listen to her, but the regret in his friend’s eyes only stood to fuel Blake’s anger further.

“I trusted you.” He revealed to the younger man. “No one believed in you. Everyone said I was stupid to keep an alcoholic so close to me, so near elections. I believed in you. I pushed for you.”

“Blake...this wasn’t planned--”

“You were poison!” He yelled, barely getting the words out through gritted teeth. “You told me every chance you got how bad she was for me, how toxic she is. You made me believe I was making a mistake to love her, to pick her over Josie, and I find out you’re screwing her behind my back!”

“I never--”

“You fell in love with her. You tell me she’s poison and you fall in love with her?”

“It just happened, Blake. I never meant to hurt you.”

“I almost let you get away with it, too. She tell you I’m sick, yet? Another cancer case. That I’m slowly losing my mind, I’m sure you can see it. Must be exactly what you want.”

“Blake--”

“I thought it was for the best. Who else to love her, to care for her, then you? My best friend. The one person I trusted so wholeheartedly. And you almost got me there for a second. I almost believed the lie. Until I remembered how much you hated her. How much you despised her, Brad.”

“I didn’t know her--”

“And now you do?!”

“Yes! Now I do. I understand you’re hurt but you have to believe me when I say I’m sorry. If I could do it all over again...listen to me. You’re my brother. You’re my family. You hear me? I love you. I never meant for this to happen. We never went behind your back. We never slept together. It was one kiss. One kiss and you know what? She picked you. She loves you. It’s always gonna be you.”

His hands came up to Blake’s face, and he held him softly. Blake’s eyelids drooped, his anger subsided, his body relented. He was becoming numb again, but this time, he had someone pulling him back almost immediately.
“Look at me. Don’t leave us. Don’t push us away.” Brad begged him.

Blake closed his eyes. “I’m drowning, B.” He whispered.

Brad sighed, pulling him into a hug. “I’m right here. You don’t have to go alone. Okay?”

He choked on unshed tears. His knees gave out and Bradley was there to catch him, bringing them both down to the floor. He held onto his friend tightly, burying his face in Blake’s neck. Brad rocked him slightly on the floor, not knowing what else to do. There were no words to make it better. There was nothing left to uncover. Everything was finally out in the open.

And where there was once at time were they would have never settled for the silence, Blake knew that such times were over.

Like death silenced the living, something had died there in their arms, right there in that house. And no amount of apologies, or love could bring it back to life.

Chapter End Notes

just wanted to say this before you guys go off in the comments. There is no character death in this story. Blake's cancer is literally just a tool to further other elements of the story. while any type of cancer is life-threatening, this particular case won't be so. I have plans to end this story in Hawaii, for really good reasons. His sickness is really only helping him realize how he wants to spend the remainder of his years. He won't be dying. Do not freak out on me. That being said, I know this chapter had a lot going on. I hope you enjoyed it. Let me know what you thought :) and thank you so much for reading!
The song in this chapter is "Gale Song" by The Lumineers. Highly recommend listening. xo

Lani answered the door on the fifth knock. Wiping her hands on a kitchen towel as she did, her face contorted into a million emotions as her eyes scanned the length of her mother.

Gwen had dark circles underneath her eyes, but other than the clear physical reminder of her grief, her mother looked the perfect picture of health. Her hair was neat and tidy, thrown into a tight bun on top of her head. The dress she was wearing reminded her of the flowers in Hawaii, and the lip gloss staining her mouth was reminiscent of the sparkle that glimmered off of the water.

“Hey, Mom.” Lani greeted.

“Hey, sweetheart...Is he here?” She asked right away.

Lani sighed internally. “He um...he just left for the bar actually. Him and Dicky both.”

Her mother’s face fell but she quickly recovered. “Oh. Okay. I just thought…”

Lani knew what her mother thought. It had been two days since that night. An event Lani was not privy to but had learned about over the past few days. Blake had been staying at her house the last couple of nights. It was a calculated move to be close to Silas and yet far enough away from Gwen for him to feel like he was getting some space from the situation. Lani couldn’t blame him and had actually enjoyed having the man stay with them, even if it was just for two nights. With the way things were still clearly going, it might just be three. But ever since Blake showed up on her doorstep that evening, half out of his mind and yet more sure of himself than anything, he’d been nothing but a gracious guest. He stayed to himself mostly, except when he managed to let her and Dicky around him long enough to hold a decent conversation.

The only thing he said about the fight was that he wasn’t sure of his place anymore, in her mother’s world and in everybody else’s. The main details of the quarrel she had to discover from her brother and mother respectively. Lani tried to remain impartial. Despite her opinions on the matter, which leaned a little more in favor of Blake, having been through this once before with her mother and father, the young woman managed to remain a third party in all of it. Her job was to make Blake as comfortable as possible, given his condition and state of mind, and keep her mother informed, as worried about him as she was.

Which meant inviting her mother inside for a couple of minutes so that the older woman didn’t feel so alone in her own house all by herself. Silas had been over Dennis and Patti’s house for the entire day, needing an escape himself from the once happy home he lived in. Lani knew that he was still trying to make sense of it all--Blake’s cancer, and his parents being apart from one another. Lani knew she was still making sense of Blake’s illness, as well. But what made it worse was that the younger boy had been confused about his feelings for Brad as of late. She knew Silas had come to love the man like an uncle, and to hear about the man’s actions recently had disappointed him to a degree that Lani knew well. It was the same thing she felt when her mother and Blake told
everyone about her brother’s true parentage.

But she managed to get over that, and love the boy all the same. She was confident Silas would see past this, no matter how things ended up. The only thing Lani doubted was Brad himself. Bitterly, a part of her didn’t want to believe that her mother and Blake’s relationship could endure anything, but seeing as she was proven wrong on so many occasions, Lani had to accept that their love was unbreakable. Things were bad now, things were tense, and unsure, but she knew they wouldn’t stay that way. She felt like things with Brad wouldn’t be as simple. The man was going to lose either way. He clearly felt strong feelings for her mother, feelings that Gwen could not return in the way he wanted. And it was still apparent that he loved Blake to no end, but she didn’t know how either of their friendships could possibly endure anymore mistrust and unrequited feelings.

It was all just a mess in her opinion. A timely mess, considering it was Christmas Eve, the sole reason her mother had visited her in person. She was hoping to see if Blake would be coming back home by now, seeing as how the next day was a big holiday that they were supposed to be hosting together.

Lani had not asked how long Blake would be staying with them, but she had the distinct impression that it wouldn’t be for much longer. She watched him more often than not, and saw how he looked out the window whenever he got the chance, in the direction of Gwen and their home, itching to go back as soon as possible. Something was stopping him though, and she only had a few guesses.

Lani sighed out loud this time and stopped leading her mother through her foyer. The older woman gave her a questioning frown but she ignored it as she went back to the front door and snatched her keys off of the wall. She bent over carefully and put her shoes on one at a time.

“What are you doing?” Gwen asked.

Lani glanced her way. “I can’t sit in my kitchen and offer you a glass of wine anymore while you pretend like you’re not seriously hurting, Mom. Tomorrow is Christmas. Everyone is coming in and coming over and you guys need to be good before then. So come on. We’re going to the bar.”

“Lani...I don’t think that’s a good idea. He doesn’t want to see me.”

“Did he tell you that? Because I think he misses you very much but he’s too afraid to go back on his own. You can’t let him get away from you. You made a mistake, own it, tell him that, and bring him home. Refuse an answer that’s anything but yes.”

Her mother’s eyes grew wide at her slightly elevated tone of voice but something in her words must have struck a nerve inside of the dressmaker because she nodded the next second and took a couple of steps toward her, toward the door. An ounce of pride for the woman who brought her into this world ran through Lani and she knew then that this was a good idea.

No matter how much Dicky would absolutely be upset by her presence in a bar in her condition, and no matter how much Blake really didn’t want to see her mother in the flesh, Lani knew she was doing the right thing by bringing Gwen to see them.

The bar was strangely packed by the time they pulled into the parking lot. There were a few stragglers outside the building, smoking and finishing off the last of their drinks. Lani clasped her mother’s hand within hers and lead them both into the loud establishment.

On precedence, Lani didn’t like the bar scene. It wasn’t her favorite thing in the world, even before the added weight she was happy to be carrying. But Dicky loved grabbing a beer where he could listen to live music and shoot shit with friendly strangers. He had that in common with Blake. If
she wasn’t so oddly satisfied with the two men bonding like they were, Lani would have been put off by the stench of the place, the way the air suffocates the throat with cigarette smoke, and its general patrons as a whole.

As they weaved through the crowd, looking every which way for her husband and Blake, Gwen suddenly stopped her in the middle of the packed floor. “Lani, I don’t know anymore. I can’t...what am I supposed to say?”

Lani’s eyes wandered around the room, to the people swaying and singing along to the live music, to the empty beer bottles on tables, to the bartender smiling to a pretty woman and her friends in the corner, to the performer on stage, and then back to her mother. She shrugged.

“I don’t know, Mom. Tell him what you would want to hear if you were in his place. Tell him the sky is blue and the grass in your yard is green for all I care, but make him believe that that sky would be a black hole tomorrow morning if he doesn’t come home tonight. Tell him the grass died and the flowers too when he left. Tell him you love him, and that you’re sorry, and that he’s the future you’re here for. Just tell him how you feel and I promise you he won’t turn you away.”

She wasn’t sure where the words came from. She wasn’t a romantic like the rest of her family, and didn’t have a poetic bone in her body, at least that’s what it felt like all of these years, but something inside of her desperately believed in Blake. Maybe it had to do with the man’s close proximity these past few days. Maybe it was the conversations he’s had with her, unprompted mostly, about his life, his philosophies, his dreams and his fears. For a man half out of his mind, his musings were as sane as anything she could have picked up from a textbook. He was the epitome of a man who had lived everywhere, seen everything, and touched the lives of everyone he’d ever met. Something about that, something about him, was good for her mother. Something about him embodied love at its best. And she realized for the first time that she believed in love because of them.

“And if he does?” Gwen asked, holding on to that last bit of fear.

The question silenced her for a moment. She became aware of the room filling with loud chatter as the performer on stage stopped. Maybe it had to do with her heightened emotions, and frazzled nerves, but Lani pulled her mother into her arms and hugged her close as the next performer set up.

“If he does turn you away, you can be sure that the next direction you see is the one you were meant for, and everyone who loves you will be right there waiting for your next journey. But Mom, I promise you that the next journey you take will involve Blake, because he’s the only direction you’ve been heading in in your entire life. Anyone can see that,” she reassured the older woman with a smile on her face, finding that she meant every word, said and unsaid.

Gwen looked back and forth in eyes that shone brightly, eyes that knew in the depth of their souls that Lani was telling the truth.

“I’ve been coming to this bar two nights in a row now and I still hadn’t worked up the courage to give this thing a go…”

Gwen’s heart stopped as her face froze at the familiar voice ringing through the microphone. Lani’s own heart picked up speed as the two women turned toward the stage. Blake sat on a stool, a guitar in his lap as he lightly strummed it to warm-up.

“My uh, my friend Dicky convinced me that tonight was as good a night as any. So, I guess I’ll play a sad one…” A couple of people whistled encouragingly. Blake scratched his head and smiled
dolefully. “I wrote this just this morning so if it sucks, blame it on the lack of coffee.” A couple of
chuckles greeted Lani’s ears and she watched as her mother moved an inch closer to the man on
stage, instantly mesmerized. Lani could tell that a couple of people recognized the former president
by their excited whispers. She saw a couple of phones come out to record and the younger woman
held her breath.

He was wearing what he was earlier: a black shirt and dark wash jeans. He looked pale and thin
underneath the harsh lights. His face was downcast as he tuned his guitar. Then, he started playing
it skillfully as he introduced the chords to the song. Flashbacks of Blake teaching her how to play
the exact instrument at Camp David flashed behind her eyes.

*It’s a lonely road, full of tired men, and you can see it in their faces. And you’ll be home in Spring.
I can wait ‘till then. I heard you’re on the big train.*

Lani was never more surprised at Blake than she was in that moment, hearing his voice as clear as
the day she met him. It was deeper somehow, gravelly with the wear and tear over the years. His
melody was simple, and the strings of his guitar vibrated with the force of his mournful lyrics.

*And oh this too shall pass. This loneliness won’t last for long. I wasn’t there to take his place. I
was ten thousand miles away.*

Lani glanced at her mother then, seeing the way the older woman’s throat tightened at his words.

*So when you hear my voice. When you say my name. May it never give you pain.*

His voice was so full of regret and apology that Lani was sure somewhere in the world there were
rivers and rivers filled with all the mistakes and pain her mother and Blake had caused each other
over the years.

*Cause I don’t wanna go, but it’s time to leave. You’ll be on my mind, my destiny.*

*And I won’t fight in vain. I’ll love you just the same. I couldn’t know what’s in your mind. But I
saw the pictures, you’re looking fine.*

His strumming became harsher and he sung more forcefully.

*And there was a time when I stood in line for love, for love, for love. But I let you go, oh I let you
go.*

*And he fell apart with his broken heart and this blood, this blood, this blood. Oh, it drains from my
skin, it does.*

He ended the song the way most people ended a relationship. Abruptly.

The crowd still clapped, clearly impressed for someone who was so nervous to get up there in the
first place. Blake muttered a quiet “thank you” and tried to get off the stage as quickly as he could.
Her eyes followed him across the room where Dicky sat waiting for him in a booth, smiling and
standing the next second, ready to give the man a hug.

Lani lightly grabbed her mother around the wrist and walked them over to the two men. She took a
depth breath herself, waiting for Dicky’s eventual explosion on her and then his abrupt cut off when
he’d realize that they weren’t alone and spilling the beans in a public bar to her mom and Blake
was a surefire way to get him sleeping on the couch for the next two weeks--Christmas be damned.

“Blake. Dicky.” Lani called out to them as they neared closer.
The two shot their heads up in surprise, an almost comical sight.

Dicky came to her side right away, thinking something was wrong. “Babe, what are you doing here?”

She waved him off gently and pointed to Blake, “You need to talk to her.”

For his part, Blake swallowed harshly, eyes wide and solemn as they looked at her mother. Gwen was holding her breath, waiting for whatever she felt like she deserved. But what she got was despair and uncertainty as Blake’s blue eyes drifted over to Lani.

“I can’t. You know I can’t.” He admitted brokenly.

Lani shook her head. “You can. Blake...it’s Christmas Eve. Talk with her. Go home. Be happy. You know that’s all you want at the end of the day.”

Another thick swallow, eyes downcast, heart hammering. He glanced at Gwen. Her mother’s face was so hopeful, so open, and maybe that’s what he needed to stand up himself and face whatever he could.

“I’ll drive back with Dicky. You guys can take the truck.”

She hoped they heard her because she didn’t waste anymore time in a bar that smelled like piss and peanuts, no matter how happy the people inside were. Lani dragged Dicky outside with one last parting glance to her mother and Blake.

There was a knot in her stomach as she left the two to themselves, but she hoped that was just the baby and nothing else.

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The radio was playing low and the classic country station Blake found at the edges of the county line went to commercial two minutes ago, so Gwen reached over to twist the dial. Every other channel was holiday music and a flurry of static, but she paused for a moment on the slow croon of Elvis’s Blue Christmas. It only seemed fitting.

They’d been driving for nearly forty minutes, not saying a word. Gwen would glance every so often over to Blake, but he kept on winding down the roads at a slow pace. She wasn’t sure about letting him drive at first, and became less so as the night went on and he told her nothing of where they were heading.

Finally, after what felt like hours, Blake pulled into a well-lit road paved with fresh asphalt. A new thread of tension struck like a match inside of the car, weighing heavier the further they crawled into the thick of memorials.

It took a moment to process that they were in a graveyard. Gwen looked out the window at all the mourners, flocking in droves this Christmas Eve, laying out their festive silk flowers, and lines of popcorn tinsel. As Blake drove on, Gwen spotted a tiny red stocking hanging on the edge of a small grave marker. She didn’t want to think about what that meant exactly, and instead focused on the small wreaths draped over the wingtips of stone angels.
As grey slate and what seemed like a thousand more headstones passed them by, Gwen yearned to be back inside the bar. When a large black vault came into view, the truck slowed to a stop and shifted into park, engine already feebly ticking under the hood.

Blake held the keys in his hand and looked at them for a long moment without moving from the driver’s seat. He dropped his fist in the center console and stared straight ahead, not doing anything but breathing.

Tentatively, Gwen unbuckled her seatbelt and cleared her throat, eyes drawing up to warm the side of Blake’s face. “Wh—what are we doing here?” She asked.

“...I’ve been thinking,” Blake said, cracking the door open before easing one boot out into the gravel path. “Come on,” he said again, rocking a little in the seat like he had to find enough momentum to haul himself out from beneath the heavy hand of whatever was pressing at his psyche.

And so they stepped out into the open air, slowly revealing themselves to the cemetery, and the first thing Gwen noticed about the tomb was that it had candles littered all around it, the colors of blue and pink intermingling.

Gwen felt out of place as she followed Blake inside. There were a few people inside the vault, standing near different plaques, faces cold and yellow. All around them were letters etched in pale marble, names carved like scripture, creeping their way into the open cage surrounding her heart.

And as she read them, one by one, small ribbons on some, she started to become aware of what she was seeing. Small things, blue and pink, babies. Babies that never got a chance to see this world with little eyes. Babies that never took their first breath with the scent of life pilfering the air.

She looked to Blake, then. His shoulders were bowed inward, and the stiff line of his body gave even more when he felt Gwen’s knowing gaze.

Little baby girl Shelton. His daughter.

It already felt like too much at once even though they talked about this once before.

“I knew it happened.” Blake began. “I had the memory of losing her. Of convincing Josie to let her go so that she could live. I couldn’t lose them both...but the funeral.”

Gwen swallowed thickly as she watched him break off, legs and words suddenly failing him as he folded himself down on creaking joints until he was cross-legged on the ground, back firmly pressed against the tomb’s wall. Gwen had no choice but to follow him down, pressing herself as close to him as she could.

“I didn’t remember the funeral. You can’t even call it that really. We just buried her inside of a little coffin and placed her somewhere like this.” He said, looking around the crypt. His eyes went down to his palms, and Gwen noticed that he was crunching one of the ribbons in his hand, a pink one.

“There’s stuff in my life that I didn’t allow myself to feel.” He looked at her then. “I never said goodbye. I rarely think about her. I should talk to her more...for the first time yesterday, I had the urge to tell her about my life. About you...and Brad. I started to tell her about the cancer, about seeing her soon. It sounds crazy, I know.”

“No it doesn’t.” Gwen said forcefully, holding back the emotion she felt in her voice. “It’s not crazy to feel like you didn’t mourn her properly. And it’s never too late to start...You should say
whatever you want to say to her now.”

He shook his head. “She’s in Washington.”

“She’s wherever your heart is. Talk to her. She’s always listening because God is with her and He
doesn’t ever stop being there for you.”

Blake bathed then in silence for a time but when he started talking finally, Gwen grabbed his hand
reassuringly and held on tight.

“Hey, baby girl,” Blake whispered, biting into his lip while he looked off somewhere across the
graveyard. “I thought—I thought I’d talk to you for a little bit. Know it’s been a while.”

His voice was low enough that Gwen felt it more than she heard it, soft as a silver bell in the air
between them. “Gwen’s here with me, this time.”

The way Blake said it, Gwen knew right then that she had to make this right with him because her
name was no stranger to this little girl’s heavenly ears. It’d been whispered to her before, and what
could she even say to that? How could she not fight for a man that loved her so much that he spoke
of her to a precious life he held so dear to his heart, no matter what he thought of the decisions he
made that resulted with them being there now. Gwen wondered all of sudden, a mirage of thoughts,
specifically, how long ago Blake might’ve brought up her name and when.

“I miss you. It feels wrong to even say it but some part of me can’t help but miss you.” He said,
voice hoarse and brittle when it met the air.

It was quiet for a long moment, and Gwen thought Blake might’ve said all he could, words lodged
and aching in his throat, but he pulled in another shallow breath and started speaking softly in that
deep rumble of his.

“I had a rough year...can’t say I’m enthusiastic about the next.”

Gwen felt her eyes water.

“But I know that whatever comes next, I won’t have to endure it alone,” Blake squeezed her hand.
“I’m just tired is all. I think we all are. Even you.”

And then the corners of his eyes finally tightened and brimmed. “I’m so sorry I did this to you.”

The image of a little girl somewhere with Blake’s curly blonde hair as a child before they darkened
with the years passed by them in a flash. Gwen couldn’t keep her own tears from spilling over. To
think that he carried that weight alone, that blame, and regret for creating something so selfishly
and having to be the one to order it away in the end. He mourned for what might have been, what
should have been, and what could never be. A toddler in her tiny sundress, a baby covered in the
love of two doting parents. What she could’ve been. So much potential for life and in the end,
death had a better hand.

Gwen didn’t know that kind of pain. She came close to it but Blake spared her, saved her from such
a fate. So she wrapped her arms around his shaking frame and pulled him as close as she could, the
two of them still sitting on the cold ground.

“You’re a good man, Blake Shelton. The best I’ve ever loved.” Gwen said.

He choked out something between a laugh and a sob, turning to hide his face somewhere between
Gwen’s neck and shoulder.
“I love you so much. You have no idea how little everything else is compared to you,” she reached up to cup a hand around the nape of Blake’s neck. “I’m so sorry for what happened. I never meant for it. You have to know that I only want you. I’ll only ever need you. There’s nobody but you in the world for me.”

Blake slowly pulled away, and the kiss bestowed upon her lips had Gwen feeling like her lungs turned to lead weights in her chest. The more she savored the feeling, the press of him, the love from him, Gwen knew how rewarding it was to pass through this life with a man like Blake Shelton.

He really had walked in the darkest of places. But to have the strength to come back out again…she had no words for that. It was a good thing he took them all away with each press of his lips.
The house was dark when they pulled into the driveway, prompting Blake to slip through the garage door and plug in the sleeping lights strung along the eaves once the truck was parked. Gwen watched him grab the mail out of the box next. He stood in the driveway for a moment, eyes following the string of bright bulbs across the street on the next house. It must have been some time since he last felt himself drifting off to that world Gwen so desperately wished would leave him alone. But she couldn’t do anything with a wish, so she walked the ten feet down the driveway and wrapped an arm around his waist. He started slightly, but allowed her to guide him back inside.

The house felt cold, had since the night he left her. Once inside, Gwen didn’t know what to do with herself. She never felt out of sorts like this before and looked to Blake for the answers.

Blake was looking around their home with an odd expression. His eyes finally landed on her and he frowned. “Where’s S.J.?” He asked.

Gwen should have expected him to notice the boy’s lack of presence this late at night, especially since it was Christmas Eve. She couldn’t wait to see the look on the boy’s face when he came home tomorrow morning and saw Blake there, standing in the kitchen with a cup of coffee, eyes shining from the lights on the tree.

“He’s at my parents.” Gwen answered.

Blake nodded, “And Brad?”

Gwen tensed automatically. “He left...he’s staying at a hotel for the time being. He said...he’ll be here for Christmas if that's okay still...Is it okay?” The dressmaker knew that things weren’t magically fixed between the three of them just because Blake was back in their home but she didn’t think shunning the man, especially on Christmas, was the best way to start mending bridges. Besides, she thought it was too mean, and despite what happened, Brad didn’t deserve it.

Blake didn’t say anything for a time. Instead, he kicked off his boots and hung his jacket up. Finally, without looking at her, he nodded. Gwen felt the air fester with heightened emotions and she selfishly didn’t want to discuss or even think about Brad anymore. He was ruining things without even being there and Gwen didn’t want this night to be about anything but them.

“Why don’t you go get cleaned up. I’ll make us some hot chocolate and we can sit by the fire for a little bit?” Gwen suggested.

Blake shook his head. “You go first.”

Gwen faltered. “Are you sure?”

He nodded, grabbing her hand. She didn’t expect to be lead to the bedroom but went willingly
without protest. Blake let go of her and settled on the bed, stripping off his jeans and button up. Gwen stared at his ministrations confused but soon followed, divesting herself of her clothes in the bathroom. She left the door open like an invitation as she waited for the water to start steaming up the room. But Blake never joined her and Gwen quickly washed up and dried off, eager to get back to him, scared out of her mind to leave him alone for too long.

The sight that greeted her when she walked back into the bedroom was more than sad. Blake had his eyes closed, and one hand on his chest, as if a severe ache were there, where his heart was supposed to be. He gently soothe it away with his hand, willing the peace of this evening to bleed back into him so that he didn’t have to drift somewhere else, somewhere far away from her.

“Showers free,” Gwen said quietly from the doorway, walking back into the room. She dropped her towel and quickly dug around in the dresser for a clean nightshirt, one of Blake’s from the airforce, and a pair of underwear. Chills cropped up on the backs of her arms under the ceiling fan and she just wished she could go to him now and let his heat smooth them away like fresh clay.

“Gwen,” Blake murmured, scratching around the tips of his ears.

She looked over to him. His tick was an oddly welcomed sight.

“Thank you.” He murmured.

“For what?”

“...For feeding my dreams.”

Gwen pulled her underwear on and sat on the edge of the bed behind Blake, leaning over to pluck at the hem of his undershirt. “Go on and get out of these clothes,” she said. “I’ll make us some hot chocolate.”

She ran her hand up Blake’s side and then disappeared down the hall. His words had found a way to rattle her skin and bones. Because feeding my dreams really meant starving my fears, and dammit if she didn’t pray every night for him to say something like this to her--feel something like that about her. She’d never give him a reason to question that ever again.

=Gwen knew instantly the moment Blake padded down the dark hallway, hitching his pajama pants up higher on one side as he walked into the kitchen. The sight of her holding one mug, the other stretched to the end of the counter closest to him, had brought a small grin to lips that Gwen would kill to kiss forever.

“How was your shower?” She asked, tilting her head to one side.

Blake took a sip of the hot cocoa and nodded, licking his lips before answering her. “Good. Thank you.”

The fact that he kept thanking her was a bit nerving but Gwen counted her blessings. He was home, warm, soft, and gentle.

Gwen walked around the island and caught his hand, wrapping his arm around her waist as she lead
him into the living room. She managed to turn on the television while the milk was heating up earlier, and the Hallmark channel played some romantic comedy about a president in another country falling for a beautiful dressmaker. Gwen smiled to herself and went to the old radio they used for Thanksgiving.

Michael Buble’s *I’ll Be Home For Christmas* played low where it sat on the fireplace mantel. She left it on the Christmas station, knowing that all throughout the night, their home would be filled with slow piano keys and the soft tinkle of bells. Their Christmas tree was lit up in full with its messy string lights, filling the living room with soft gold and the dwindling smell of evergreen. The other lights had been dimmed down to nothing by her, and it took a moment to convince Blake to settle down on the couch while she spread the many throw blankets and pillows out onto the floor, right in front of the crackling fire.

It took another moment for the vision to come to fruition but finally, Gwen looked down at her makeshift Christmas fort, and seeing Blake himself curled up on his side with one arm tucked under his head, casting a shadow across the floor where the Christmas tree shined nearby, Gwen couldn’t help but be in love with her life.

Gwen joined him quickly, cold toes pressing at the front of his calves, startling him. Gwen laughed at his furrowed eyebrows.

“How are you so cold,” he murmured, blinking sleepily at her before letting his sparse lashes sink low again.

“You were always warm enough for the both of us.” She whispered, shifting closer when she felt Blake reach out and wrap a hand around her thigh, hiking it over his hip. She listened to the measured rise and fall of their breathing, soft and quiet over the furnace slowly puffing warmth out of the vents overhead to fill the room, and tried to anchor herself in that moment without drifting off too far into the world of sleep.

After a while, Gwen reached over and pushed a damp curl off Blake’s forehead, tucking it back into place. “Thank you.” She said, soft as freshly fallen snow while she pushed her fingers through the rest of Blake’s hair. “For answering all of my prayers.”

Blake released a soft sigh. She was tucked so close to him that her own words lingered warm around her face, pushed up somewhere near Blake’s throat.

When he spoke, his voice was deep, a low rumble in his chest. “I forgive you.”

Two tears welled up inside of her brown eyes, and slid down the side of her nose. She brushed them away before they could fall into the blankets between them.

“I love you,” she whispered, at a loss for anything else, letting her hand rest gently on Blake’s neck where her thumb pressed lightly against the pulse there.

“Do you forgive me?” Blake asked.

She leaned closer to press her lips against his throat, “Of course, I do,” she punctuated her words with another kiss. And then another, until their legs were tangled underneath the blanket, until her lips found his finally and she took whatever air was left between them away. She was enjoying the heat of his body, the weight of his passion, when he pulled away from her suddenly.

His eyes were burning earnestly and plain as anything when they moved down to meet Gwen’s. “I don’t--I think I’m--,” he cut off, exasperated. “Recently--”
“I know,” Gwen voiced, words whispered kindly. He was officially old now, sick, and tired. He was unsure of the pleasure he could give her, not knowing the only pleasure she needed was this, him holding her, kissing her, loving her as he should, without the rest of the world, without hesitation, and without doubt. Her next words were even more hushed, making landfall somewhere against the side of Blake’s face. “I just wanna feel you.”

There was no heated rush of a dizzying thrill, none of the usual electric current that invaded all of her senses when Blake pressed their lips together, whispering against the corner of her mouth, just adoration, and the best kind of love, the softer kind. “I love you, Gwen.”

“I know that, too.” She murmured, and kissed him again.

Roaming hands and deepening kisses and the radio setting the rhythm for the evening was a good way to go, Gwen thought. If she died right then, with his mouth pressed against hers, his heart beating in sync with her own, Gwen would thank God when she reached the pearly gates.

It would be Christmas in a few minutes but that was the furthest thing from her mind. It remained the furthest thing away when despite his worries, or his body’s unwillingness, Blake made love to her very slowly, gently, as if she was going to break and not him.

Her stomach tightened while he moved inside of her, both on their sides, her back glued to his front, their hands tangled together in front of her chest. The twinkling lights listened to their hitching sighs and soft swears over the sound of the Christmas radio. Blake let himself be pulled into the cradle of her thighs over and over again, burning them both in all the places they touched, even in all the places they didn’t.

Gwen turned her head over her shoulder, meeting his sunken eyes in the feeble light again, faces inches apart. Blake dropped his lips to press a kiss against Gwen’s hairline and then another against the corner of her eye. When he pulled back, the mother of three looked into two blue eyes that shined brighter than any lights strung up in the world, but reflected drops of gold from the tree—their tree. Everything was about them for now on, them and theirs.

“Merry Christmas, darling,” Blake whispered, reaching down to hitch one of her legs around his waist, making their connection deeper, kissing her for all she was worth. And when Blake pushed into her now, this new angle taking her higher, she could only arc her body into it, moaning long and low into his mouth.

They stayed like that for a few moments, breathing against one another while their bodies adjusted to the new sensation. Blake only moved to tilt his chin up and found Gwen’s lips again, one hand placed soft and reverent against the side of her face while he moved slowly inside of her.

Gwen clenched her body and Blake gasped against her mouth, rolling his hips so that her eyes flickered and slid shut. He didn’t fall into any heated or quickened pace but rocked into Gwen without any hurry, grinding against her until colors started lighting up in stars behind both of their eyes.

And Gwen could make love this way forever. She didn’t need fast, or hurried, or hard. Just this. Just him. They had years of fucking one another, she wanted the rest of her life to be this gentle, this kind.

“Blake,” Gwen called, gasping his name out into the quiet room. “God, Blake—”

“It’s okay,” Blake rasped out, tucking one arm underneath her head while the other pulled her closer, hand still entangled with hers above her breasts. “I’m gonna take care of you.”
His thrusts became deeper and Gwen’s mouth dropped open in a wordless sound, hands squeezing Blake’s so tightly she was afraid they’d fall off. The blankets tangled up around them, the room having gone hot enough now that both of their bodies were beginning to gleam with sweat, her shirt sticking to her skin, Blake’s sticking to them both.

Age and illness kept this from being as easy as it once was, she knew, and Blake tried to keep his breath and pacing steady, following all the little sounds Gwen still made for him. She felt so warm there wrapped up in their little makeshift nest, lulled and sleepy despite every nerve ending being set on fire by Blake’s ministrations. It was the spell God placed them under, the radio and ticking furnace. The lights, the Christmas tree washing them over in soft amber, the color of thick sunflower honey, and if she could, she’d probably stay wrapped up in their cocoon of a quieter life forever. She wanted to tell him so, but Gwen was beyond the possibility of words in that moment.

All her mouth was good for was pulling the other human behind her down into a mindless collision of kisses. Blake hummed and braced the hand behind her head on the floor as he finally took her over the edge, Gwen gasping into his mouth as she trembled from head to toe.

Blake followed soon after and slumped down against Gwen amidst the bombs that were going off inside of their hearts, burying his face close against her neck. She remembered a time when they were on opposite sides of a war. How she’d take any bullet for him now, even then, she thought.

“I love you.” He breathed there, reminding Gwen so that she knew, knew it now and didn’t ever forget it, as if she could.

Gwen turned them over, allowing Blake to slip out of her as she moved him on his back. She laid on his chest and pressed her lips to his heart, knowing no better feeling than when his skin pushed back, reassuring her of his resilience, of his life.

They’re quiet for a time, and she waited until their breathing mellowed out into something softer, and then turned her face to press a kiss under Blake’s ear.

“Merry Christmas, Blake,” she said, running the pads of her fingertips up and down his clothed chest, keeping him there for just a little while longer, hoping she could keep him forever.

The sound of him sighing brought her peace. The sound of the radio brought her joy. The sound of her own blood rushing in her ears brought her life. Gwen smiled into his chest, feeling the happiest she’d ever been.

“Her name means sky.” Blake mumbled.

Gwen tilted her head up at the same time he tilted his down.

He continued. “Lani. Her name means sky, the heavens. I get it, now. She was always going to happen and because of her, we were inevitable. Because without her, I’d just be in Hell. Without her, there’s no you. There’s no us. Without her, we’re just two people who knew each other once instead of two people who are connected forever. No Lani, no us, no heaven. Whether I die tomorrow or twenty years from now, heaven will never be what you both have given me right from the start...The sky and everything beyond it.”

The world would be a more awful place without him in it, and as Gwen allowed the tears she wiped away earlier to fall between them then, she’s grateful that time isn’t now. Because she’s never been closer to heaven before than in that moment, than before those words.

Heaven was a lot of things, she knew, and would be the best thing that ever happened to either one
of them when the time came. It’s what all the books said and all the preachers preached. Heaven was a beautiful paradise.

Gwen was just glad that she was able to feed their dreams and starve their fears before they got to it.

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