The Pacific Rim

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Summary

When key members of the Atlantis expedition return to Earth, President Bartlet wants to meet with them. The only problem is that he has to take them with him to Australia.

Notes

This fic was originally written more than a decade ago. While I've edited for this posting, I imagine its age shows (as well as the age I was when I wrote it).

This and the series it belongs to are dedicated to freifraufischer, without whose support none of this would have been written, and without whose friendship I'd be much worse off.
Chapter 1

Summer sunlight flooded the Oval Office, where CJ Cregg was feeling oddly glad that she was nowhere near the press room. It was a hundred and fifteen out there at the least, and the air conditioning in the press room had never been that good. Or maybe it was just the press. And, of course, there were other benefits to being the new chief of staff. Now she was in a position to be chewed out by the President every fifteen minutes instead of every hour.

“Well,” he was saying, “how is it that the members of the most important expedition in human history returned home, and I’m just now finding out about it?”

“Sir, General Hammond just told me,” she protested. “I told you as soon as I knew.”

“I understand that, CJ,” said Bartlet, “but don’t you think you should have known sooner? Was this totally unanticipated?”

“Apparently so, sir,” she replied. “Something to do with a… ZBL.”

“You got one out of three,” he said. “ZPM. I did read the report.”

“Yes, and the scientist who was trying to explain it to me over the phone kept insisting on calling it a Zed-PM.”

“Ah, that would be Dr. Rodney McKay,” said the President, putting on his jacket. “Delightful man, really. Always very willing to tell you exactly how smart he is.”

“Well, he ought to fit in here.”

“What did you say?”

“Nothing, Mr. President.”

“I heard that, Claudia Jean.” He picked up a folder she had given him when she came in. “So where are they?”

“Who?”

“The Atlantis team,” Bartlet replied, coming around the desk. “Remember, the greatest adventure in human history. We were just talking about them.”

“Yes, sir,” said CJ. “They’re en route from Peterson Air Force Base outside of Colorado Springs, in order to brief General Hammond in person on things.”

“On things?” The President gave her a look of benign amusement. “You were my press secretary for how long, and the best word you can come up with is ‘things’?”

“Well, sir, there was a lot of noise in the office when I took the call, and the scientist who was explaining things to me talks faster than anyone I’ve ever heard.”

“Rodney has an interesting conversation style.”

“He said something that sounded like wreath, but I’m pretty sure that’s not it.”

“Why did they have you on the phone with McKay?” he asked.
“I don’t know, sir,” said CJ. “He was on the phone, and I talked with him.”

“They could have had you talk with Dr. Elizabeth Weir,” Bartlet continued. Recognizing his tone, she sank to one of the sofas. This was going to take a while. “It’s funny. When I met Dr. Weir, I was in my last term in the House, and she was lobbying for some anti-military group.”

“And now she’s in charge of a sizable military force.”

“Exactly. You appreciate the irony, of course.”

“I am extraordinarily appreciative.”

He looked up at her from the file in his hand as he put on his glasses. “You should drop the adverbs, CJ. They make you sound insincere.” He returned his attention to the file and took a seat in his usual armchair. “So Dr. Elizabeth Weir got the attention of the UN ambassador with alarming speed and was swept out of lobbying circles into the den of lions that is the United Nations.”

“You probably shouldn’t describe the UN in such terms when anyone other than me is in the room.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.” He closed the file, set it aside, and began perusing the next one. “And then she went on to broker some of the most sensitive deals in modern history. But enough about her. Let’s talk about her right-hand man, Major John Sheppard. And let me tell you, you should find out if this guy is single.”

CJ sighed. “Sir, you’re not setting me up with anyone.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’ll let Abbey do that.” He turned a page in the file. “I should promote this man.”

“I don’t think you can, sir.”

“Why not? I can draft a turkey into military service.”

“Sir, must you bring that up?”

“As often as possible.” He pushed his glasses up. “Anyway, I think I should promote him.”

“Yes, and the Marine Corps gets a little touchy about people meddling in promotions.”

“He’s in the Air Force, not the Marines.” Bartlet lifted a sheet of paper. “He’s a pilot. It says here that he’s trained to fly Apache, Blackhawk, Cobra, and Osprey classes.”

“Those are helicopters.”

“Seems like it.” He put the page back. “There’s some other stuff here, but I haven’t got a clue about what any of it means.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then there’s the inimitable Rodney McKay, but you’ve already spoken to him. I won’t bore you with details,” said the President. He flipped more pages. “And there’s someone who’s apparently from another galaxy. I haven’t read her file yet.” He stood up and headed toward his desk. “I want to meet with them.”
“Yes, sir, I’m sure you do,” CJ replied, getting to her feet, “but you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Australia.”

The President stopped and turned. “Will Australians be terribly offended if I meet with a group of people who work for me?”

“No, sir,” said CJ, “you’re going to Australia. Tonight.”

“Why am I going again?”

CJ knew he was baiting her, but on the slim possibility that he’d actually forgotten about the trip, she explained, “You’re going to the Pacific Rim conference.”

“Well, let’s take them with us. There’s room on the plane, and these people haven’t had a vacation in months. Let’s take them to Sydney.”

“Mr. President, with all due respect,” CJ protested, “that’s a terrible idea.”

“Why?” he asked. “We can bring General Hammond along, they can have their meetings on Air Force One, and I can meet them.”

“There’s another officer accompanying them,” she replied, checking her notes. “Colonel Carter. You’ll have to get permission from General O’Neill to let her come along.”

He pointed at a phone on his desk. “That’s what that’s for.”

CJ tried to come up with another argument against it—she knew there were at least a hundred—but her brain just wasn’t working quickly enough. Before she could try to talk him out of it, he headed toward the door and said, “Make this happen, CJ.”

She shook her head and smiled a little. “Yes, sir, Mr. President.”

Dr. Elizabeth Weir closed her cell phone with a sigh. The call had been a relief, at least at first. The trip from Colorado to DC had been excruciatingly quiet, as neither she nor any of her people had wanted to talk about anything in front of Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter. General O’Neill had sent her along for their meetings, and Elizabeth had a suspicion that she was there to babysit.

She walked back to her seat, next to John Sheppard, who was staring out the window as lights below them grew more frequent. They weren’t that far from Andrews now. “Doctor?” said Carter. “May I ask what the call was?”

“It was General O’Neill,” Elizabeth replied. After sitting for a while, it had been nice to stand up and walk to the back of the passenger area for the call, so now she was reluctant to sit down again. “We’re not going to the hotel tonight. At all, actually.”

Next to Carter, Rodney looked up sharply. “What are we doing?”

“We’ve been asked to accompany President Bartlet on a trip to Sydney.”

“Australia?” Carter asked. “Why?”

“The President is attending and speaking at the Pacific Rim conference, which is being held in
“Sydney,” said Elizabeth, one arm over the back of her chair. “This was obviously planned before we came back, and since he wants to meet us, he decided to take us and our meetings with him.”

“And how does he intend to do that?” Teyla asked.

“The President’s got a pretty sweet plane,” John replied, still looking out the window. “It’s got a communications center, an apartment, an operating room, offices, you name it. And there’s rumor you can even get M&Ms with the seal of the President.”

Teyla nodded slowly, but didn’t look like she knew what he was talking about.

Elizabeth looked down at John. “When did you become an expert on Air Force One?”

“I hear things.” He glanced up at her. “Take a seat. I haven’t bit you yet.”

“Yet being the operative word?” Still, she slid down into her seat.

Carter didn’t let John answer. “Now might be a good time for you to change into uniform, Major Sheppard,” she said. She’d been none too happy when John had shown up in jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt, his uniform in a garment bag. Elizabeth wasn’t entirely certain she blamed the colonel, since the woman had been wearing a skirt, heels, and pantyhose for a few hours now.

“Yeah,” said John.

He stood up in front of Elizabeth and retrieved the bag from the compartment above them. He nodded to Sam, and as he walked off, she said, “Don’t forget to shave, Major.”

“Yes, ma’am,” John said dispassionately.

Carter watched until John had left the cabin and turned to Elizabeth. “You have your hands full with that one, don’t you?”

“You’d be surprised,” Elizabeth replied, trying not to answer her at all.

When the motorcade came to a stop and CJ got out of the limo after the President, she glanced around and found Donna already running toward her. “You needed to see me?” Donna asked.

“Yeah,” CJ said. “Why are you wearing a coat? It’s ninety degrees.”

“It’s windy here. Besides, we’re going to Australia.”

“What?”

“They’re in another hemisphere. It’s winter in Sydney.”

“Yeah. Listen, there’s a group of people who have been added to the passenger manifest.”

Donna nodded. “General George Hammond and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs.”

“Yeah, but there are five others,” CJ replied. “Dr. Elizabeth Weir—”

“Why does that name sound familiar?”

“Have you been paying attention to politics at all in the last ten years?” Donna didn’t answer. It had taken her two seconds too long to connect the name with international politics. CJ continued,
Dr. Weir has with her two Air Force officers and two civilians. They’re being brought over from another runway. I need you to find them and keep them away from the press before they board.”

“What about after?”

“Yeah, well, that’d take an act of God.” CJ shooed her away. “Sooner rather than later.”

“Got it.”

Donna rushed over in the direction of an open gate, where two jeeps were driving in behind the motorcade. When she got there, a tall officer was helping a woman in a pants suit out of the jeep. Donna didn’t think she looked like she needed the help. “Are you Dr. Weir?” she asked, as soon as she’d reached them.

The woman looked up in surprise. “Yes,” she said. “Who are you?”

“I’m Donnatella Moss. I’m senior assistant to Josh Lyman, deputy chief of staff. He’s not on this trip, so I’m doing whatever CJ Cregg tells me to do.”

“Sounds like quite an experience,” said the man.

“This is Major John Sheppard,” Weir said. “Don’t worry. He’s always like this.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” Donna replied. She looked past to the other jeep, where two women and a man were getting out. “They’re with you?”

Weir nodded as the three joined her and the major. “All right, let me do this again,” Donna said. “My name is Donna Moss, and CJ Cregg, the White House chief of staff, asked me to escort you over to the plane.”

Dr. Weir glanced at the major. “Well, let’s get moving.”

“Wait.” Donna looked at the third woman in the group, a black woman dressed in tight pants and a sleeveless purple top that didn’t quite cover her stomach. Shrugging her coat off, Donna handed it to her and said, “Here, put this on.”

“Thank you,” she said, “but I am not cold.”

“That’s not the issue,” said Donna. “You’re not dressed appropriately to be seen by the press when you board.”

The tall man nodded to the woman, and she put the coat on. Donna looked back at Dr. Weir. “If you’ll follow me.”

As they neared the press pool, where President Bartlet was answering questions and probably talking about the history of kangaroos, Major Sheppard asked, “So why did we need an escort to the plane? It’s not like we’d miss it.”

“CJ wanted to keep you away from the press as long as possible,” she said. “Dr. Weir, would you mind standing on the other side of Major Sheppard?”

Weir did as she was asked, but also said, “Donna, do you really think the press is going to recognize me? It’s been almost a year since I was near a photographer.”

“CJ used to be the press secretary,” Donna replied. “She doesn’t like to take chances with them.”
They passed the pool and boarded the plane without incident. Once in the plane, Donna suddenly realized that she had no idea what she was supposed to do with them. She took them into the staff cabin, which was definitely off-limits to the press, and asked them to wait there.

“CJ!”

CJ turned around and almost hit a reporter with her bag as she heard Donna yelling for her. She quickly extricated herself from the tangle of press boarding the plane and walked away with Donna. “Are they on?” she asked.

“They’re in the staff cabin,” said the assistant. “I didn’t know what else to do with them.”

“Walk with me,” CJ replied. “What happened to your coat?”

“One of them has it. She wasn’t exactly dressed appropriately, and you told me to keep the press from noticing them. CJ, how does someone who’s important enough to be on Air Force One not know better than to wear a shirt that doesn’t cover her stomach while she’s on Air Force One?”

CJ paused at the door. “They found out they were coming on the trip while they were on their way to DC. They thought they were going to have a night in a hotel before their meetings.”

“Okay.” Donna started to walk off, but then spun around abruptly. “Oh, Josh called. Toby’s not coming.”

“What?”

“Josh called and said Toby’s not coming.”

“Why didn’t Toby call me?” CJ demanded.

“Hey, don’t shoot the messenger,” said Donna. “Andi’s got the flu, and Toby had to stay and take care of the twins. He talked Sam into stepping in and finishing the speech.”

“Oh, how wonderfully convenient,” CJ replied. “Thank God there’s a former press secretary on board.”

Resisting the urge to mutter, CJ walked off toward the press cabin, where she was greeted with the usual cheerful demeanor of reporters being deprived information. “CJ, why the delay in takeoff?” someone asked the moment she walked in.

“Hey, one thing at a time,” she said. “Good evening, boys and girls, I’m CJ Cregg, and I’ll be your host for the next three minutes, at which point I open the special trap door beneath all your seats and drop you on the runway.”

“Hey, do I know you?” Danny Concannon said from the back.

CJ glared in his direction before continuing. “Congresswoman Wyatt has the flu, so Toby Ziegler has to take care of their twins while she’s ill. As such, I’ll be filling in somewhat, though I suspect that I’ll have Donna deal with you too.”

“We feel loved, CJ,” said Sandy, from the second row.

“Getting back to Carl’s question,” she resumed, “we’re leaving late because there were some last-minute additions to the passenger manifest.”
“What a shock,” said another man.

“Quiet, you. Pinch-hitting for Toby Ziegler tonight will be Samuel Norman Seaborn, who will be finishing up the President’s speech for the conference. We have an Air Force research team coming along for the trip, as President Bartlet is a science buff and likes to sit in on meetings he doesn’t understand because he’s not an astrophysicist.”

“Can you tell us what these meetings are about?” Katie asked.

“To be honest, Katie, I read the memo, and while it had words that I recognized, they didn’t form any meaningful message for me.”

The group laughed, and a newer woman raised her hand. “CJ, is there anyone else?”

“Yes,” she said. “I’m informed that the President has also asked Dr. Elizabeth Weir to join us. She’s an expert in international diplomacy, and she’s known this President since he was serving in the House of Representatives. I’m sure they’ll pass the time playing a lot of chess. Danny?”

“Any other ex-girlfriends of mine on the flight?”

CJ smiled. “I don’t know. Any other ex-girlfriends of Danny Concannon on the flight?”

Adrienne Thomas, an older, grey-haired correspondent for the Chicago Tribune, smiled and said, “Well, there is me.”

“Well, ladies and gentlemen, that was more than I wanted to know,” CJ said, knowing not to take that seriously, but also not wanting to let Danny off the hook. “Hope everyone’s comfortable. We’ll be taking off in a few minutes and landing a very long time after that. Enjoy the flight.”

CJ left the cabin and headed as far away from the press as possible. She should have guessed that as luck would have it, Danny knew Elizabeth Weir pretty well. It was going to be bad enough that an alien was on Air Force One with the White House Press Corps, and she had a feeling that Danny was going to make matters much, much worse before the trip was done.
CJ made her way through the plane to the President’s office. “Debbie,” she said to the secretary, “I need the next free minute the President’s got.”

“He’s free right now,” said Debbie. “I’ll tell him you’re here.”

Half a minute later, she stepped inside the office. “CJ,” the President said, “what joyous tidings do you bring?”

“Not that joyous, I’m afraid,” she replied, clasping her hands. “Since Toby’s not here, I was running through some things with the press before takeoff. I told them that Dr. Weir is on the flight, and Danny Concannon mentioned that he once dated her.”

Bartlet took off his glasses. “You’re kidding.”

“I wish I was, sir,” CJ said. “I have no idea how serious or how long ago it was, but he knows her, and if he runs into her, things might get interesting.”

“You think he might find out about the SGC.”

“I think it’s a possibility we shouldn’t rule out.”

He sighed. “We can’t keep those people confined to one room the whole way. They’d go nuts. And I suppose it’s too late to kick Danny off the trip.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Tell him he gets fifteen minutes with me on… I don’t know, antiglobalization protests at the conference,” the President said, sitting down. “Find out what he knows about her and figure out if we need to keep her away from him.”

“Yes, sir, Mr. President.”

Two hours into the flight, there was a knock at the door to CJ’s office. It opened a crack, and Danny stuck his head in. “Can I come in?” he asked.

“Well, since I asked you to see me, no,” she replied.

“Good,” he said, coming in anyway and taking a seat. “What did you want?”

She set her pen aside. “The President wants to do a sit-down with someone from the print media before the conference, on the protests surrounding it.”

“What do I get, fifteen minutes on globalization?”

“That’s it.”

“Deal.”

He got up to leave, and CJ picked up her pen again, trying to appear casual. “Elizabeth Weir is really an ex-girlfriend of yours?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, pausing at the door. “Years ago. She was still in law school. We were both the
new kids in Washington.”

“So what happened?”

“Well, let’s just say there are reasons she’s my ex-girlfriend.” He touched the doorknob. “It’s weird. We haven’t kept in touch, except for when she congratulated me on my Pulitzer. Strange that she would show up on this flight.”

He left then, and while CJ was somewhat relieved to know that they weren’t in contact anymore, something about it still left her vaguely unsettled.

Having been released from the cabin where Donna had left them, Colonel Carter left the room almost immediately, and John and Elizabeth soon followed, leaving Rodney and Teyla asleep in their seats. They stood in the hallway, and John took his tie off. “I knew there was a reason I liked Antarctica. No ties,” he said.

“John, you’re not allowed to do that,” Elizabeth replied. “You’re supposed to be neat if the President walks in.”

“Pretty unlikely. It’s well after midnight.”

“You’ve never met this President, have you?”

“I met him when I was twenty-two,” said Elizabeth, taking her jacket off and laying it on a nearby chair. “He was in the House then.”

She turned and took the tie out of his hand. He didn’t complain as she put it back on him, but as she was straightening it, someone said behind her, “Well, if it isn’t Elizabeth Weir.”

She looked over her shoulder, her fingers still involved with John’s tie. “Danny,” she said at the sight of the reporter in the doorway. “What a surprise.”

“I heard you were going to be on this flight,” he said, as she finished up with the tie. “How’ve you been, Liz? Haven’t seen you in a long time.”

“Well, I still hate that nickname.”

“I figured as much.” He glanced at John. “Who’s your friend?”

“Major John Sheppard,” she replied. “Major, this is Danny Concannon. You still with the Washington Post?”

“Probably will be till I die,” Danny said, extending his hand to John. “Pleased to meet you.”

“You too,” John said.

“Well, hey, I’ve got to get back to my seat before CJ sends the stewards after me,” he said. “But we should chat sometime while we’re in Sydney and catch up.”

“On the record or off?”

“Whatever you want.” He grinned. “On the record would be great, though. You’ve been missing from professional politics for a long time now.”
He left as abruptly as he’d arrived, and after a moment’s silence, John said, “Old boyfriend?”

“How’d you know?”

Once out of the cabin with the Atlantis people, Samantha Carter let out a long breath. The prospect of being stuck with them for the twenty-four-hour flight to Sydney was not a good one, and she needed to get away from them.

Despite what had happened in one of their last conversations, Sam had not expected the coldness displayed by Dr. Weir in this encounter. The more she thought about it, however, the more it made sense. She had essentially blackmailed Weir during her brief tenure at the SGC, and Sam suspected that Weir didn’t take kindly to having her arm twisted like that.

Of course, Sam hadn’t been entirely happy about having to go on this trip. Jack’s reason for sending her—though not explained in so many words—was to make sure Major Sheppard was listened to. His record was such that that might become an issue with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Added to that were more recent events, including the death of Colonel Marshall Sumner, and it was entirely likely that his word would not carry its proper weight.

On some level Sam thought he should be allowed to fend for himself. After all, it wasn’t like these things had been unjustly placed on his record, so he was going to have to speak for himself at some point. If he expected to be taken seriously by those in command over him, he was going to have to get past some of this irreverence for authority. Sure, there were many others in the service with similar attitudes, but most of them weren’t involved in dangerous missions to other galaxies.

But the day had started off badly, when Weir and Sheppard had seemed joined at the hip, leaving Sam with Rodney McKay, of all people. She was just waiting for him to start off on how smart he was for having kept the people of Atlantis alive. He never did, which surprised her, but the expectation put her in a bad mood. Seeing Sheppard in civilian clothing on the plane when she was already in service dress had only made her crankier.

Down the corridor a door opened, and Sam looked up to see a dark-haired man in a suit come out, taking glasses off and rubbing at his eyes. He looked in her direction and smiled. “Just coming out to stretch my legs,” he said. “The President likes these long flights, but they tend to drive me a little crazy occasionally.”

“We’re only two hours in,” Sam replied.

“Yeah, that’s the bad part.” The man came over to her and shook her hand. “Sam Seaborn.”

She smiled. “Sam Carter.”

“Well, that has all kinds of potential for comedy.” He put his glasses back on. “You’re with that Air Force research team that got added at the last minute?”

Sam snapped into her cover story mode. “Yeah,” she replied. “The President wanted to be in on those meetings for some reason.”

“Let me tell you, deep space telemetry is one of his passions.”

“How’d you—”

“I read the passenger manifest,” he said. “I’m having trouble with the President’s speech for the conference, and I started reading anything I could get my hands on.”
“Really.”

“Yeah.” He opened the folder in his hands. “You know, I know a lot of people who should talk
with you. Back when I was deputy communications director for the White House, I kept getting all
these alien conspiracy people through my office. It’d be nice if someone working with deep space
radar could talk with them. Besides, you were the one who did that appearance after the Colson
incident, weren’t you?”

“Why would a speech writer have alien conspiracy people in his office?”

“It has to do with Andrew Jackson, a two-ton block of cheese, and Leo McGarry being insane.”

Sam blinked. This guy’s job might actually be weirder than hers, and that was saying something.

Back in his seat in the press cabin, Danny briefly entertained the thought of sleep. But the flight
would last close to a day, and they’d be landing around ten in the morning in Sydney. It would be
better to go as long as he could now and try to readjust himself to local time on the flight, unlike
everyone else.

He stared up at the ceiling. Elizabeth had looked good. Granted, he hadn’t expected her not to, but
seeing her in the flesh was a nice reassurance. Pictures rarely did her justice, and lately there hadn’t
been that many of those.

Danny had found that downright curious, but figured that she was in secret negotiations somewhere
most of the time. There were plenty of places around the world for her to be relatively isolated. But
that wasn’t what really piqued his curiosity.

It had been more than fifteen years since they’d broken up, but the Elizabeth Weir he’d dated had
been quite vehemently anti-military. She wasn’t an isolationist by any stretch of the imagination,
but her idealism was so extreme that she truly believed that any problem could be solved without
taking up arms.

So why was Elizabeth was hanging around an Air Force major?

He’d watched her with the man for a minute before walking in, wondering if they just happened to
be in the same space. But when she took the tie from the officer and started putting it back on him,
Danny knew there was something up. Elizabeth didn’t do that to just anyone.

CJ told him once that he had a freakish memory, but he always figured that it was that freakish
memory that won him a Pulitzer. He opened his laptop, and a quick excursion into Google got him
to a page with explanations of various military medals and ribbons. Major John Sheppard, it turned
out, had silver wings, meaning he was a senior pilot, which was more about rank than anything
else. He had the standard combat ribbons for an officer of his age and rank. But what had stuck out
at Danny was one he’d never seen before.

On the middle row of the ribbons was a bluish-green one edged in black, and in the center of it was
pinned a bronze disc with the outline of Antarctica on it. According to Danny’s information, it was
the Antarctica Service Medal, meaning that the recipient had served somehow with official
operations in Antarctica. The disc meant the major had spent a winter there. Danny had been
around a lot of servicemen in his career, men and women doing astounding things for their country,
and none of them had had that medal.

Unsettled, Danny opened Minesweeper on his computer. As he proceeded to lose game after game,
he wondered what Elizabeth was doing with John Sheppard.
By the second time CJ heard Donna calling for her and running down the corridor, she was ready to stuff Donna into a suitcase. “Donna, what could you possibly want?” she asked. “It’s almost two in the morning.”

“We have to do something about that woman,” Donna replied.

“What woman?”

“The one who had to have my coat to board the plane because she was dressed inappropriately.”

“Doesn’t she have other clothes with her?”

“Yes, but apparently nothing with sleeves,” said Donna. “Dr. Weir said she’s a nomadic trader or something. CJ, why is a nomad in an Air Force research team?”

“Donna, there are questions about the military that I just don’t ask.” She stopped in a doorway and turned to face Donna. “She can borrow one of my shirts.”

“You’re too tall.”

“You?”

“Too flat-chested.”

“Right,” said CJ, “so we’re looking for someone short and well-endowed. Donna—”

“No,” she interrupted, eyes wide.

“Donna—”

“No!” She almost stamped her foot. “What am I supposed to say, ‘Mrs. Bartlet, I need to borrow your shirt because you have big boobs’?”

“Well, that would be one way of saying it.”

Donna and CJ both spun around, to where Abbey Bartlet was standing, her arms crossed. “Though I should warn you that if I’m going to loan my clothing to someone, I’d rather meet her first.”

CJ nodded. “She’s with the Air Force research team that—”

“That my husband added at the last minute,” Abbey replied. “He told me. It’s why we were late.”

She turned to Donna. “Was that the woman I saw wearing your coat?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Donna, nodding.

“I assume she’s the nomadic trader who’s in this research team for reasons passing comprehension.” She sighed. “Well, when we get to Sydney, we’ll have to take her shopping. And probably Dr. Weir too. They were expecting August in DC, not Australia.”

Donna nodded. “I’ll get that scheduled.”

“If they’re still up, I could meet them now,” the First Lady replied smoothly. “Might as well do it now while Zoey’s asleep.”

“Ma’am?” CJ prompted.
“Dr. Weir was one of Zoey’s professors at Georgetown,” Abbey said. “Jed mentioned to her that Dr. Weir was going along, and she wanted to hide.”

“Why?”

“She got a C in the class. According to other kids in it, it was a respectable grade.”

“But the President,” Donna began.

“Didn’t like the fact that his daughter made a C in a class on international relations.” Abbey smiled. “Shall we see if they’re still up?”

The group was still in the staff cabin, where, fortunately, no staffers were actually to be found. Sam was working on the speech elsewhere and had anyone he could find locked up in that room with him. In this room, however, two civilians and an officer were sleeping, and Dr. Weir and another officer were sitting by a window, both of them trying not to wake the three sleepers with laughter.

When Abbey walked in, the officer stood immediately, and Weir soon after, both of them trying to stop smiling. “Well, don’t let me spoil the fun,” Abbey remarked.

“It’s good to see you, Abbey,” Weir said. “How are you?”

“I’m doing quite well, Elizabeth. Thank you for asking.” She looked at the officer. “Seems you keep attractive company these days.”

CJ thought she saw the diplomat’s cheeks turn a little pink. “This is Major John Sheppard,” she said. “He’s been working with me over the last few months. John, this is the First Lady, Dr. Abigail Bartlet.”

“Nice to meet you, Major,” said Abbey. “Do you mind if I call you John?”

“Of course not, ma’am.”

She smiled. “I knew I liked you.”

The officer looked at Elizabeth, frowning. “Do you know everyone on this flight?”

“I didn’t know Donna.”

“Yeah, but you know the President, the First Lady—”

“The President and First Lady’s youngest daughter,” Abbey put in.

“And some random reporter,” John finished.

“Wait,” CJ interrupted. “Some random reporter?”

“Yeah, an old boyfriend of mine,” said Elizabeth.

“Danny Concannon?”

“CJ,” Abbey said, “I’m sure it’s not a problem. We actually came for something else.”

“Yes,” said CJ. “Donna, who was it?”

Donna pointed at the young black woman sleeping in a chair. “Her.”
Dr. Weir frowned. “Has Teyla done anything wrong?”

“No,” CJ replied, “it’s just that she’s not dressed appropriately for Air Force One, and when she gets off the plane in Sydney, pictures will be taken.”

“Once we land, Donna and I are going to take both of you shopping,” said Abbey. “I doubt either of you have clothes warm enough for Sydney this time of year.”

“No, ma’am,” said Elizabeth.

“But in the meantime,” Abbey continued, “Donna, this young woman seems to be closer to my daughter’s size. Zoey has an extra jacket with her. If she wakes up when you go in there, tell her I’m borrowing it for a friend.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Donna left, and Abbey turned to CJ. “See? You didn’t even need to tell me that my breasts were big enough.”

The major made a sound like he was choking, and Dr. Weir turned to him a look of pretended concern. “Major?”

“I’m good.”

“Well, that settles it,” said Abbey. “If you two don’t mind, I think I’ll stay in here. You seem like interesting people, and I think you’re the only ones who want to be up.”

“There’s the pilot,” Elizabeth suggested.

“Yes, but he seems a little preoccupied with not crashing the plane.”

“Hey, I’ve never flown Air Force One,” John said. “Wonder if they’d let me play with it for five minutes.”

“No, John.”

“My grandson was on this plane not long ago, John,” Abbey began. CJ slowly made her way to the door. “I could have the stewards check to see if he left any toy airplanes on board.”

CJ looked back into the room before shutting the door behind her. The major was grinning. “That’d be great, Mrs. Bartlet.”
When Donna brought the jacket in for Teyla, the First Lady invited her to stay, but the assistant politely declined, saying she really needed to sleep. So it turned out to be Abbey, John, and Elizabeth sitting up for hours as they attempted to acclimate themselves to Sydney time.

The major, on top of being quite, quite easy on the eyes, was an easy conversationalist, and he spent most of the few hours Abbey spent in the room entertaining her and Dr. Weir with tales of his military career. The affability he displayed with them seemed to be the cause of most of his little adventures. Of course, when Abbey asked him why he and Elizabeth were working together now, the answer was evasive and charming. Clearly, they were up to their necks in classified operations.

Elizabeth was the first to pass out from exhaustion, and Abbey left not long after that, passing her daughter Zoey on the way back to the apartment where she hoped Jed was sleeping. It was a futile hope, however, because her husband was sitting under a lamp reading.

“Ah, the prodigal wife returns,” he said, setting his book aside. “Debbie told me you were just going to tell CJ that you wanted to take those civilians with the research team shopping.”

“Well,” Abbey replied, heading to the closet to get her pajamas, “I decided to sit around and talk with them. You’ll be happy to know that Elizabeth Weir is just as charming as you thought she was when you met her.”

“‘Charming’ was not the word I used, Abbey,” said Jed. “‘Overzealous, idealistic brat’ was probably more like it.”

“You thought she was charming, Jed, and you know it.” Abbey headed into the bathroom, still talking. “You wouldn’t have cared that she was an overzealous brat if you didn’t like her.”

“Yeah, I did,” he called from the other room. “But at first it was because she wasn’t afraid of arguing with me.”

“Whatsoever.” Abbey came back out of the bathroom. “I don’t know what top-secret stuff she’s got her hands in now, but that Air Force major she’s got with her is very cute.”

“I love hearing you talk about younger men.”

“Very handsome,” she continued, walking over to his chair, “and charming.”

“That’s the sixth time you’ve used that word tonight.”

“Third, Jed,” she corrected. He looked up at her, and she leaned down to kiss him. “And he was. They both were, right up until the point where Dr. Weir fell asleep.”

“I sent Zoey to talk with her,” Jed replied.

“Well, I’m sure she’ll find ample reason to stay in there if Major Sheppard is still awake.” Abbey walked over to the bed and turned the covers down. “Come to bed.”

He did as he was told, settling into bed next to her. “You said Elizabeth was asleep?”

“Yeah. John was the only one still up.”
“And I sent my daughter down there?”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. I doubt you could pry him away from Dr. Weir.”

“That doesn’t sound good. Aren’t there regulations against that?”

Abbey looked up at him sharply, a little surprised. “Well, I don’t know exactly what they’re doing that would put Air Force regulations into effect as far as their personal relationship goes,” she replied. “But aren’t you the man who said we shouldn’t be in the business of defining love?”

“Yeah, well, that didn’t involve the United States Air Force.”

“Go to sleep, Jed.”

Zoey Bartlet stood at the door of the staff cabin, wondering if there was any way she could possibly get out of this without her father finding out that she hadn’t actually talked with Dr. Weir. Of course, she knew there wasn’t a way. Her father was insane like that. If she tried to back out of it, she knew he would ask her old instructor about their conversation and would find out there hadn’t been one.

She slipped inside quietly, knowing that it was entirely likely that people were sleeping. But when she got in, she found that there was only one officer in dress uniform still awake. He had opened his jacket and was in the process of taking off his tie when she got in.

“Hi,” Zoey said. “I was looking for Dr. Weir.”

“She’s asleep,” the man said, pointing at the dark-haired woman, curled up in a chair. He looked like he’d never heard of a comb or a razor, but he certainly looked good anyway. “I’d wake her, but she hasn’t slept for almost twenty-four hours.”

“Oh, that’s okay.” She smiled. “I guess I ought to introduce myself. I’m Zoey Bartlet.”

“Yeah,” he said, shaking the hand she’d offered. “John Sheppard.”

“You’re in the Air Force?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Are you a pilot?”

He nodded. “Mostly a helicopter pilot.”

“That’s pretty cool.” She stood there awkwardly for a minute. “Well, hey, it was nice to meet you, but you look pretty tired. I should probably go.”

“You look bored,” said the officer. “My bet is that there’s no one else on the plane who’s awake.”

“Well, there’s probably some reporters awake, but I try to avoid them.” She folded her arms across her stomach. “How long has it been since you slept?”

“About as long as it’s been since Dr. Weir slept. I don’t sleep well on airplanes, so I just stay awake until I can’t anymore.” He finally set his tie down on an end table. “How do you know Dr. Weir, Zoey?”

“I was in one of her classes at Georgetown,” she replied. “International Relations in the Twenty-
First Century. I was in way over my head in that one.”

John sat down in a chair and gestured vaguely for Zoey to join him. “What was she like as a teacher?”

She sat down in the empty chair next to him. “Evil,” she replied. “Pure evil. We had a paper due every week, mock negotiations, formal debates. It was awful.”

“You know, that doesn’t surprise me.”

“I think my Secret Service agents got more out of it than I did,” Zoey continued. “But she really knew her stuff. I guess that comes with being a UN diplomat.” She glanced over at the sleeping woman. “I don’t know if I would have recognized her, though.”

John frowned. “It wasn’t that long ago, was it?”

“No,” Zoey said, laughing a little. “She had blonde hair then. She looks really different with dark hair. But it looks nice.”

“So what did you get in the class?”

“A C.” Zoey smiled at him. “Dad was furious. Dr. Weir was the only teacher I had who gave me a C.”

John was staring at Dr. Weir as she slept. “Her dad was a Cabinet secretary,” he said. “Politicians don’t scare her much.”

“Of course not. She is one.”

“That’s true. And at the risk of being court-martialed or something,” he added, “I can’t really see Elizabeth giving you a grade you didn’t earn. Did you deserve an A?”

Zoey laughed. “No.”

He grinned. “Then don’t complain.”

“I’m not complaining!” she protested. “Just… stating fact.”

“Good.”

“So how do you know her?” she asked. “I mean, Dr. Weir’s position on the military is pretty well-known.”

“Yeah, well,” he said, “I’ve been accompanying her on some high-level negotiations.”

“Why? I thought you said you were a pilot.”

“There have been concerns that she doesn’t take military matters into consideration enough.” He shifted in his seat.

“John,” Zoey began. “Can I call you John?”

“Sure.”

“Okay, John,” she continued. “You know that you can just tell me it’s classified, right?”
He laughed and rolled his eyes. “No, really,” she insisted. “You’re a terrible liar.”

“Okay, so we didn’t have a cover story ready to go on this one,” he said. “We weren’t expecting the media, or the President’s daughter, for that matter.”

“Well, I’m speaking solely from experience with the press here,” she replied, “but you might want to find a better cover story.”

“Thanks for the safety tip.”

“You’re welcome.” Zoey stood up. “You probably ought to sleep. It’s a long flight.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, hey, maybe I can stop by later with a movie,” she suggested. “I brought a few along.”

“That’d be great.”

She headed to the door, but John stopped her. “Hey, Zoey?”

“Yeah?”

“Why’d you take the class?”

She rested her hand on the doorknob. “Dad wanted me to,” she said. “He said that Dr. Weir was a good role model for anyone.”

“Was she?”

He leaned over to look at her behind the chair. “Yeah,” she replied, nodding. “Yeah, she was.”

Elizabeth awoke some hours later, when it was bright outside and they were over water. By then the only person still in the cabin was John, who was sleeping on the other side of the room. She sat quietly for a while, reading material which had been brought for her and the others. It had been a long time since she’d had a chance to read a newspaper. It felt good to have that ink on her fingers.

John awoke with a start sometime later, though Elizabeth couldn’t discern what had woken him. “Bad dream?” she asked, turning a page in the paper.

“No, just a weird—” He looked at her suddenly. “No.”

He fell back against the seat and rubbed at his eyes. “How late were you up?” Elizabeth asked.

“The First Lady left after you fell asleep,” John replied. “Then Zoey Bartlet came in.”

“Zoey Bartlet came in?” she repeated. “Why?”

“To see her favorite teacher in the whole world.”

“Her father ordered her, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.” He yawned. “She’s a cute kid, though.”

“She’s also out of college, so she’s not exactly a kid.”

“Were you really a blonde once?”
Elizabeth set the newspaper aside. “Yes, before I took the post at the SGC,” she replied. “I’ve about decided that Colonel Carter didn’t like me because I looked too much like her.”

He stood up stiffly. “Colonel Carter didn’t like you because she’s a—”

“John.” Her tone drew his attention immediately. He clearly caught her meaning. What she didn’t say was that she was fairly certain she agreed with him, though his opinion of the colonel was derived almost entirely from Carter’s treatment of Elizabeth during their stay on Earth thus far.

He rubbed his jaw, which called Elizabeth’s attention to his rather pronounced five o’clock shadow. “Didn’t you shave yesterday?”

“Once.”

She looked at him oddly. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Well, apparently not,” he replied. “You think I need to shave again?”

“No, I think you needed to shave yesterday.”

He sighed and picked up his bag. “Come on,” he said, pulling her out of her chair and leading her by the hand out of the room.

He led her to one of the plane’s bathrooms, where he insisted that she stand there and watch him shave so she’d have proof that he’d actually done it. It was a very boring process, though John apparently amused himself by singing to himself. During the fourth rendition of the Scooby Doo theme, however, things got interesting. Had Elizabeth not seen Danny Concannon’s face in the mirror, she might have jumped three feet when he whispered, “Having fun, Liz?”

“It was more fun before you showed up, Danny,” she said smoothly.

“Come for a walk with me,” he replied, grabbing her by the arm and walking off with her.

They were a few feet from the bathroom before she spoke. “Aren’t you supposed to be confined to the press cabin?”

“The President wants me to do a piece on globalization. I just came from his office and saw you there with the good major.”

“What do you need from me?”

“Are you dating him?”

Elizabeth narrowed her eyes. “What is it about you? Is your brain wired differently so you ask idiotic questions like that?”

Danny took a step closer. “You were all chummy with him.”

“I’m all chummy with you right now,” she replied, “and I’m certainly not dating you.”

“I could fix that.”

“Danny, I have friends with guns.”

“Yeah, and that’s what I don’t get,” he said. “Why are you hanging around with an Air Force clown like him?”
“John Sheppard happens to be a highly gifted pilot,” Elizabeth said.

“And he’s part of the military establishment,” Danny replied. “You used to rail against the military, and don’t tell me you grew out of it. I was at the last lecture you gave. It wasn’t that long ago.”

“He’s not—”

“Don’t lie to me, Elizabeth,” he interrupted. “I know you better than this. The guy was in Antarctica! How much more establishment can you get?”

“Danny,” Elizabeth said, taking a deep breath, “you’re in way over your head on this one.”

“I’m a tall guy.”

“Not tall enough.”

“I never was tall enough for you, was I? I won a Pulitzer, Elizabeth. I broke Shareef.”

Elizabeth sighed. “What do you want from me, Danny?”

He paused. “You broke up with me when I stopped letting you straighten my ties.”

“I broke up with you because you used me,” she said. “It nearly cost me my career.”

“You can do better than this guy.”

“Danny, for the last time—”

“Elizabeth?”

She turned around, and to her great relief, John was standing there, in full uniform and cleanly shaved. “Is he bothering you?” he asked.

“No, we were just finishing up our little discussion,” she said, looking at Danny.

She walked away, with John at her side, his hand on the small of her back as they walked through a door. She looked over her shoulder and saw Danny where she’d left him, a wry smile on his face.

Sometime later, when it became apparent that reading newspapers was not going to soothe her, Elizabeth went for another walk. It was accompanied by a disapproving look from John, but she had to do something. This time, she steered clear of the press cabin.

Despite being a comfortable ride, Air Force One had only so much room in which to wander. A couple of times she passed the same group of people who were clearly drafting a speech for the President. The second time, the man standing in the middle with a stack of papers in his hand looked at her oddly.

That time, when she reached the end of her circuit, a door opened, and Abbey Bartlet stood on the other side. “Elizabeth,” she said, sounding surprised.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Abbey,” Elizabeth replied. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“Nonsense,” said Abbey. “Why don’t you come inside?” When Elizabeth wavered, the First Lady said, “Don’t worry. Reporters aren’t allowed back here. And Zoey’s hiding from you, I think.”
“I don’t see why,” Elizabeth said, stepping into the plane’s apartment.

“She’s afraid her father will make you give her a pop quiz or something.” Abbey gestured to a sofa. “I heard you had a bit of a problem with a reporter earlier.”

The diplomat didn’t ask how Abbey knew that, as she’d learned from years of lobbying and negotiating that news spread, and when it was a private disagreement like the one she’d had with Danny, it spread faster. “Danny Concannon wanted some answers,” she said.

“Really,” said Abbey, sitting at the other end. “You know, I remember you showing up to a few parties with him years ago.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said, wondering how—or why—the older woman remembered this stuff. “I lived with him for about three minutes. That was back when I was stupid.”

“Elizabeth, no one believes that you were ever stupid,” she replied. “After all, you did manage not to marry him.”

“There’s a reason why Danny’s still single, Abbey.”

Abbey smiled. “Is there a reason why you’re still single?”

“Why don’t you stick with marrying off your own daughters?”

“Jed won’t let me.”

“There’s a good chance my father wouldn’t let you either.”

Abbey smiled and stood, walking to a small table where a glass pitcher was situated. “Water?”

“Yes, please.”

A few moments later Abbey brought two glasses over and handed one to Elizabeth. “That officer with you is very cute,” she said, quite casually.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Abbey, with all due respect, you’re terrible.”

“Why shouldn’t I wonder?” Abbey asked. “An intelligent, attractive woman like you deserves to have a man at her beck and call.”

“John Sheppard would never succumb to that.”

“Have you seen the way he looks at you?”

Elizabeth sipped at her water. “You have no shame.”

“That’s what my daughters keep telling me. Of course, I tell them that I brought them into this world by the sweat of my brow, so I ought to get to embarrass them as much as possible.”

“But I’m not your daughter.”

“Technicality.” Abbey turned to face her. “Elizabeth, is it possible that you’re in command of some sort of military operation?”

She looked down at her glass. “I can’t divulge that information.”
“But you’re in charge of some military personnel?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Mostly Marines, and John.”

Abbey shook her head. “Must be quite a change for you.”

“Yes, it is,” Elizabeth replied. “I’m used to doublespeak. I’m used to deciphering messages that people can’t say for whatever reason. I’m used to people with agendas.” She shook her head. “These people aren’t like that.”

“Refreshing, isn’t it?”

She laughed softly. “Truthfully? It scared the hell out of me at first.”

“Oh, those were the days,” said Abbey. “You know, I miss being a doctor. I miss being able to say things and mean it most of the time. Is it as nice as I remember?”

Elizabeth smiled. “Yes, it really is.”

In one of Air Force One’s conference rooms, Sam Carter sat alone with General Hammond. It was dark in the room, lit only by small lights embedded in the ceiling above the tables. It was all a far cry from the SGC.

Hammond closed the folder before him. Sam had just finished briefing him on the state of the galaxy, as far as they, the Tok’ra, and the Jaffa knew. “Thank you, Colonel,” he said. “It’s always nice to hear about these things in person.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Of course, there’s another reason I asked Jack to send you to Washington,” he continued. “I want your opinion on the fitness of the Atlantis expedition.”

“Well, sir,” she said, “I haven’t been around them that much, but from the reports I’ve read, they’ve done a tremendous job under impossible circumstances.”

“A lot of lives have been lost.”

“I think a lot of lives would have been lost no matter the personnel.”

Hammond sat back in his chair. “Then you know what I’m getting at.”

“Dr. Weir’s ability to command?” Sam asked.

“Got it in one, Colonel.”

“I’m not sure which is the problem, sir,” she replied, “Dr. Weir or Major Sheppard.”

“You’re referring to the incident with the viral outbreak.”

“Yes, sir.” Sam nodded. “Neither one of them was right in that situation, though it seems that both got past whatever issues were going on then. Sheppard seems to have accepted her decisions, and Weir doesn’t seem quite so opposed to military options as all of us feared. These records of how she handled the siege are pretty extraordinary.”

“Do you think a new military commander for Atlantis is in order?” he asked.
“The threats aren’t as severe as they once were,” Sam replied. “And with so many civilians in the city, it would be difficult for them to accept a military commander. They trust Weir.”

“But Sheppard?”

“Sheppard’s a loose cannon, but Weir seems to know how to handle him.”

“Well, thanks again, Colonel,” Hammond said. “When we land, you and the Atlantis representatives will have a day or so to relax and readjust to local time, and then you’ll be meeting with myself and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. I look forward to your contributions there.”

“Thank you, sir.”
When Elizabeth finally came back from a very long conversation with Abbey Bartlet, they were already making their descent. She must have slept longer than she’d thought. She changed her clothes before she rejoined her team members. They were already assembled and ready for landing in the staff cabin, which had mysteriously held very few staff members during the duration of the flight.

“Oh, good, you’re here,” John said when she came in. “You missed Zoey Bartlet again.”

“I didn’t miss her the first time. You didn’t wake me.”

“It’s just as well. She didn’t really want to talk to you.”

“I figured as much.”

“She did bring a movie in, though,” Rodney added.

“Oh?”

“The Princess Bride,” John replied. “I hadn’t seen that since college.”

“It seemed a rather silly tale,” Teyla remarked.

“Well, it’s not supposed to be serious, Teyla,” said Elizabeth. “Except for a few things.”

Teyla looked unconvinced, so as the pilot announced over the intercom that they would be landing soon, Elizabeth took her seat next to John. “Is Zoey Bartlet as much of a flirt as I suspect she is?” she asked quietly.

“You mean, did she come here to flirt with me?”

She didn’t answer, so he smiled smugly before turning his attention to the window next to him. “How is it you always get a window seat?” she said.

“Well, normally I’d have the cockpit.”

“Not on this plane.”

For a while, no one spoke. Teyla looked a little sick as the plane hit a little turbulence over the city, but by the time they were nearing the runway, John started tapping on his window. “Oh, that is sweet.”

“Staring at girls?” McKay asked.

“No, this is awesome,” John said. “They’ve got Battlehawks down there.”

“They have what?” Teyla asked.

“Battlehawks. It’s this awesome helicopter. New version of the Blackhawk,” he said excitedly. “Bigger engine, more visibility, Hellfire missiles…”

“John, you’re going to drool all over the window.”
He turned and grinned. “Still not as much fun as a jumper.”

“Is anything?”

“Good question.”

Within a few minutes they had landed, and once they had gathered up their belongings, Donna Moss arrived at the staff cabin to escort them off the plane. “Still trying to keep us away from the press?” Elizabeth asked.


They filed out after the assistant and started down the stairs. Rodney, Carter, and Teyla walked behind. Elizabeth had a suspicion that there was going to be a picture of her coming down the stairs from Air Force One with an American pilot in the papers the next morning, but for now she didn’t really care.

“Aren’t you cold?” John asked as they neared the ground.

“Yes, actually.” She’d forgotten about the seasonal difference and put on a shirt with short sleeves.

“Here,” he said, swinging his bag down in front of him. From it he pulled a black jacket. “Put this on.”

He held her bag for her as she put on the soft fleece. “You’re never like this at work,” she said. “Does the uniform make you think you’re a gentleman?”

“And an officer.”

By then they were nearing the line of dignitaries waiting to meet the President, so Donna started to lead them off to the cars waiting for the staffers. But before they had broken away from the group, one of the Australians said, “Is that Elizabeth Weir?”

Elizabeth looked up at Donna who was rolling her eyes. “Go,” said the assistant. “There’s no avoiding them now.”

“I’ll come with you,” John said.

“No,” Donna interrupted. “You’ve already got one reporter wanting to know why you’re with Major Sheppard. The last thing we need is the entire Australian press corps wondering.”

John still held her bag. “Go,” he said. “I’ll take this to the car.”

The receiving line was torture, as she was situated behind CJ Cregg, who was being repeatedly complimented on her recent promotion to chief of staff. Then every last person in the group was suddenly stunned to see Elizabeth with the American dignitaries. If she had to hear how glad they were to see her and wasn’t it strange that she’d seemingly fallen off the face of the earth one more time, she was going to snap.

After Elizabeth had shaken hands with the Prime Minister and smiled for what she hoped was the last time in the hour, CJ touched her shoulder. “Dr. Weir, I’m going to need you to ride with the President.”

“Is something wrong?” Elizabeth asked.

“He’s got a crazy idea.”
An agent escorted her to the limousine, where she waited inside for the other two passengers. Within a minute and a half, Abbey and Josiah Bartlet got in the back seat. “Elizabeth,” the President said, “thanks for coming on such short notice.”

Elizabeth nodded with a smile. “I serve at the pleasure of the President.”

The nice thing about Presidential motorcades, John decided, was that there was no such thing as traffic. Sure, the people waiting for the motorcade to clear the streets were probably a little annoyed, but as he rode in a car with Donna Moss and two men named Ed and Larry (he had no idea which was which, and suspected it didn’t matter), he decided this wasn’t a bad way to travel.

“So where are we going?” he said to Donna.

“Darling Harbor,” she replied. “It’s about half an hour by foot from the Harbor Bridge and the Sydney Opera House. We’ll be staying at the Grand Mercure.”

“Is that near anything nerdy?” one of the men in the front asked.

Donna checked her notes. “It’s about a quarter of an inch from the Australian National Maritime Museum,” she said.

The man groaned. John turned to Donna, who explained, “The President enjoys places like that, and enjoys making others suffer in his pursuit of trivia.”

John decided not to contest that, but didn’t doubt it either. Instead, he watched the scenery of Sydney go by as they drove through the city to Darling Harbor. The hotel, a rather modern-looking building, was quite near the coastline. As they neared it, cars started veering away from the limousines and its escort vehicles. “Where are we going?” John asked.

“We’re going in a back entrance,” said one of the men. “The President is likely to have a rope line to walk, so they’re going to get us through the back to avoid the crowd.”

When the back half of the motorcade pulled up to the hotel, Donna jumped out of the car without a word as soon as the car was stopped. Everyone else got out at a much more reasonable pace. By the time they had all meandered into the back lobby, the blonde woman had returned with a fistful of keyless entry cards. “Okay, everyone,” she called, getting the group’s attention. “When I call your name, please come forward and get your room key. Remember all the usual rules and please don’t break anything.”

“Hey, Donna,” a staffer called, “are you in the pool for which direction the water in the toilets spins?”

“Same way it does in the Northern Hemisphere,” she replied, not looking up.

“You’re out of your mind.”

“No, you are,” McKay put in, from a few feet back. Everyone turned to look. “The Coriolis force only affects movement over extended periods of time or distances. Hurricanes rotate the other way, but the water in a toilet has nothing to do with the earth’s rotation.”

The man who’d originally asked Donna about the pool looked at McKay in disbelief. “How do you know that?”

“I’m a physicist,” McKay answered. “I’m with the Air Force research team.”
The staffer then turned to Donna. “How’d you know that?”

“I was on the trip to Chile last year,” she replied. While several people complained about wanting their money back, she called, “Kevin Massey!”

She ran through the list with practiced efficiency. When people asked where their rooms were, she told them that they were all in the building. Since the Atlantis team members were the last to be added to the trip, they were last in the group of keys to be given out. Donna handed keys to McKay, Teyla, and Carter, and when she was left alone with John, he said, “I’ll take Dr. Weir’s key to her. I’ve got her bag anyway.”

“Good,” said Donna, “because it’s the same key.”

“What?”

“The hotel has suites with multiple bedrooms. You’ve been put in the same suite,” Donna didn’t offer him the cards. “I’ll get it taken care of.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” John replied, taking the keys out of her hand. “We’ve been living across the hall from each other for a year. I think we can handle a few days in the same suite.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Thanks for the offer, though.”

John started to walk off, but Donna called after him. “Mrs. Bartlet wants you to come on the shopping trip,” she said. “We’re leaving at three.”

“What time is it now?”

“Eleven.”

Four hours. That might be just enough time to get some real sleep. “Okay, thanks, Donna,” he said. By then Donna had started toward the car, and John suspected she didn’t hear him.

The suite was on the fifth floor, and to John’s surprise Elizabeth was waiting at the elevator. “How was the ride in?” he asked.

“Strange.” She took her bag from him without asking. “You don’t by any chance have my key, do you?”

“Yep,” he said. “We’re both on the fifth floor.”

“Convenient.”

“I thought so.” The elevator doors opened, and they stepped inside. “So where’s the rest of our luggage?”

“The advance man said they’re bringing it up to the rooms now.”

The elevator rose slowly, and John glanced up at the ceiling. “What did the President want?”

“The US ambassador to the Philippines couldn’t make it to the conference,” she said, her eyes locked on the doors.

“And that has what to do with you?”
“He was supposed to be on a panel during the conference.” The doors opened, and they stepped out of the elevator. “It’s a session on Western involvement in developing nations. The President wants me to fill in.”

“ Doesn’t sound too bad.” He led her to the left.

“A year ago I could have done it at the drop of a hat,” Elizabeth said, “but I’ve been a little out of the loop. I’m going to have to do some serious work to be prepared in time.”

“When’s the panel?”

“Fourth day,” she replied. “That’s not much time to catch up on as much as I need.”

“You’ve been known to read a hundred pages in an hour and be able to talk about the material fluently at the end.”

“Yeah, but that was all in English.”

John blinked. One of these days he was going to learn Russian so he could understand her when she started muttering. But for now he was just going to settle for being slightly disturbed by the fact that she would bother reading things in other languages to prepare for a panel discussion.

They turned another corner, and there at the end was the suite. “Is this my room?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yes.” John took out a key and handed it to her. He pulled out his own card and unlocked the door.

“Why do you have two keys for the room?”

“Because,” he said, opening the door, “it’s apparently my room too.”

“What?”

John hit the light switch and held the door open for her. “It’s a two-bedroom suite,” he explained as she came through. “Apparently we got stuck in the same one. I told Donna it wasn’t really an issue.”

The door closed. “Yes, well, as long as McKay doesn’t tell everyone back in Atlantis.”

“Won’t be any worse than the rumors going around already. Did you hear the latest?”

“In the control chair?” He nodded, and she smiled a little. “You used to get so mad about those.”

He still did occasionally, but he didn’t refute her. The whole conversation was a little awkward for him, as it always was. He’d heard all kinds of rumors about various locations in the city (some he’d never been in), and it all made him somewhat uncomfortable. He wasn’t sure how she could be so amused by it.

They stepped into the room and John finally looked around. Traveling with the President certainly had its perks. This place was nice. Spacious, well-lit, and well-furnished, it was a major upgrade from any place he’d lived in in the last two or three years.

The bedrooms were on either side of the sitting room. “Right or left?”

“Right.”
Half an hour later, their luggage arrived, at which point John remembered to tell her that the shopping expedition with the First Lady was scheduled for that afternoon. Elizabeth excused herself to her room, where she proceeded to unpack her clothes. She hoped that whatever she bought on this excursion would fit in her suitcase.

John knocked on the open door after a while. “Do you need something?” she asked, not looking up.

“You’re still unpacking?”

“Yes.” She looked up at him as she refolded a shirt. He had changed into civilian clothes. “What did you do, dump it all out on your bed?”

“No, I dumped it all out in a drawer,” he said. “I can demonstrate.”

“No, thank you,” she replied. “I can handle this.”

She smiled for him as she grabbed a bag of makeup to take to the bathroom. When she returned, he was standing over her suitcase. “John?”

He turned, and Elizabeth saw what he was looking at. Dangling from his index finger was the top of a red bikini. He glanced several times between it and her, and she knew what he was thinking. When she could take the silence no more, she took it away from him, scooped up the bottom half from the suitcase, and stuck it in a drawer. “Stop looking at me that way,” she said. “It’s not like you’ve never seen a woman in a bikini before.”

“Yeah, but I’ve barely seen your shoulders, let alone–”

He stopped when she looked at him, one eyebrow raised. “Why don’t you go down to the pool and stare at girls in bikinis there?” she asked.

“I like the view here.”

Elizabeth stopped for a moment and stared. That wasn’t quite what she was expecting him to say. He smiled nervously. “From the balcony,” he added, waving toward the glass door.

“Right,” she replied, a smile slowly forming. She knew he was covering himself, but didn’t contest it.

John moved the suitcase over and lay down on her bed. “So, how long is this going to take you?” he asked.

“A while,” she said. “Why do you ask?”

“I wanted to go explore the hotel before Mrs. Bartlet takes us shopping.”

“Us?”

“Yeah, she wants me around too.”

“She thinks you’re cute.” He looked at her sharply, so she continued, “She told me on the plane.”

“Elizabeth,” John said, sitting up. “please tell me the First Lady’s not hitting on me.”

“She’s not hitting on you,” she replied. “She wants you to carry bags.”

“Great.”
There was a knock at the door, and John got off the bed by rolling off it. He hit the floor with a thud. “Oww. Shouldn’t have done that.”

“John, get the door.”

He left the room, and Elizabeth heard him talking with a woman outside. Then he came back in and took the jeans out of her hands. “Shopping got moved up,” he said. “Come on.”

He barely gave her enough time to grab her purse before dragging her out of the room.
There were people who called Danny Concannon obsessive. Danny thought that was synonymous with “reporter.” Right now, the object of his obsession was an ex-girlfriend. There were also people who would call that stalking, except it wasn’t about Liz Weir (and oh, how she’d hated that name). It was about Dr. Elizabeth Weir, not the woman he’d dated, but the diplomat who had charmed the world.

Things just weren’t making sense anymore. One day Danny woke up and wondered why he hadn’t heard anything about her in months, and the next day she was boarding a plane with a military research team. Most people would think nothing of it, but not Danny. He knew better. He knew her better.

So an hour after the landing in Sydney, he was still thinking about it. It wasn’t long before he picked up his phone and called a source at the Pentagon and mentioned a sidebar he was doing on a Major John Sheppard.

CJ stood outside the President and First Lady’s suite, waiting to be answered. To her surprise, it was Abbey who opened the door. “CJ,” the woman said. “Jed was expecting you.”

“Yes, ma’am,” CJ replied. “Can the President speak with me for a moment?”

“Abbay, what did you do with my glasses?” the President suddenly yelled from somewhere within the suite.

“They’re in your jacket,” she called.

“Well, what half-brained twit put them in there?”

He stepped into the room, and Abbey turned a smile to him. “You did, Jed.”

Wisely, Bartlet ignored her. “CJ,” he said. “Thought you might be stopping by.”

Abbey picked up her coat and put it on. “I’m going to head out now to do a little shopping with Dr. Weir and that nomad,” she said. “There’s a dinner we’re supposed to be at tonight, so I had Donna move it up.”

“Shopping or dinner?”

Abbey rolled her eyes, but left without another word. When the door closed, the President took a seat. “You want to talk me out of having Dr. Weir speak at the panel,” he said.

“I would like you to at least listen to another point of view, sir.”

“Think about it, CJ,” Bartlet said. “A renowned diplomat with such a tremendous body of writing, speaking, and negotiating. And she’s literally traveled among the stars, seen and done things we can only dream of. Think about it, CJ. She’s touched the face of God.”

“Mr. President,” she replied, “I have no doubt that she has an amazing story to tell, and someday she will. But I don’t think it’s the best idea to give her a podium right now.”

“She won’t have a podium,” he countered. “She’ll be at a table with six other people.”
“Sir…”

“I know what you mean, CJ.” He put on his glasses. “Do you not think that she can handle it?”

“I’m confident in her speaking abilities, sir. She’ll have a considerable amount of news to catch up on, but I’m sure she can handle that.”

“She taught college, you know,” the President continued. “Surely she can put up with diplomats for an hour.”

CJ smiled. “Are you sure that shouldn’t be the other way around?”

“You’re probably right.”

“Yes, sir.” She let out a long breath. “You realize this is a story, right?”

“Why?”

“Well, Dr. Weir is recognizable,” she replied. “Her lectures have regularly made news. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard her quoted on Capital Gang.”

“Usually Bob Novak saying she’s too young to know what she’s doing.”

“Still, sir, she’s as close to a household name as you get when you’re a diplomat,” said CJ. “She’s been out of the news cycle for a year now, and suddenly she’s available to fill in on a panel at the last minute? Mark Gottfried is going to eat that up, and he doesn’t usually care that much about international politics.”

“Being press secretary really made you paranoid, didn’t it?” the President asked.

“Only a little, sir.”

He sighed. “CJ, someday she’s going to come home,” he said. “The program will be public, and everyone will know what this peaceful diplomat from Iowa did for not only her country, but for her world, her galaxy, and a galaxy that wasn’t hers. And when that happens, she’s going to be a major player in the party, in the country—in the world, for that matter.”

“And you want to make sure people don’t forget her.”

“Exactly.”

She nodded. “I’ll let the press know that she’ll be on the panel.”

“Thanks, CJ.”

John never had the pleasure of shopping with a teenaged sister, and had always managed to sweet-talk his way out of shopping with girlfriends, so shopping with three grown women was an experience as frightening as it was new. Once or twice he caught a sympathetic glance from the Secret Service agents, when they weren’t busy making sure the store was secure.

While John had no real objection to watching pretty women go through the rituals of admiring each other, he was going to run screaming from the store if he was asked one more time if something was flattering or not. Elizabeth knew that, he was sure, and was only doing this to torture him for the bikini remark earlier.
He was standing guard over a small mountain of purchases while she was in the dressing room when the First Lady came over. “You’re not looking to buy today?” she asked, smiling.

“I think I packed pretty much anything I need,” he said.

“Yes, I was wondering why you had long-sleeved shirts at all, coming to Washington.”

“Yeah, I wear them to cover up the tattoos.”

Mrs. Bartlet looked intrigued. “Roll up your sleeves,” she said. “I want to see.”

“I was kidding, ma’am,” he replied. “I don’t have any tattoos on my arms.”

This, unfortunately, was not enough. She raised a brow and asked, “Do you have any elsewhere, Major?”

“If I did, I wouldn’t be likely to tell you.”

Elizabeth came out of the dressing room just in time to hear that. “If you did what?” she asked.

John had no intention of telling Elizabeth, so naturally the First Lady did for him. “If he has a tattoo.”

She gave him that look of disbelief with which he was so familiar, but it was tempered this time by a light of amusement in her eyes. “Do you?” she asked.

“Like I’m telling you,” he replied. “You buying anything?”

“Yes, actually.” She held up a stack of shirts and sweaters. “This should keep me warm for a week.”

“I should hope so,” said John. “Can I have my jacket back?”

“No.”

Before John could try to forcibly remove it from her, Donna, who had stepped out to take a call, returned. “Excuse me, Mrs. Bartlet,” she said.

“It’s all right,” the First Lady replied. “I’m going to check on Teyla.”

She departed, and Donna turned her attention to John and Elizabeth. “Doctor Weir,” she said, “I was just on the phone with CJ.”

“Is something wrong?” Elizabeth asked.

“No,” said the assistant, “but you and your team have been invited to the dinner at the close of the conference.”

“Which would involve,” John prompted.

“It’s a formal event, equivalent to a state dinner in the White House,” Donna replied. “In the event that you accept the invitation, we’ve sent for a mess dress uniform for you, Major Sheppard. But Dr. McKay would need a tuxedo, and you and Miss Emmagan would need gowns.”

“Mess dress and more shopping?” he asked, while Elizabeth was digging around in her purse.
“Hold this,” she said, shoving the pile of clothes at him, not giving him a choice.

By the time John had gotten it all balanced properly, Elizabeth had her wallet open and was pulling out a credit card. “What is it?” he asked.

She shook her head, smiling tightly. “My credit card expired four months ago.”

“Four months ago?” Donna asked, looking at Elizabeth oddly.

“That could be a problem,” John remarked.

The blonde woman opened her notebook. “No, it’s not,” she said. “The President is covering all your expenses, including this. Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you sure?” said Elizabeth, putting her wallet back in her purse.

“Yes, it won’t be a problem,” the assistant replied, flashing a credit card at them.

“Well, let’s get this started,” Elizabeth said, taking the clothes back from John and heading toward a register.

Sam Seaborn knew that people hadn’t gotten much sleep on the flight, but he didn’t care anymore. There was speechwriting to be done, and he’d always found that near-comatose was the perfect state in which to write major addresses.

At least, that was what he told himself.

Draft three was in his hands, and when he set it on the table, half a dozen people were watching him expectantly, like he was some kind of god brought down to the stage in a Greek tragedy, there to magically make everything right. He really was going to kill Toby, and that would make things right, but first he had to finish the first major address he’d written in a couple years.

His eyes rested on the youngest in the room, an assistant named Winifred Hooper. “What do you think?” he asked her.

He watched as she paused for thought, and the whole room braced for impact, knowing what it was like when she issued an opinion, like a Justice on the bench. “I think it’s crap,” she said. Those four words could, with a little less coffee and a little less sleep, reduce the other five to tears.

“Yeah,” Sam said. “And you know why? Because it is crap.” With bigger motions than were really necessary, he ripped the draft in half. “Guess what, folks? Time to start over.”

He scribbled a sentence down and handed it to Winifred. “Work up an introduction starting with that sentence. Use more than five adverbs and you’re all fired.”

He stood and left, pushing open both doors to the conference room as he exited. There was nowhere in this hotel where he could think clearly, so he wandered, pondering Eliot and Thomas, maybe even Wordsworth and Blake. There had to be inspiration to be found somewhere in Australia.

Sam wended his way through doors and halls, until the smell of chlorine pervaded and he knew he was near the pool. He’d never found anything particularly uninspiring about women in pools, so he took off his jacket and headed in. Unfortunately, the room was mostly deserted, with the exception of some children playing with a man in the shallow end, and a blonde woman curled up in a deck
chair nearby, reading a book.

“Hey, you look familiar,” he said, swinging his jacket over his shoulder and walking over to her slowly.

The woman looked up from her book for a moment. “We met on the plane.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sam said. “I was trying to be—I don’t know, cute, or something.”

She smiled just a little. “You don’t remember my name, do you?”

“Haven’t got a clue.”

She closed her book and held out her hand. “Sam Carter.”

“Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force,” he finished. “How could I forget a name like that?”

“I don’t know,” she said. She didn’t object when he took the unoccupied chair next to hers. “I thought politicians were supposed to be good with names.”

“We’re not, really,” he replied. “We have aides who are good with names.” She started laughing, and Sam smiled. “No, really,” he continued. “Only I guess I couldn’t find any good aides, so that must be why I lost in the California forty-seventh.”

“I thought you lost in the forty-seventh because you were a Democrat with a pulse in Orange County.”

“You follow politics?”

“Only as far as the television in the rec room.”

He laughed a little. “So what are you doing out here?”

“Trying to stay awake and catch up on some reading,” she replied, holding up her book.

“Quantum Theory and the Digital Revolution,” he read. “I thought you were into deep space radar telemetry.”

She smiled coyly. “This is a hobby.”

“Quite a hobby, then,” Sam replied, watching the kids in the pool trying to dunk the adult under the water. They weren’t being terribly successful, but they seemed to be having fun. Then he frowned. “You know, there’s something I don’t quite get about this.”

“What’s that?”

“You have a doctorate in astrophysics,” he said. “So does Dr. McKay. I can understand why you’re on this research team.”

The woman stiffened. It wasn’t much, but Sam was a politician—he noticed things like that. “So two astrophysicists on the team makes sense. I can almost understand the decorated combat pilot, because his bio seemed to indicate that he’s a pretty smart guy, and they say you have to be to fly planes. Not that I’m complaining about that either.”

“What are you getting at?” she asked.
“A nomad and a diplomat on an Air Force research team?” he said. “Maybe it’s just because I’ve had a little bit of experience with this, but that just screams cover story to me.”

She shook her head. “I’m an astrophysicist,” she replied. “I work for NORAD.”

Sam smiled and stood. “Well, I’ve got to get back to harassing my staff,” he said abruptly. “Nice talking to you again.”

She was definitely covering something, but Sam couldn’t press it now. As he walked back to the conference room, he tried to push it from his mind, and when he came through the double doors, he said, “Okay, show me what you’ve got.”

It was the middle of the night when the phone in Danny’s room rang. He answered it groggly, but the person on the other end was persistent. Within a few minutes, he realized that this was his Pentagon source.

“Hang on,” he said, groping for his notepad and a pen. Once he had it and was sitting up, he asked, “What have you got on Sheppard?”
Morning brought with it the first of what was likely to be a long series of meetings with Generals Hammond and Alexander. Not wanting to wander around a hotel packed with tourists from a wide variety of countries while in conspicuous dress uniform, John waited in the room for Elizabeth to be ready to go down. Somehow, her confidence made him less awkward about this whole trip.

She appeared in the sitting room dressed in a conservative black suit, with a silky red blouse under the jacket. For the first time in his memory, she was putting on earrings. “John,” she said, “could you get my shoes? They’re next to my suitcase.”

He nodded, setting his cap down and entering her room to retrieve her shoes. As he picked them up, he wondered when they’d turned into a weird version of his parents. There were a lot of things that were just wrong about that. Not that he had anything against Elizabeth, or his parents, for that matter. No, Elizabeth was quite attractive, but she was also in a position of power over him, and that just wasn’t working for him. Except…

No. He was not going to start thinking about her that way. That way lay madness.

John grabbed the shoes and came back into the sitting room, where Elizabeth waited barefoot. “Thank you,” she said, taking them and dropping them to the floor. They made her a good two inches taller, which was a little unsettling for John, used to finding her eyes at a certain angle from his.

“Ready?” she asked.

He picked up his hat. “You’re the boss.”

She took a deep breath and smiled. Clearly, she was a little nervous about this. Attempting to put her at ease, he smiled back and opened the door for her. As they walked to the elevator, the only sound was the clicking of her heels.

They stood waiting for the lift when John decided he couldn’t take the silence any longer. “What’s with the briefcase?” he asked.

“Mission reports,” she said. “Files on the city. Anything I thought might be useful.”

“Worried?”

“I’ve met with General Hammond before,” she replied, “but I’m expecting a rather vigorous cross-examination today.”

“You sound like a lawyer.”

“That shouldn’t be surprising,” she said, “since I am a lawyer.”

The elevator doors opened, and John frowned at her as they stepped inside. “I’m not sure I can be friends with you anymore.”

“It’s not like I’ve ever been a trial lawyer, John.” Elizabeth looked highly amused. “I’m a diplomat, and that usually requires some understanding of international law.”

“Where’d you go, Harvard?”
“Yale. For law school, at least.”

The elevator descended, and Elizabeth clasped her hands behind her back. “What’s with the hat?” she asked.

“Part of the uniform,” he said. “Not allowed to wear it inside, but I am required to have it with me.”

“Seems a little silly.”

“Hey, I don’t make the rules.”

“You don’t often follow them, either.”

“Hey!” He gave her his best look of mock indignance. “I’m getting better.”

“Marginally.” They arrived at the first floor and exited the elevator car. “Let’s find the conference room, shall we?”

“After you.”

It took ten minutes and a trip to the information desk (at her insistence) to find the place, but eventually they did. John opened the door for Elizabeth, and they headed in. The two generals and Colonel Carter were already inside. “Dr. Weir,” said General Hammond, “it’s good of you to join us. Major Sheppard, come on in.”

Elizabeth walked forward and shook his hand. “It’s good to see you, sir,” she replied.

“I don’t think you know General Alexander, do you?”

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Then allow me,” said Hammond. “Doctor, this is General Nicholas Alexander. General, Dr. Elizabeth Weir.”

“Yes, I think I’d recognize the good doctor just about anywhere,” said the Army general. “Anyone who’s paid attention to international politics in the last few years knows that face.

Elizabeth smiled as she shook Alexander’s hand, and John was momentarily amazed at this side of her. He’d seen her order men to defend a city no matter the cost, but somehow it had never occurred to him that she could be charming and politically graceful with these two men. She pulled him into the circle soon enough, however, and they all took their seats around the table.

“Well, ladies and gentlemen,” said Alexander, “let’s get started.”

Somewhere in the middle of his breakfast, that blonde woman ran up to Rodney and told him that the President had requested that he join the group going across the street to the Australian National Maritime Museum. Ordinarily, he would have escaped to a lab, but even as a Canadian, he knew one didn’t turn down a Presidential request. And to be perfectly honest, one didn’t turn down a pretty blonde like Donna Moss.

So there he was, wearing a light jacket in the high winter sun on the deck of the H. M. A. S. Vampire, docked at the wharf of the museum. Teyla stood over by the railing, staring out at Darling Harbour while Donna was talking with her. She was pretty uncommunicative, but Donna didn’t seem to mind.
“So what’s it like being a nomadic trader?” Donna was asking.

“It is very different from the lives you and your friends lead,” Teyla replied.

“Do you meet interesting men?”

Rodney didn’t want to listen to the rest, so it was just as well that a complete stranger walked up to him and introduced himself.

“Sam Seaborn,” said the stranger.

“Rodney McKay,” he replied, shaking the offered hand.

“Ah, doctorate of astrophysics.”

“How did you know that?”

Seaborn blinked. “Doesn’t matter. You’re with the Air Force research team?”

“How did you know that?”

“I read a lot.”

“Oh.”

They stood in silence for a minute, and Rodney wondered just how much longer he was going to be expected to stay on the deck of the ship. “So you must know Colonel Carter pretty well,” Seaborn suddenly said.

It took Rodney all of three seconds to figure out what Seaborn was after, which was impressive speed for a man of his limited social skills. “Colonel Carter?” he said. “Oh yeah. She and I, uh, we go way back.”

“You’re a smart guy,” Sam continued. “I’ll cut to the chase. Do you think a guy like me might have a chance with her?”

Rodney opened his mouth to mention either General O’Neill or that weirdo he’d heard rumors about, but what came out of his mouth was: “Well, under other circumstances…”

Sheppard really was a diabolical influence.

“So you’re saying,” Seaborn began.

“Yeah, pretty much.”

The man started laughing nervously as he spoke. “Well, I’m not really one to judge,” he said, “but man, I never would have figured she’d go for a guy like you.”

“I’m a scientist, she’s a scientist,” Rodney continued. “It’s a very intellectual relationship.”

“I’ll bet.”

Oh yes. Carter was going to kill him.

An awkward silence passed, and Seaborn said, “Well, the President actually sent me to find you because he wants to know something about nuclear submarines.”
“Nuclear submarines?” Rodney repeated. “That’s not exactly my area.”

“You know, I think he knows that.”

The room was getting hot and stuffy, or maybe it was just that John despised wearing ties. Elizabeth didn’t seem too uncomfortable, but that suit didn’t look nearly as warm as his uniform was.

Across the table from where John was trying not to squirm, General Hammond closed a file. “Let’s move on to what kinds of personnel and supplies the two of you feel the expedition needs now,” he said.

“Well, I’m sure you can both come to the conclusion that we’re in need of medical supplies,” Elizabeth began. “But Dr. Beckett did intimate to me that he could use more people on the medical staff. Specifically, he’d like some medics to handle the light stuff and triage so he can have his doctors and nurses free to take care of the big things.”

General Alexander nodded. “I’m sure we can arrange that,” he said. “We do have plans to expand the expedition’s roster considerably, and we’ll be taking your suggestions into consideration when the new military personnel are selected.”

“Well, I make it a point never to argue with someone named after half the Russian tsars, so that’s good news.” Elizabeth smiled at Alexander and turned to John. “Major, I believe you had some thoughts.”

He leaned forward, looking at her a moment longer. “We could use some more pilots,” he said. “We’ve got people who have the ATA gene flying puddle jumpers, but I know I’d feel more comfortable if more of the people flying them had flown other things before. They’re not magic machines, and I get the feeling sometimes that the people who aren’t pilots think they are.”

“I’m glad you suggested that,” Hammond replied. “We have quite a few F-302 pilots who’d like to join the expedition.”

“That’s good to hear,” said John. “Doctor, did you bring Beckett’s notes on gene compatibility?”

“Yes, and I believe both the generals have it,” she said. “We can’t do the gene therapy on Earth because of FDA regulations, but now that we know how to screen for people who can get it effectively, that should enable us to be a little more selective about which pilots are chosen to come.”

“You know,” John added, “I think just about everyone back in Atlantis would kill for a few good sump pumps. There’s nothing more annoying than having to wait for water to drain out of the city when it floods.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I was getting to that, Major.”

“We understand that there has been some significant structural damage to the city in the various incidents over the last few months,” Alexander replied. “We’ve got a couple structural engineers at Stargate Command who are eager to tackle Atlantis.”

“Well, that’s good to hear,” said John. “Maybe they can fix that leak in your room, Doctor.”

An odd look passed between the two generals, but they said nothing. Elizabeth looked briefly at her notes. “Generals, I’d like to take this opportunity to extend the thanks of each and every
member of my team for the care and consideration you’re taking at this time to lighten our load.”

“At this point, I’d say it’s the least we can do for you and your people, Doctor,” Hammond said.

“However,” Alexander interjected, “there have been concerns.”

“Concerns?” Elizabeth repeated. “Of what nature?”

“We’ve had reports about your leadership,” the Chairman continued, “from a scientist under your command by the name of Kavanaugh.”

John sat back in his chair and made a sound of disgust. Elizabeth took it much more calmly. “Sirs, I would like to direct you to the report—”

“Why don’t you let us do the directing now, Doctor?” Alexander said. John looked at Hammond. He didn’t look very happy.

Elizabeth let out a slow breath. “Certainly, General.”

It was lunchtime before CJ felt like she had time to breathe. While the President had been off on his nerd expedition, she had been tracking down all kinds of research for Dr. Weir. It turned out that catching up on a year’s worth of world events was more difficult than imagined, and she had imagined quite a lot. It didn’t help that Weir had requested newspapers that weren’t in English.

So she was waiting in the lobby with a rather heavy box at her feet when the President returned to the hotel for lunch before attending the first closed session of the conference. “Mr. President,” she said, “did you have a nice time?”

“I did, CJ,” he replied. “There was a fascinating exhibit on aboriginal maritime cultures. You should have come.”

“Well, I’m sorry I missed out.” She didn’t follow Bartlet, as would have been customary, but waited to grab Donna out of the line. “Donna,” she said, “I have to go with the President, as I’m sure he wants to tell me all about the museum.”

“Uh huh.”

“So I need you to take this stuff up to Dr. Weir’s room.” She pointed at the box.

“What is it?”

“There’s a laptop, along with several non-English newspapers. She wants it to prep for the panel she’s sitting on.”

“Okay.” Donna picked the box up with a grunt. “Jeez, could this be any heavier?”

“Oh, I forgot.” CJ tossed a folder on top, and Donna staggered a little. “There you go.”

“Thanks.”

CJ headed off to catch up with the President’s entourage. They were in the dining room already, and Bartlet waved her over. “CJ, hurry up,” he called. “You don’t want to miss the quiche.”

She came to the table and sat next to Zoey. “So how was the museum?”
“Dad enjoyed it,” said the young woman. CJ smiled, fairly certain she knew what that was code for.

“Wish you could have been there,” Abbey commented. “Why didn’t you come?”

“Dr. Weir wanted me to track down some information for her,” CJ replied. “She didn’t have time to do her own research for this panel, not with her meetings with Hammond and Alexander today.”

“You still think it’s a bad idea,” the President said.

“It’s going to be a tight squeeze.”

Debbie walked up to the table then, and Abbey said, “Debbie, won’t you join us?”

“No, thank you, ma’am,” the secretary replied. “Sir, Prime Minister Wright has invited you to join him and his wife at the opera tonight.”

“What’s the opera?”

“Turandot,” said Debbie.

“Excellent! I haven’t seen that one in years.” He finally started into his soup. “Did I have anything scheduled tonight?”

“You had asked me to invite Dr. Weir in so you could beat her at chess.”

“Nah, I can do that some other time.”

“I’ll let her know.”

“Thanks, Debbie.”

Debbie nodded and walked off. The President turned his attention back to CJ. “Let me tell you all about what you missed,” he said.

“You don’t think you should be talking about the subject for the session this afternoon?”

“I can talk about economic development any day of the week, CJ,” he replied. “Right now I want to talk about ancient mariners, so eat your soup and let me talk.”

“Yes, sir.”

Elizabeth let out a long breath once Alexander had finished reading a transcript of Kavanaugh’s message to Earth. She was keeping her composure remarkably well, John thought, though he noticed that she was tapping her heel on the floor, something she did when she was losing her patience with him.

“I’m not sure where to start with this, Doctor,” General Alexander said. “Disregard of the Geneva Convention, perhaps?”

“Hang on,” John started.

Elizabeth touched the table in front of him. “Major—”

“No, hang on,” he said. “She didn’t disregard the Geneva Convention. When the suggestion was
brought to her, that was her first concern.”

“A concern that evidently didn’t last long.”

“I don’t think you fully understand the situation, General,” she said calmly. “Eventually that Wraith was going to starve to death. It’s not as though we could feed him.”

“So you authorized medical tests on it.”

“You haven’t seen how desperate things have been,” she replied, meeting his gaze evenly. “We are faced with an enemy almost impossible to kill by conventional means. We had an opportunity to help a civilization develop an inoculation that would prevent the Wraith from feeding on humans. You can’t tell me the United States military has never developed and tested weapons as unscrupulous, and you’ve never confronted an enemy like this.”

She glanced at John. “Do you think I made that decision lightly, or made it alone?” she asked. “The Geneva Convention is how we as a world decided who we are and what we stand for. My humanity is not something I would discard were this threat not as powerful and as imminent as it is.”

Hammond turned to the fifth person in the room, who had said nothing so far in the meeting. “Colonel Carter,” he said, “you’ve been unusually quiet.”

“There’s not much I can comment on with any fluency, General,” she replied. “I’ve read the reports, but Doctor Weir and Major Sheppard are really the ones who know the situation.”

“Do you have an opinion?” General Alexander asked.

Carter looked down at the notes she’d been taking. “I think they did the right thing, sir,” she replied. “From what I understand, these Wraith can’t live without feeding on humans. I don’t think that rules we developed here on Earth for dealing with each other can apply.”

The Chairman leaned forward. “You once had Apophis himself in the SGC,” he said. “He asked for sanctuary and you gave it to him. How is this situation any different?”

“In that case there was a human host to consider, who was no more than an innocent bystander.”

Carter looked up at Elizabeth. “Dr. Weir did the right thing.”

Alexander didn’t reply to that, but instead turned his attention back to Kavanaugh’s report. “Sir,” John said, “may I say something?”

“What is it, son?” Hammond asked.

“Kavanaugh’s not exactly a reliable source,” he replied. “He thought he’d been embarrassed in front of people who were working under him, and he’s been a pain in the—” He stopped suddenly when Elizabeth cleared her throat. “He’s been unpleasant ever since. He’s got an ax to grind. That doesn’t usually make someone credible, does it?”

“Major,” said Alexander, “I’m not sure you have a leg to stand on when it comes to credibility, not with your record.”

“Sir,” Carter interrupted, “I worked with Kavanaugh when he was at the SGC. He’s an arrogant SOB, which doesn’t make him much different than a lot of scientists, but Major Sheppard is right. He’s vindictive.”
“Still, it’s only because of Kavanaugh that we know of Sheppard’s latest insubordination,” General Alexander continued. “I noticed that Dr. Weir failed to mention it in her report following the virus outbreak a few months ago.”

John looked at her sharply. He’d had no idea that Elizabeth hadn’t reported that. To her credit, she kept her gaze firmly on the Army general. “With all due respect, General, I felt that issue could be better resolved between ourselves instead of dragging in a military tribunal,” she said.

“Whether that’s true or not,” said Alexander, “you left something out of a report, and that leads us to wonder if there are other things you’ve left out.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I think what General Alexander is getting at is that there’s concern you’ve gotten too close with these people,” Hammond said. “I don’t mean any one person specifically, but that this situation has led you to get too attached.”

Elizabeth almost smiled. “How is that a bad thing?” she asked. “How is it a bad thing to like the people you’re fighting to protect?”

“We come from different backgrounds, Doctor,” Alexander replied. “In the military we have regulations about fraternization. You have to be able to make decisions for the good of the whole, and most people can’t make those decisions if they’re attached to the people who might be hurt by them.”

John watched her grow a little paler, and he knew what she was thinking. There were so many good men and women who would never grow old now, and so many more who had nearly been in that number. Including himself, on more than one occasion. “General,” he said quietly, “I can assure you that that hasn’t been a problem.”

There was a long silence, in which John locked his gaze on General Alexander. The older man seemed no more likely to back down than he. Finally, Hammond intervened. “Ladies, gentlemen,” he said, “we’ve been at this a long time. If General Alexander will agree to it, I’d like to resume this in the morning. General?”

Alexander nodded, and the two generals left the room without another word. Carter stood and gathered her notes, and Elizabeth folded her hands on the tabletop. “Colonel Carter,” she said, “I thought you didn’t like me.”

The blonde woman stopped what she was doing for a moment and looked at Elizabeth. “I don’t,” she said. “I spent a few years in Washington, working with lobbyists and politicians. I never met one who didn’t have an agenda.”

“Would you believe me if I said I don’t?”

“Not particularly.” Carter walked around the table. “I don’t like you, Doctor, and I don’t trust you. But I have to respect that you’ve done the best job anyone could do under impossible circumstances.”

She headed toward the door, and Elizabeth stood. “We’re not that different, Colonel,” she said. Carter stopped, and Elizabeth looked over her shoulder. “We both want what’s best for the people of this world. We’re both fiercely devoted to those we serve with.”

Carter smiled and shook her head. “That doesn’t mean I have to like you.”
“No,” said Elizabeth, “I suppose it doesn’t.”

Carter left, and Elizabeth looked back at John. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?” he asked, getting to his feet.

“Coming to my rescue there.” She had a wry hint of a smile on her face.

“Well, it was the least I could do.” He grinned, and she shook her head.

They stepped out into the hallway, where it was blissfully cool in comparison with the conference room. “Help me study for the panel in three days and you’ll have done more than the bare minimum,” she suggested.

“Elizabeth!” he whispered. “You’re ruining my image as an underachiever.”

“Like anyone believes that anymore.”

“Can I take my tie off?” He gave her his best pleading look.

“I’ll just have to put it back on you if you do.”

John started loosening the tie anyway as he saw a woman appear at the end of the hallway and head toward them. “In case you haven’t noticed, it’s when you start fixing me that that old boyfriend of yours starts showing up.”

The woman was nearing them as Elizabeth took the tie away from him. “I guess I’ll have to fill in for Danny today,” the stranger said. “Dr. Weir, I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Debbie Fiderer, the President’s executive secretary.”

“Hello,” Elizabeth replied, changing the tie to her left hand and shaking Debbie’s. “This is Major Sheppard.”

“Hello, Major,” said Debbie. “The President asked me to tell you that Prime Minister Wright invited him and the First Lady to attend the opera tonight. There are a few empty seats, and he thought he’d offer them to you and your team before he starts punishing staff members and making them go.”

“What’s the opera?”

“Turandot.”

“Elizabeth,” John put in, “didn’t you say you had studying to do?”

“You’re going to help me this afternoon,” she said, “so we can go with the President tonight.”

“Can’t you get Rodney to go? Or Teyla?”

“They spent all morning in a maritime museum with the President, John,” she said. “I think you can sit through Puccini for a little while tonight.”

“I don’t have a choice, do I?”

“No, not really.” She smiled at the secretary. “Please, tell the President that we’d be delighted.”

“Yes, ma’am.”
As Debbie walked off, Elizabeth said, “Come on. We’ll order room service and read newspapers for a while. Then you can be glad that I don’t suggest to the President that you sit with him.”

As she led him toward the elevators, he mumbled, “Why didn’t I leave you in Pegasus?”
Chapter 7

Sam Seaborn was wandering around the hotel in his tuxedo an hour before he actually had to be ready to go. Walking helped get words flowing through his mind, and with any luck he’d be able to come back after the opera and finish the speech. Toby would sign off on it, and everything would be great.

He walked by the dining hall and glanced inside. Seeing Sam Carter sitting alone at a table, he walked in and approached. “Mind if I sit for a few minutes?” he asked.

She looked up. “No, not at all,” she replied.

“Thanks,” he said, smiling. A waitress approached, and he said, “Bourbon, please.”

“You seem awfully dressed up,” Sam commented, taking a drink from her glass.

“I’m going with the President to the opera tonight,” he replied. “I understand that a couple people from the Air Force team are going too.”

“Not me,” she said. “I’ve got stuff I need to review for a meeting tomorrow.”

The waitress came back with his drink. “Thanks,” he said, then took a sip as the woman left. “Well, hey, maybe after we get back, I can buy you a drink.”

She looked up, obviously surprised, and smiled. “I’d like that.”

He raised his eyebrows, not having expected her to say yes. “Really?” he said. “Because Dr. McKay said…”

As he trailed off, Sam narrowed her eyes. “McKay said what?”

“Well, he kind of said that you and he were an item.”

“Excuse me,” the woman replied, getting up. “I have to strangle him.”

As she walked up, Sam picked up his glass again and said, “Well, I guess that means they’re not an item.”

Thump thud slap.

Russian was the first foreign language Elizabeth had learned, when her maternal grandmother would speak to her in her native language, and sometimes it flowed off her tongue more naturally than English. Usually, reading a Russian newspaper was no different than reading the Wall Street Journal.

Thump thud slap.

As the sun moved across the sky over Sydney, the Cyrillic letters, as familiar as the Roman alphabet, were starting to blur. Her concentration was waning.

Thump thud slap.

John was supposed to be helping her with this. He was sitting at the foot of her bed, with a London
paper on his knees. Theoretically, he was supposed to tell her whenever he came across something important, and he did look like he was reading.

*Thump thud slap.*

And she’d made sure not to give him an American paper with a sports section.

*Thump thud slap.*

But she hadn’t taken that ball away from him.

*Thump thud slap.*

That was the last straw.

“John!” she cried, sitting up straight and slapping the newspaper to the bed. “Would you stop?”

He threw the ball at the wall one last time and finally missed the catch. It hit the thick carpet and rolled a few inches. He looked over his shoulder at her. “What?” he said, grinning.

She buried her hands in her hair, staring at the Russian again. “I’m having Beckett reattach that bug.”

When she looked at him again, he looked like a puppy just kicked by its owner. “And here I thought you liked me,” he said, a lamentable pout on his face. “I went out of my way to get you a birthday present.”

“I do, but you’re driving me insane, and I’m trying to read about—” She stopped suddenly, realizing that she hadn’t absorbed anything in the last ten minutes. “I don’t even know what I’m trying to read about anymore.” Elizabeth sighed. “What time is it?”

John glanced at his watch. “Eighteen hundred. The motorcade leaves in an hour.” He got to his feet. “Don’t you need six hours to get ready?”

“Very funny,” she replied. “I want to look through this newspaper from Riga first.”

“Riga?” he repeated. “Elizabeth, shouldn’t you draw a line here somewhere? What possible importance could Riga have at this point?”

“It’s the capital of Latvia, John.” She brushed her fingers over a headline. “And you should go back to Atlantis and tell Dr. Skujans that her hometown is unimportant.”

“Skujans is Latvian?”

“What did you think she was?”

“A chemist?”

“Astronomer.”

“Whatever.” He started gathering up papers and stuffing them back into the box. “My point is, you’re sitting on a panel on security concerns and Western intervention in developing nations in Asia or something. What possible use could you have for year-old news from Latvia?”

Elizabeth squeezed her eyes shut. The only part of this that made it worse than the usual kind of pestering was that John was right. With a sigh she tossed the Russian newspaper on top of the box.
“What are you wearing tonight?” she asked.

“What uniform?” He crinkled his nose like a child being served spinach. “Why?”

“Because I have to figure out what to wear tonight.”

He stared at her for a moment. “There’s a choice in the matter?”

“I figured something like this might happen,” she replied, untwisting her legs from the lotus position she’d been sitting in. “So I got two dresses yesterday.”

“I thought you were just being indecisive.”

“As women are prone to be?”

He smirked. “I would never say that,” he said, nodding.

Elizabeth resisted the sudden, childish urge to stick her tongue out at him. If she did that, he might get ideas. “Anyway,” she said, “I can’t go to the opera in the same dress I’m wearing to the state dinner.”

“I thought that was something that magazines made up.”

“Unfortunately, no.”

John shook his head. “I can’t believe we’re actually having this conversation.”

“Yes, I’m having a hard time with that too,” she replied, stretching her arms over her head. “The dresses are in my closet. Go pick one.”

He gave her an odd look, but turned around anyway. In the meantime, Elizabeth began gathering up everything else she’d need for a quick shower. It wasn’t long before she looked up and saw John scratching his head. “Elizabeth, which one do you want?” he asked.

“I don’t care.” She started peeling off the extra layers she’d thrown on because of the coldness of the room. “Just pick one.”

“But they’re both black.”

“Is color the only defining factor for you? They’re completely different.”

“Well,” he said, pulling the dresses out of the closet, “most men don’t spend much time imagining what women look like with clothes on. We tend to do the opposite.” He turned around just as she was pulling off a long-sleeved shirt, leaving a tank top underneath. “Of course, if you keep this up, I won’t have to imagine much.”

Elizabeth decided to ignore the remark. She looked at the dresses, her hands on her hips. He held each one up in front of himself in turn, and she tried not to laugh. Shaking her head, she grabbed the plainer of the two and headed to the bathroom.

Half an hour later, she emerged, finding John waiting at the door to the suite, looking very neat in his uniform. He nodded to her. “You look very nice.”

“Thank you,” she replied, running her hand over the smooth black silk of the dress. “So do you.”

With a smile, he opened the door. “After you, ma’am.”
Rodney was sitting beside the pool when he saw Samantha Carter come in. Judging by how pissed off she looked, he started looking for a quick exit. Unfortunately, none were quick enough.

“McKay, what did you tell him?” she said, almost yelling.

He got up, and the two of them faced off at the edge of the pool. “Hey, he made his own assumptions,” Rodney began explaining.

“Yeah, and you didn’t try to disillusion him either,” said Carter.

“It was a joke, Colonel,” he said. “I wasn’t expecting him to believe me.”

“I ought to push you into the pool.”

“Colonel, I can’t imagine what I’ve done to piss you off like this,” Rodney started.

“You told a politician that I was dating you!”

“Okay, first of all, I didn’t tell him that!” he said. “He assumed that. And you’ve been pissed off a lot longer than that, and I’ve barely talked with you since I got to Colorado.” He stopped suddenly and stared at her. “You’re only this cranky when something’s—hey, we’re not under threat of—are we?”

She rolled her eyes. “You are such an idiot.”

“You know, you should be thanking me for this,” Rodney continued. “I heard the rumors while we were at Cheyenne Mountain. I figured you didn’t want to get involved with this guy, so I saved you a step.”

“McKay, I can put up with your meddling in scientific matters,” Carter said. “But the minute you step into my personal life—”

“What?”

He didn’t get an answer in words. Instead, Carter did what she’d threatened. She shoved him hard, and he went flying sideways into the deep end of the pool. When he surfaced again, he thought he heard her say: “That felt good.”

Dejected, he stayed there for a minute, treading water, until a hotel employee came up to the pool’s edge. “Sir, you can’t be in the water with your street clothes on,” he said. He sounded cranky, but Rodney no longer cared.

“Yeah,” he said, making his way to dry land, “tell that to the person who pushed me.”

John was fairly sure that Elizabeth thought he was brooding tonight, but the truth was that he was trying to make sense of things. She was confusing him.

Intellectually, he’d known that Elizabeth was a woman of sophistication, but seeing her in a red top and pants that matched his every day had pushed that fact into the realm of the barely acknowledged. Sure, she had talked with him many a time about literature, starting with Tolstoy and moving through Dickens, Shakespeare, Eliot, and countless others, but she’d been talking with him. He certainly didn’t consider himself classy, despite the fact that his shoes were currently very shiny. Shiny enough for faint reflections.
And then, the other thing he’d known but not really known was that Elizabeth would look beautiful in a burlap sack. Of course, that dress she was wearing was hardly burlap. It was black and silky, low in the front and lower in the back. She looked gorgeous. There was no denying it. He’d seen Teyla wearing less during their fake visit home, but it had done nothing for him, in part because she’d looked so out of place. Elizabeth, on the other hand, with her dark hair in soft curls and a smile on her face, looked strangely ethereal. It was how she was supposed to look.

An unfamiliar man in a tuxedo approached them, a smile on his face. “Elizabeth Weir?” he said, his accent American. “I heard you were on this trip.”

Elizabeth looked at him oddly, until she recognized him and smiled. “Sam,” she said, “it’s been a while.”

“Haven’t seen you in at least a year,” he replied. He gave her a hug. “How’ve you been? You look terrific.”

“So do you,” she said. Then she looked at John, who was trying not to feel like a third wheel in the conversation. “Let me introduce you two. Sam, this is Major John Sheppard. John, Sam Seaborn.”

Sam held out his hand, and John shook it firmly. “Major.”

“Mr. Seaborn.”

“Oh, please, it’s Sam. And it’s a pleasure,” Sam said. “Elizabeth, this must be quite the special assignment for you to be with an Air Force officer.”

She smiled and rolled her eyes. “Don’t remind me,” she said. “Danny Concannon already smells a story.”

“Danny always smells a story.” Sam turned to John. “So how long have you known Doctor Weir?”

“It’s been about a year,” John said. “How about you?”

Sam smiled. “Wow, how long has it been?”

“Well, it was during President Bartlet’s first campaign, when the President talked me into helping out on debate prep,” Elizabeth replied. “We were both on the red-eye out of Los Angeles, and the flight was delayed. We were stuck sitting on the runway.”

“And you and I argued about Taiwan from the moment we introduced ourselves to the moment we got to the campaign.”

“Seven years, then,” Elizabeth said. “That was a lot of negotiations ago.”

“And a lot of speeches.”

They laughed a little, and John looked beyond them to see Secret Service agents descending the stairs. Through the glass doors he saw the motorcade pulling up to the building, and a few moments later, he saw the President, the First Lady, and CJ Cregg coming into the lobby.

Jed Bartlet was a short man, shorter than Elizabeth, but he didn’t seem like it. His confidence towered far above his actual height. His smile upon greeting Elizabeth was genuine, and she seemed amazingly at ease. It was clear that they’d known each other for a while.

“Mr. President,” Elizabeth said, “allow me to introduce Major John Sheppard, United States Air
Force.”

The President extended his hand. “Hi, I’m Jed Bartlet.”

“Yes, sir,” said John, shaking his hand. “It’s an honor, sir.”

“It’s good to see you again, John,” the First Lady said.

“My wife claims she’s running away with you,” the President continued, pointing at her with his thumb. “I suppose you should take that as a compliment. She has excellent taste.”

“You flatter me, Jed,” Abbey replied. “I married you, after all.”

Mostly to Elizabeth, John said, “Okay, this has officially gotten strange.”

“Stranger than the last year?” she said quietly.

“Yes.”

“Well, you look lovely, Elizabeth,” Abbey continued. “You two make quite the pair.”

John opened his mouth to say something, but Elizabeth stopped him by laying her hand on his arm briefly. “Thank you, Abbey,” she said.

“Well, time to get moving,” the President said. “We don’t want to miss the overture.”

Technically, it was a Secret Service agent who led the way to the door, but it was clear to everyone that the President was leading. John and Elizabeth fell in step behind the Bartlets, and Elizabeth said, “You’re doing fine, John.”

He let out a long breath. “You know how I said that there are some things that weren’t in the brochure?”

“This is one of them?”

“In a word, yes.”

She laughed, the kind of sound he’d heard from her so rarely. As they walked through the doors being held open by agents, she placed her hand at his elbow, as though to lead him. “You’re doing just fine.”

Danny had been standing at the door to Elizabeth’s room for the better part of five minutes, knocking every few seconds. It was entirely possible that she was asleep, but he doubted it. So, he kept knocking.

He heard some squishy footsteps down the hall, and someone said, “If you’re looking for Dr. Weir, you, uh, you won’t find her in there.”

He turned and saw a very wet man trying to get a door to unlock down the hall. “You know Elizabeth?” he asked.

“I work with her,” the wet man said. “You know Elizabeth?”

“I dated her about fifteen years ago,” Danny frowned. “What happened to you?”
“An irate Air Force colonel shoved me into the pool.” He looked thoughtful for a minute.
“Highlight of my day, really. Anyway, why are you looking for Elizabeth?”

“I wanted to talk with her about a piece I’m doing. I’m a reporter, by the way. Washington Post. Danny Concannon.”

“Rodney McKay, astrophysicist.” He finally got the door open. “I’d shake your hand, but I’m a little wet.”

“Mind if I come in?”

McKay looked at him oddly. “Well, as long as you don’t want to watch me changing into dry clothes…”

Danny smiled and shook his head. “I’ll avert my eyes. I just want to ask a few questions about Doctor Weir, since you seem to know her.”

McKay shrugged. “Be my guest.”

“Guess I’ll start with the obvious. Where is she?”

“She,” he began, pulling fresh clothing out of a bag, “was invited to see an opera with the President tonight, and I’ve learned that, while I’m Canadian myself, one doesn’t turn down such invitations.”

The scientist headed into the bathroom, emerging in dry clothes a few minutes later, though still smelling of chlorine. “I take it that’ll be followed up by conversations about Kashmir over chess?”

“Who, Elizabeth?” McKay asked. “She’s terrible at chess. She doesn’t look at the board as a whole. Major Sheppard, on the other hand, is quite formidable.”

“Oh, so you know this Major Sheppard too?”

“Yes.” The scientist looked at him oddly. “Why?”

“I’m just trying to draw a picture of what’s going on with her,” Danny replied, hoping his casualness would put a stop to any suspicion. “I was going to catch up with her tonight, but then she went off to the opera.”

“Well, she’ll be back later,” said McKay. “I’m sure Sheppard won’t want to stay down there any longer than necessary.”

“She took Sheppard with her?” Danny asked. “Now that’s an interesting development.”

“Whoa, what are you—”

“Relax,” Danny replied, setting his notebook down. “I’m off the record.” He folded his hands. “Just out of curiosity, do you know if she’s seeing anyone?”

McKay opened his mouth a few times, but no sound came out. Danny tried not to laugh. “Is she seeing you?”

The man started. “No,” he said immediately. “I wouldn’t—not that she isn’t—no.” He coughed conspicuously. “And I think it’d be best if I didn’t comment on anything else.”

That was it. Danny knew he wasn’t going to get any more out of him. “You know,” he said, picking up his notebook, “I think I’ll just wait for Elizabeth to get back. That’d probably be easiest
on everyone. Nice talking to you, Rodney.”

The scientist said something in response, but Danny didn’t really hear it. He was already formulating a battle plan in his head, because there was something going on, and there was no way he was giving up without a fight.

John was amazingly well-behaved throughout the opera, with minimal fidgeting. Of course, he was sitting between Elizabeth and the Prime Minister of Australia. It was actually the President who was more distracting for Elizabeth, as he kept leaning over to whisper comments about the performance. Had she been sitting with anyone else, she would have put a stop to it, but one didn’t tell the President to shut up.

But at the end of the performance the singers came out to their standing ovation, which included everyone in the Prime Minister’s box. As they were clapping, John leaned over to her and whispered, “Not bad.”

“Some of the finest singers in the world, and all you can come up with is ‘not bad’?” she asked.

“Well, it wasn’t,” he protested. “I’m just saying, I saw a better production at the Met a few years ago.”

Elizabeth stopped clapping for a moment and stared. “And you put up a fight about coming?”

“I didn’t say I went willingly then.”

“Doctor,” came the voice of the man on the other side, “did you not like the tenor?”

Halfheartedly, she started clapping again. “He was fine, sir,” she replied. “I just feel like strangling someone.”

“Well, the Secret Service likes to have a heads-up when someone wants to strangle me. Should I let them know?”

“No, sir,” she said, laughing just a little. “You’ve been nicer than that.”

“Good, I’ll tell Ron to get the snipers to stand down.”

By the time curtain calls had finished, Elizabeth’s hands were stinging. She readjusted her wrap, tightening it, and looked at John, who was examining his hat as though he’d never seen it before. “You hungry?” she asked.

“Starving. How about we get back to the hotel and get something sent up?”

“You’re really liking this room service thing, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I am.”

CJ walked up to them before Elizabeth could answer. “You look like you want to escape,” she said.

“That obvious?” John asked.

“Well, I’m going to help you out a bit,” CJ said. “I’m trying to get the President out the door as quickly as possible, because he needs to go over the current draft of his speech with Sam. I’m putting Sam in the car with the President, the First Lady, and myself, so that will leave the second limousine for the two of you. I’d actually like it if you were out there before President Bartlet
leaves.”

Elizabeth looked at John for a minute. “That sounds fine, if it means we can avoid the press more than we’ve been doing.”

CJ smiled. “I know the feeling. I’ll get an agent to escort you down to the motorcade.”

A few minutes later, a tall man in a tuxedo approached them. “Dr. Weir, Major Sheppard, if you’ll come with me,” he said.

They followed wordlessly, going through a back exit, the likes of which most people would never see. The agent led them down to the limousine, and neither said anything until they were inside and the door was shut. “Well,” John finally said, “that was different.”

“He could take half an hour to get out of there,” Elizabeth said, sighing and slouching down in the seat. “I want my newspapers.”

John was looking out the window. “You’ll be fine at the thing.”

“These meetings with Hammond and Alexander aren’t helping.” She decided that she must have been overtired, because she didn’t usually confess those kinds of things on any meaningful level.

“Well, I think they can intimidate just about anyone,” John replied. “Especially Alexander.”

“He wants to replace me,” she said quietly.

“What makes you say that?”

Elizabeth looked down at her hands. She hoped no one had looked at them tonight, because Elizabeth Weir nearly always had a manicure. She’d gotten used to the lack of nail polish in Pegasus, but it had taken her a while. “He doesn’t trust me,” she finally said. “I left something out of a report. He’s got no reason to trust me.”

John shifted in his seat. “Elizabeth, why didn’t you put it in the report?”

She closed her eyes and exhaled. “We took care of it,” she replied. “One way or another, I got my point across. I didn’t see the need to put another black mark on your record. You were doing what you felt was right, John. I couldn’t punish you for that.”

He didn’t answer, and knowing him as well as she did, Elizabeth suspected that he didn’t know what to say. But before the limousine started moving, John’s hand found hers, and he didn’t let go until they’d reached the hotel.

Rodney didn’t know what was taking Elizabeth and Sheppard so long, but around ten he started calling her room every five minutes, hoping for an answer. At eleven he gave up in favor of camping out outside her room. He honestly didn’t think he’d given that reporter any information, but he knew not to take chances with something like this.

He heard their laughter drifting down the hall at a quarter to midnight, long before he saw them. When they came around the corner, he thought he saw Elizabeth’s hand in John’s, but when he looked again, that wasn’t the case. The smile on Elizabeth’s face had quickly faded as well. “Rodney?” she said, stepping ahead of Sheppard. “Is something wrong?”

“Not yet,” he said. “I was talking to a reporter.”
She touched two fingers to her forehead. “Tell me it wasn’t Danny Concannon.”

“That was him,” he replied. “He said he was an old boyfriend of yours.”

“Yes, and apparently he’s going to haunt me forever.”

“McKay, what did you tell him?” Sheppard asked.

“Not in the hallway,” Elizabeth said. She pulled out her access card and opened the suite door. “In.”

The two men complied, and as Elizabeth removed her wrap, she said, “John, call CJ Cregg and ask her to meet us here. Tell her it’s about an old friend from home.”

“Old friend from home?” Rodney repeated, as Sheppard made the call.

“It’s a code,” she said.

While they waited, Sheppard leaned against the back of the sofa and took his tie off, but the wait wasn’t very long. Within a few minutes, CJ arrived, still in an evening gown. As soon as the door was closed behind her, she said, “What’s the problem?”

“Danny Concannon—”

“What I wouldn’t give to never hear about a problem starting with that name again.”

Elizabeth smiled in sympathy. “Danny Concannon talked to Dr. McKay. He doesn’t think he said anything, but Danny’s getting serious about this.”

CJ turned to Rodney. “What was he asking?”

“Mostly about Dr. Weir, actually,” he replied.

“Me?”

CJ shook her head. “You know, I could have sworn that Teyla would have been the problem on this trip,” she said.

“She’s hardly said anything to anyone not in this room,” Rodney replied. “I can’t see what she’d give away.”

“Concannon’s going after Elizabeth because he knows her,” John said. “He knows her position on the military, and he’s not going to let go of the fact that she’s with an Air Force research team and meeting with two generals while she’s here. He knows there’s something big going on.”

“All right,” said CJ, “Dr. McKay, did you say anything that made him suspicious?”

“I told him that Major Sheppard went to the opera with Elizabeth,” Rodney replied.

CJ frowned in Elizabeth’s direction. “He’s acting like a jealous ex, if you ask me,” Weir explained. “He thinks we’re together.”

“Well, you were together,” Rodney said. “You were at the opera together.”

“Oh, come on,” Sheppard put in, wrapping his tie around one hand. “For a smart guy, you can be pretty dense, McKay.”
“Danny thinks I’m sleeping with him,” Elizabeth clarified.

“Well, so does half of Atlantis. More than half, actually—” He stopped suddenly. “Wait, does that mean you’re not?”

“Yes!” they answered in unison.

“Well, that serves Zelenka right for betting the remainder of his chocolate—”

“Rodney,” Elizabeth said, in the tone that usually got him to shut up. “I’m not even going to begin to comment upon the appropriateness of your speculating on my sex life. What we need to do is figure out what to do with Danny.”

“Ignore him for now,” CJ said. “The press corps should be occupied by following the President for the next couple days. The problem is going to be when Dr. Weir’s panel comes around.”

“At which point every reporter with a pulse is going to be talking about me,” Elizabeth replied.

“Exactly,” CJ continued. “I’m going to get Donna to try to keep them occupied. Fortunately, the President’s speech is that night, so with any luck, they’ll only have a couple hours to think about you.”

“What if that doesn’t work?” Sheppard asked.

“Danny can be pretty persistent,” Elizabeth added.

“If that doesn’t work, I’ll buy him off somehow,” CJ replied. “And if that doesn’t work, I’ll find a Republican and borrow his gun so I can shoot myself.”

Rodney left the suite muttering something that resembled an apology for bothering them, and Elizabeth soon escaped into her bedroom, barely giving John time to say good night. He managed to change into something more comfortable than his uniform before collapsing into bed, but only just.

But strangely, he didn’t sleep, no matter how much he tossed and turned. His body wanted to sleep desperately, but his mind wouldn’t stop running long enough to let him. If he wasn’t thinking about how that reporter was going to get them all into so much trouble, then he was thinking about Elizabeth in that dress. And that wasn’t helping matters at all.

Eventually, there was only one course of action available to him. He was going to make himself some tea. Moving as quietly as he could, he left his room and headed to the small kitchen area, searching through the cabinets until he found a teapot and some herbal teas that hopefully would put him to sleep instead of keeping him awake. He could only hope that the next day would be easier.

“John?” said a voice soft and feminine. He turned around and saw the door to Elizabeth’s room open, with her standing in the dim light. “John, what are you doing?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” he said. “Did I wake you?”

She shook her head. Her hair was a mess, so it was clear that she’d been trying to sleep. She looked cold, too, so when the kettle started to whistle, he said, “Do you want some of this? It’s lemon.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I haven’t had lemon tea in years.”
John turned the heat off under the pot and searched through cabinets again until he found two coffee mugs. “Then it’s my pleasure,” he said as he poured the hot water.

After a moment, she said, “You really should let me do that.”

“Elizabeth,” he replied, “I fly helicopters, airplanes, and highly advanced alien spaceships. I think I can make a cup of tea.”

“Are the two related?”

He turned around and handed her a mug, smiling. “Absolutely.”

They headed over to the sofa and sat down, much closer together than they ever would have in Atlantis, where someone could walk in at any minute. But things were different here. In some ways, they had to be more guarded, lest their superiors think they were acting inappropriately, but on Earth, with the threat held at bay for now, the part of them that was always consumed with the safety and well-being of the expedition was free to think and feel and be. Tonight, even though they were both worried about reporters and perception, they simply were.

His arm ended up around her shoulders, though he didn’t remember doing it. If she had objections, she didn’t state them. So as they sipped at tea and began to relax, he said, “It was strange to see you like that tonight.”

“What, in a dress?” she asked.

“No—well, in that dress, maybe—but no, it was…” He took another drink. “You were standing there making small talk with a professional speech writer. You were chatting with the President and the First Lady.”

She looked up at him. “You knew I was a diplomat.”

“Yeah, it just never really dawned on me.” John set his mug on the end table. “You weren’t very comfortable talking with me for a while.”

Elizabeth handed him her empty mug, which he set aside for her. Neither made any indication of movement in the near future. Then, very softly, she asked, “Would you believe that I’m more comfortable talking to you than I am talking to the President now?”

He smiled, just a little, and let his fingers brush against her bare shoulder. “Yeah, I think I’d buy that.”

A few minutes later, Elizabeth’s head landed on his shoulder. She was fast asleep. After such a long day, he didn’t have the heart to wake her now that she was finally asleep, so he grabbed a blanket off the back of the sofa and very gingerly tried to drape it over them both. There was still a light on in the kitchen area, but John just didn’t care. He was too tired, and as he leaned his head back and closed his eyes, his last thought was that Elizabeth was very warm.
Chapter 8

CJ didn’t sleep much that night. Truth be told, she didn’t really sleep at all. Danny was not supposed to have this much power over her, but some things couldn’t be helped. At least she wasn’t not sleeping because of him personally.

So in the morning she splashed water on her face in an effort to look less tired and headed down to the President’s suite. There, President Bartlet was already through a cup of coffee and was devouring the morning’s news. “Josh called,” he said, turning the television off and tossing the remote to the sofa. “We’re going to lose on farm subsidies.”

CJ clasped her hands in front of her. “We knew it was going to be tight,” she replied.

“No such luck, I’m afraid,” CJ continued. “Danny’s been snooping some more.”

He sighed and leaned his head back against the sofa cushion. “Is there a way we could dump his body in Darling Harbor?”

“Much as I’d like to, sir, I can’t think of a way to do it.”

“Yeah, well, you always lacked creativity.” He got to his feet. “Buy him off.”

“Well, he doesn’t get a Cabinet post or anything,” Bartlet answered.

“Yeah, but what if he wants an interview with you? Or with her?”

“Give it to him, under the condition that he asks no questions pertaining to classified activities,” the President said. “But offer me before you give him her. She’s got enough on her mind now without getting the Spanish Inquisition from Danny Concannon.”

It took Elizabeth several moments to figure out where she was, as it clearly wasn’t a bed. Then she remembered her late-night chat with John, and realized that they must have fallen asleep on the sofa. She’d spent enough time in conflict zones and other surreal situations to know that sometimes, falling asleep on top of a coworker was inevitable. She knew not to read into it when she came into a lounge in Atlantis and found people piled onto a sofa, fast asleep.

Granted, this was perhaps a little different. John was her first advisor, her first confidant. He’d become a friend of immense value to her, even through their frequent quarrels. And not so many days ago, she’d nearly lost that friendship. She’d sent him to what should have been certain death—a heroic death, to be sure, yet that would have been hollow comfort for her.
But he was alive, warm and breathing with his heart beating under her hand. Elizabeth was mostly buried in a blanket, and her face was pressed into his side. She squirmed a little, but otherwise tried to stay away from acting like she was awake.

It didn’t work. Soon John’s hand moved up her back and ruffled her hair. “Morning,” he said.

“Does it have to be?” she asked.

“Oh-eight-hundred,” he replied. “We’ve got two hours before the meetings start.”

She yawned. “Are you always this early when you’re awake?”

“Huh?”

Elizabeth thought about what she’d said and frowned. Hadn’t it made sense? “Are you always this awake when it’s early?”

“This isn’t early.”

“You need a shower,” she said out of the blue. First thing in the morning was generally no time for her to be talking. Things tended to come out of her mouth without her permission.

John palmed her head and pulled her back. “I’d say the same of you, but my mother taught me to be polite.”

“Oh, shut up.” Elizabeth sat up and stretched, pushing hair out of her face.

He picked up one of the mugs left from the night before and took a drink from it. Then he made a face and put it back. “You sleep okay?”

Elizabeth frowned. “Why do you ask?”

He shrugged. “You seemed a little restless in the night.”

Abruptly she tossed the blanket aside and got up. John caught her hand. “Elizabeth,” he said, as she tried to pull her hand back from him, “what’s going on?”

She shook her head. “No, I didn’t sleep that well,” she said. “I don’t think I have since the siege ended. Maybe longer.”

“Elizabeth,” he said slowly, “please look at me.” Taking a deep breath, she did so, and he squeezed her hand before letting it go. “You did the right thing.”

“How can you say that?” she asked with a shake of her head. “You would have died! You would have died, and I knew that.”

“And so did I.” John ran his hands through his hair. “We really could use another psychologist in the expedition.”

“Probably several,” Elizabeth said dryly.

“Look, Elizabeth,” he said, hesitating. “I’m not going to tell you it gets easier, or it ever should get easier, but soldiers die. Soldiers die for a lot of reasons, but sometimes it’s because the people in our positions have to send them.”

She shook her head again but said nothing. Soon she moved away, going to her room to shower.
John presumably did the same, and when they reappeared in the sitting room, he was leaning against the back of the sofa, dressed in most of his uniform already, though his coat lay on the furniture. His tie was in his hand. Elizabeth shook her head. “Let me do that,” she said. “It looked terrible yesterday.”

Walking up to him, she took it, and he gave her a goofy smile. “You didn’t say anything about it.”

“Abbey thought it was cute.”

“So I can’t tie a tie,” he said as she looped it over his neck. “That was reason number forty-seven for Antarctica.”

She shook her head and started the knot. “I keep having this dream,” she said, softly, and he went very still. “Back during the storm, when the Genii tried to take the city. Kolya has me, you’re trying to help, and he shoots you before he escapes.”

“Elizabeth…”

“I get to you and I’m screaming for help, but there’s no one.” She finished with the tie but kept it in her grip, focusing on the knot. “There’s blood everywhere. I’m screaming for help, and you… you’re telling me not to be afraid.” She lifted her gaze to find him staring at her intently. “How can I be anything else, John? How can I accept sending good men and women to their deaths?”

John seemed to hesitate, then took her hands in his, lowering them from his tie. “For me it’s Sumner,” he admitted. “I know I did the right thing, but I don’t think I’ll ever forget, or forgive myself for it.”

A heavy silence fell; Elizabeth expected sarcasm or some other attempt to lighten her mood, but neither came. Instead, John stood, awkwardly invading her personal space, and with the comfort level of a teenager with a hormonal girlfriend, he hugged her. She slipped her arms around his neck as he pulled her tighter to himself. “I’m not dead,” he said, a statement simple and obvious enough, but one which she needed to hear.

“I know,” she whispered, “but how many are?”

He stroked her hair for a moment. “People would have died anyway, Elizabeth. Don’t do this to yourself.” He inhaled deeply. “Are you afraid now?”

She hesitated, though she knew her answer immediately. “Yes,” she said, quietly. “You scare me.”

“Why?”

“Because every time you leave, I’m afraid you’re going to do something idiotic and get yourself killed, and I know I need—I can’t do this without you, John. I can’t do my job without—”

“Don’t,” he whispered. “I know.” There was a long pause, and he held her a little tighter. “I know.”

Uncomfortably stuffed into a suit, Rodney McKay left his room an hour before he had to be in the conference room with the others. When he turned a corner, he saw the elevator door starting to close, so he started jogging and yelled, “Hold it!”

The woman inside stuck her hand out to stop the door, and Rodney ran inside, slightly out of breath. “Thanks,” he said. The blonde nodded, and he added, “Donna, right?”
She smiled a little and nodded again. “And you would be Dr. McKay.”

“Oh, please, you can call me Rodney.” He stuck his hands in his pockets and smiled at her. Donna looked at him oddly and turned her attention to the rather large stack of papers in her arms. “So, uh, what are you doing this morning?”

“CJ Cregg wanted to see me about something.”

“Oh, well, that’s probably about me,” Rodney replied. “I had a small run-in with a reporter last night. He was asking a lot of odd questions, but I think I handled it well enough.”

“Have you ever had any experience with White House reporters?” Donna asked.

“No, but—”

“They’re like piranhas,” she said. “Their favorite thing to do is make you think you’ve won.”

“Well, I’ll keep that in mind.” The elevator arrived at the lobby, and both got out. “Hey, want to come get breakfast with me?”

Donna raised both eyebrows and pointed down a hall with her thumb. “I have to meet CJ,” she said.

“Oh, right, how silly of me,” Rodney replied. “Well, the offer stands.”

“I’ll… keep that in mind.”

She walked off quickly, wondering what was going on there. The previous night she’d heard about him getting shoved into a swimming pool by the Air Force astrophysicist on the trip. Donna shook her head. The more she thought about the research team, the less sense it made.

CJ was on the phone when she walked into the small conference room where Sam and his team were already working on the speech for another day. Donna walked up to him and smiled. “How’s it going?” she asked.

“We’re getting there,” Sam replied. “Little by little. Hey, did you hear something about Dr. McKay and a swimming pool?”

“Yeah,” Donna replied, “apparently Colonel Carter stormed in there last night, yelled at him for a while, and shoved him into the pool.”

“Wow,” Sam said. “That’s pretty impressive.”

Across the room, CJ hung up the phone. “Donna,” she said, “walk with me.”

Surprisingly, Weir and Sheppard were the last to arrive at the meeting. Sam thought they both looked rather worn, though Elizabeth looked worse than John, like she hadn’t slept well at all. “Doctor,” Sam said quietly, “are you all right?”

Weir looked up, seeming startled. “I’m fine,” she said, though her voice didn’t have quite the confident tone it usually did.

Sam didn’t really believe that she was all right, but there was no way the diplomat was going to admit it. “You just look a little tired,” she said.

“The opera ran pretty late, and we had to deal with an incident with a reporter.”
“An incident with a reporter?” Hammond repeated.

“We don’t think it was anything to be worried about, sir,” said Sheppard.

Weir nodded. “But CJ Cregg is looking into it for us.”

“Well, I’m sure she can handle it,” General Alexander remarked. “Shall we get started?”

“Certainly.” Weir replied. They all took their seats, and Sam hoped that this day would go more smoothly than the previous. At the least, she hoped that Sheppard wouldn’t try to mouth off to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs again, and that he and Weir wouldn’t give the impression that they were sharing more than just the burden of leadership.

Donna hated it when CJ called upon her for dirty work, and unfortunately, the only plan she could come up with at this point was cheesy, stupid, and made her look like a Nancy Drew wannabe. Thankfully, the only real witness to this was Ed, her current partner in crime.

Casually wandering up to the table where Danny Concannon was working, Donna attempted to appear bored, or at the least unoccupied. When she reached him, he looked up and said, “Hey, Donna.”

“Hi, Danny,” she replied. “What are you up to?”

“Just compiling my notes,” he said, gesturing at his open notepad as he sipped his coffee. “You busy?”

“No, not at all,” she said. “Well, I’m going to have stuff to do pretty soon, but I’m waiting for the President to head out to the lunch session.”

Danny smiled. “The lunch session is going to be interesting day after tomorrow.”

Donna pulled one of the chairs out and sat down. “You mean the panel with Dr. Weir?”

“Yeah,” he replied. “I wouldn’t be surprised if it gets more coverage than the President’s speech. She hasn’t spoken publicly in a while.” He set his coffee down and turned a page in the notepad. Donna noted the word “Prometheus” underlined and followed by three question marks. “Hey, do you know why that is?”

Donna shrugged. “The President’s had her on special assignment for a while.”

“Just wish I knew where to look for her. I kind of miss being able to lurk in her evening lectures.”

“You really dated her?” she asked.

Danny smiled. “Long time ago.”

At that point, Ed finally decided to make his appearance. He hurried up to the table and said, “Danny, there’s a call for you at the front desk.”

The reporter hesitated, looking at his laptop and his notes. The front desk was quite some distance away from the small hotel café in which they sat, so he’d be away from his things for several minutes, even though there was no phone call for him. Donna spoke up quickly. “I’ll stay here with your stuff if you want,” she offered.

“Thanks, Donna,” he said. When he stood up and closed his laptop, undoubtedly password-
protected, she tried not to wince.

He was gone quickly, and Ed took up his post at the door, standing watch for Donna. With speed that could only be developed in two Presidential campaigns and six years in the White House, she picked up the notepad and read as much of it as she could before Danny returned.

Running late was nothing unusual for this President, but CJ was unused to causing the delays. But she had to wait for Donna to finish up with Danny, and she also had to go to the event. When the blonde woman came running into the hallway, CJ grabbed her by the elbow and started dragging her after Secret Service agents to the limousine that Bartlet was just entering. She almost pushed her into the back before climbing in after her.

“Hello, Donna, nice of you to join us,” the President said.

“Good morning, Mr. President,” said Donna.

The door shut, the limousine started moving, and CJ said, “Well, what does he know?”

“It’s hard to say,” Donna replied.

“Hard to say? What do you mean?”

“He’s got a lot of little pieces, but none of them seem to fit together.” Donna frowned. “He’s got Major Sheppard’s record, though. Something about Afghanistan, and then his record just stops with his assignment to Weir’s team.”

“How on earth did he get that?” the President asked.

“Danny’s got very, very good sources,” CJ said.

“Yeah, I remember.” He looked at Donna. “What else?”

“There was something about radar,” she replied, “and the name Prometheus came up.”

“Anything else?”

“That was as far as I got.” She looked at them apologetically. “Danny was coming back. Ed and I decided that the desk had asked for Dan Barr, and Ed didn’t hear it correctly.”

“Did he buy it?” CJ asked.

“He didn’t seem suspicious, but I can never tell with him,” said Donna. “But unless he’s started fingerprinting his notepads when he leaves them around places…”

“I wouldn’t put it past him.”

The motorcade came to a stop, and the President said, “Thanks, Donna. CJ, you know what to do.”

CJ nodded, and when she got out of the limo, she headed back to the press pool to find Danny Concannon.

Elizabeth didn’t know if the President had arranged this, but Hammond was once again the one who ended the meeting, saying that he understood that she had quite a bit of preparation to do for the panel on the day after next. Still, she was grateful, though the meeting had been far more
pleasant than the previous one. Granted, that wasn’t saying much. A wet paper sack would have been more pleasant than the previous one.

It was difficult to see how the attitudes of the powers over her had changed so completely during her absence. Of course, in all honesty, it wasn’t their attitude toward her, but their attitude toward the situation. The nature of the expedition had shifted dramatically, from exploratory to military, and it was somewhat understandable that they would question a civilian’s ability to command such a situation. But she had been appointed to run the SGC during the height of the Anubis threat, and she had dealt with the Wraith threat as well as she felt anyone could. On top of that, her city was no longer as defenseless as it had once been, so it seemed frightfully unnecessary to place a military man in command of the expedition.

Elizabeth sighed. Atlantis really was her city now. For a woman who had always been capable of being comfortable wherever she was, she now felt that Earth was very foreign.

“Dr. Weir,” someone called behind her as she headed toward the elevator. She turned and saw CJ approaching. “I have some news.”

“Good or bad?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, some probably would say it’s bad news. I want to say it’s good news.” She took a deep breath. “Danny wants an interview with you.”

“Why would you call that good news?”

“I wouldn’t, really. Just said I’d like to.” CJ sighed. “If you really don’t want to do it, I can talk to him, but it was the only deal he’d take this afternoon.”

Elizabeth tried not to seem annoyed by the prospect. “When?”

“The day after your panel. It’ll be the day before we leave.”

Slowly, she nodded. “Tell him I’ll do it.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” CJ said, just before heading off. Elizabeth headed to the elevator again, and she spent the rest of the afternoon and most of the night alone, reading as much as she could absorb.

It was late when John decided that he wasn’t likely to sleep well. Whether he wanted to admit it or not, Elizabeth’s dream had been nagging at him through most of the day. As a man whose entire adult life had involved risk and violence, he’d given thought to his own demise on several occasions in the past. But this was different. Very different.

Dr. Heightmeyer, during the one time he’d visited her about his own nightmares, had given him a line about dreams meaning less than people like to think. John was disinclined to believe that. In his dreams he had been quite vividly reliving the moment when he pulled the trigger and killed Sumner. It happened over and over and over. Occasionally he had to fire more than once to finally kill the man, which made him wonder if somewhere deep down he had some desire to take over. That version happened a lot after the nanovirus incident.

Strangely, though, after the old version of Elizabeth had lived that one precious day with them, the dream hadn’t been quite as bad. It was as if his subconscious was telling himself that he wasn’t ultimately responsible for Sumner’s death.
Still, Elizabeth’s dream was bothering him. In another part of his life he would have been most disturbed by his boss dreaming about him, but the last year had taught him to think a little differently. She’d woken him up the night before, her hands clutching his shirt as she shook violently. He’d rubbed her back and stroked her hair, trying to give her some physical reassurance of his presence, but it took her a long time to calm down. The only explanation was a nightmare.

To know now that his death, even in a dream, was causing her such distress was itself distressing to him. That she was dreaming of his death in such grim detail was even more bizarre. She was a rock when she was awake. She’d show anger, but rarely grief. Whenever he’d seen that, he’d felt as though he were intruding, even though he’d wanted to help her at the same time.

He headed out of his room to the balcony that stretched the length of the building. It was late enough that most sane people would be asleep, so he expected to find solitude there. Instead, he found Elizabeth.

She was dressed in a thin grey nightgown that looked very cold in the crisp night air. The light wind tossed her hair, and in the moonlight her skin seemed to glow. It had been a long time since John had acknowledged that Elizabeth was an attractive woman, but there were times when seeing that face across the briefing table had seemed to dull the effect. Now, of course, there was no questioning it.

Elizabeth looked over her shoulder at him. “You’re up late,” he said.

“So are you,” she replied.

“You look cold.”

As he approached, she looked back at the harbor and smiled. “Do you have a jacket in your back pocket or something?” She shook her head. “I lived in New York for a long time. ‘Cold’ doesn’t mean the same thing to me as it probably does to you.”

John looked her up and down skeptically. The nightgown she wore just reached her knees, but it wouldn’t have been warm if it had been longer. This was certainly a different look for her. He had to remind himself to stop staring. It wasn’t polite, he told himself.

“Besides,” she continued, “it was too warm in my room, and I’ve been inside all day.”

He nodded and leaned forward on the railing, watching the reflections of hundreds of lights dance on the water below. “Seems we can’t escape balconies,” she said softly.

“Guess not.”

“The view’s not as nice here.”

“It has its perks.” John wasn’t entirely certain what he meant by that, so he just hoped she’d change the subject.

After an awkward silence, she did. “John,” she began, “about this morning…”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said. “It was just a dream.”

“It’s a little late for that,” Elizabeth replied. “I think I passed the limit of the number of times I can have that dream and not worry about it.”

Carefully, he looked at her. “Is that why you’re up?”
She closed her eyes. “Yes.”

Before she could look at him again, John moved behind her and started rubbing her arms. Her skin was as cold as it looked, and his hands were mercifully warm. “That’s not the only reason,” she said softly.

“You’re worried about the panel.”

“I’m worried about Hammond and Alexander.” As he moved his hands to her shoulders, she inhaled deeply. “I’m not sure what I’d do if they didn’t let me go back. It’s home.”

“I know what you mean,” John replied. Her skin was very, very soft and smooth. “I haven’t really lived in one place in a long time, but—”

“You feel like you belong there,” Elizabeth said. “I’ve spent most of my adult life traveling, but I feel it too.”

She looked over her shoulder, though John wasn’t sure if it was because of what she was saying, or the way his fingers had brushed down her neck. He hadn’t even realized he was doing it. It didn’t seem to matter. Her eyes were large, her skin was soft, her lips were parted, and she was beautiful in the night. He was kissing her before he had even decided to.

It startled them both and ended quickly. John thought about saying something, but his extensive vocabulary had gone on vacation, evidently, because when she turned around completely, all he could think about was that her mouth felt good and that he wanted to feel that again.

Elizabeth was far from objecting to the second kiss. Vaguely he wondered if this sudden wellspring of attraction was as new as it felt or if it had been around longer than he’d recognized, but he was far from actually caring. It felt as natural and strange as that first time using Ancient technology had felt. There had been rumors about them almost from the beginning, but now John was starting to wish that some of them had been true.

One strap of her nightgown had slipped off her shoulder by the time John pulled back, quite reluctantly. Breathless, Elizabeth met his gaze. “John,” she said, “we really shouldn’t…”

“Yeah,” he said, his hands still buried in her hair. As they stood and stared, the third kiss was inevitable.

That time, John felt her hands press against his chest gently. Somehow he found the presence of mind to realize that she was trying to stop him. “Yeah,” he said again, this time, his mouth occupied with hers for just a moment longer. “Yeah, we really shouldn’t.”

Elizabeth took a step back. “I,” she began. “I should get some sleep.”

“Yeah, we’ve got lots of… stuff in the morning.”

After he thought about it he realized that that wasn’t actually true, but it was as good an excuse as any. He watched as she walked back to her open door, and at the threshold she stopped, looking over her shoulder at him. “Good night, John,” she said, quite softly.

“Good night, Elizabeth,” he replied.

For a long time after, he stayed where he was, wondering why he’d decided that that was the best course of action. Never in his adult life had kissing a woman ultimately ended in a way that wasn’t bordering on disastrous, so he didn’t much see how kissing his boss, who happened to be a rather
beautiful woman, would end any differently.

He headed to bed anyway. With any luck, he’d wake up and discover that he’d dreamt the whole thing, but some small part of his brain was really hoping that he hadn’t.
Chapter 9

Elizabeth woke very early the following morning, half-hoping that John had forgotten the late-night tryst on the balcony, or at least the part where he kissed her and she let him. She felt rather foolish about her ambivalence. Still, he’d unsettled her, and that was a feeling she did not like at all.

She had other things to worry about. The panel was the following day, and she was less than halfway through the material CJ had provided. General Alexander seemed to be in earnest about finding reasons to remove her from command of Atlantis. Danny Concannon wanted to interview her. So the thought of John Sheppard kissing her was not exactly helping her work through all of that.

Elizabeth spent most of the day in her room, reading as much as her eyes would allow and emerging only to eat, and then only at John’s insistence. Then at the end of the day, Debbie Fiderer arrived with a request that she join the President the following morning for breakfast. After accepting, she went back into her room and fell asleep on the bed, not even bothering to move the laptop or the papers.

In the morning, she woke up with the ink imprint of a French headline backwards on her leg. As she tried to translate it, she felt the old familiar sinking feeling in her stomach. It had been years and years since she’d actually been nervous about speaking in public, but she knew what the next phase of stage fright would be for her. After nervousness would be a period of a few hours in which she was perfectly calm, and then after that would be momentary panic, just before showtime. This was going to be interesting.

After giving up on the headline, she headed to the shower and then to the President’s suite for breakfast. She didn’t see John before leaving, but strangely she hoped he’d be there for the panel, even though she was worried that the sight of him would throw her off entirely. But first, she had to get through breakfast with the President.

Rodney was just starting into an omelet when Sheppard and Teyla walked into the dining hall together. That was a sight he hadn’t seen since the very early days of the expedition, when almost everyone had assumed that there was something going on between them. That was before anyone really knew Sheppard, or realized that his taste in women lay in considerably different directions.

They came up to Rodney’s table and sat down without asking permission. “Where’s Dr. Weir?” he asked.

“Good morning,” Sheppard replied. “Elizabeth’s with the President for breakfast.”

“Didn’t see her much yesterday,” Rodney commented.

“Yeah, I didn’t see much of her either,” the major said. “She spent most of her day locked up in her room.”

“Literally?”

“No.” The waiter came by and took Sheppard’s and Teyla’s orders, and he continued, “She didn’t want anyone bugging her. I spent most of the day with Zoey Bartlet.”

“Is Elizabeth mad at you?” Rodney asked, before taking a huge bite of toast.
“No,” John said, “just nervous, and not sleeping well.”

“How do you know how well she’s sleeping?”

“Her room’s ten feet from mine,” John replied. “I can hear her pacing in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, so it’s not like—”

“Get your mind out of the gutter, McKay.”

CJ arrived at the President’s door following an early-morning summons, and was surprised when Jed Bartlet himself opened it. “Mr. President,” she said, “doesn’t an agent usually open the door for you?”

“Todd’s on the balcony staring down tourists,” Bartlet replied. “Abbey and Zoey went into the city for breakfast and took a lot of the agents with them.”

“You wanted to see me, sir?”

“Yeah, I’ve invited Elizabeth Weir in for breakfast,” he said, waving toward the hotel employee who was standing in the room. “You can go now. Thanks.”

The man nodded and left. CJ rested the folder she held on the back of a chair. “Sir, it’s not too late to pull her from the panel,” she said. “Laryngitis is a very believable excuse.”

“I’m not pulling her, CJ,” he replied. “For crying out loud, if she didn’t live in another galaxy, I’d make her a Cabinet secretary.”

CJ smiled a little. “You offered her a job a few years ago.”

“She turned it down to teach at Georgetown,” he said. “And I couldn’t bring myself to talk her out of it. Not out of a teaching job.”

There was a knock at the door, and CJ went to answer it. Elizabeth was on the other side. “Come in, Doctor,” she said. “The President’s waiting for you.”

Once done with the formalities, the three of them sat down to breakfast. Bartlet asked a few questions about her preparedness for the panel, and while Weir seemed a little nervous about it, she also seemed confident that she was ready for it.

CJ was almost finished with breakfast when the conversation turned to Atlantis. “Elizabeth, I want to talk with you and your team on the way back,” the President said, “but I also just wanted a minute of your time today for you to talk about your experiences in the Pegasus galaxy.”

Elizabeth picked up her napkin and daintily wiped her mouth. “Anything in particular?” she asked. “CJ?” the President prompted.

She thought for a moment. “What’s the most difficult decision you’ve had to make?”

Elizabeth looked pensive and sipped from her coffee. “You’ve read the reports, right?” she asked. When CJ and the President nodded, the diplomat continued, “We captured a Wraith once. Twice, actually, but the first time was the important time. We tried to keep him around for a while, hoping to get some information out of him. It became rather problematic, because obviously we couldn’t feed him without sacrificing one of our people. And then we ran into the Hoffans.”
“Who wanted to use the Wraith to test a drug,” CJ provided.

“Exactly,” said Elizabeth. “When Major Sheppard came to me with the suggestion that we let them use the Wraith for the experiments, I was absolutely appalled. I told General Alexander the other day that the Geneva Convention is how we defined ourselves as human. The hardest thing I’ve ever done is sell that.”

She ran her finger around the rim of her coffee cup. “You know how kids name the lobsters in the tank and then their parents can’t order lobster? John—Major Sheppard named the Wraith Steve. I don’t know why, and I know it wasn’t really his name, but it makes it harder to think about what I authorized.”

“I read Major Sheppard’s report on it,” said CJ. “He’s right about the Geneva Convention having its limits.”

“CJ,” Elizabeth replied, shaking her head, “it’s not as easy as that. And I’m ashamed to admit it, but sometimes I wonder if I wouldn’t feel as bad about it if it had worked.”

“Because then the violation would have meant something,” the President said. “Instead, hundreds of people died, and no miracle weapon was found.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes and nodded. “That may not be the hardest decision I had to make, but it’s been the hardest to live with,” she said. “By all rights, I should be considered a war criminal.”

“You’re not the only one,” Bartlet replied. “It didn’t solve anything for you or for me.”

“Would you do it again, sir?”

He didn’t answer immediately, and CJ felt quite tense, suddenly realizing that the answer might not be no. She didn’t understand how a father whose child had been kidnapped because of that choice could even consider making that choice again.

But Josiah Bartlet was not just any man. He was President of the United States, and there were times when the country had to come before his family.

A haunted look on his face, he nodded. “I would.”

That pained resolve was mirrored in Elizabeth’s eyes. To CJ’s surprise, she said, “So would I, sir.”

Despite the fact that Elizabeth had been mostly ignoring him since he’d kissed her two nights earlier, John caught up with her and offered to ride over to the site of the panel discussion with her. She wavered for a moment, but in the end she smiled and waved him to the waiting car. They didn’t talk, but she seemed to relax just a little, and John was glad about that. She needed it.

At the site, she was ushered to the back, and John loitered around the lobby outside of the hall in which the panel would be taking place. There were quite a lot of reporters milling around, several of whom were talking about Elizabeth. While there had been a lot of talk about her appearance being a big deal, it had never really sunk in that people would be talking about her like that. It almost made John want to get some old newspapers just to find references to her. He was having a hard time believing that all these people knew who she was, when a year ago, he hadn’t had a clue.

He went in when the doors were opened, but stayed toward the back, not wanting to be spotted lest Danny Concannon show up. These days he was having more and more trouble thinking of reasons not to punch the reporter in the face, except that it would cause even more of a story, and wouldn’t
have been good publicity for Elizabeth.

At the top of the hour, a door in the back of the room opened and eight people filed in. The first person stood at one end, where a podium had been set up, and the others sat down at the table. Elizabeth was the last. While the moderator introduced the members of the panel, her eyes cast about and found him, giving him an almost imperceptible nod acknowledging his presence.

“And at the far end we have a last-minute substitution,” said the moderator. “The US Ambassador to the Philippines was unable to attend, so Dr. Elizabeth Weir has agreed to sit in his seat today.”

“It’s an honor to speak to this group, Mr. Purnell,” Elizabeth said, smiling.

“Well, let’s begin.”

The first question went to a young Japanese representative, and John began to realize just how much of what was going to be said here would fly over his head.

“So you see,” a Chilean was saying on the television, “this Western intervention is often greatly unwanted in these traditional societies. You have become accustomed to rapid change, but for the people of traditional cultures, it is too much. The West cannot expect so much at once.”

“Mr. President,” CJ said, walking through the room, “turn the television off. We have to get this speech finished up in an hour so they can get it up on the teleprompter.”

“Thanks, CJ,” Jed replied. “I didn’t know that already.”

“Sir,” said Sam, from the sofa opposite, where CJ was sitting down, “we really do need—”

“Oh, give it up, Sam,” he said. “Some of the best stuff you ever wrote for me was at the last possible second. I remember you shouting part of a speech at me as I walked on stage.”

“You made most of that one up on the fly, sir,” Sam replied.

“I did?”

“Yes, sir. And you put everything I ever wrote to shame.”

“Well, what are we doing here?” Jed asked. “If I can make stuff up on my feet—”


“Right.” He picked up the remote and muted the television. “‘As new threats rise around the world and old ones regain their former strength,’” he read. “‘Shouldn’t that be reversed?’”

“I was thinking that, Mr. President.” Sam scribbled that down on his copy.

“‘As old threats regain their former strength and new ones arise around the globe’—see how I’m improvising?—‘we cannot ignore the deep roots of prejudice and hate.’ I’d rather say hatred there. It sounds nicer.”

“Yes, sir.”

Jed looked up at the television and saw Elizabeth Weir’s face on the monitor. “Ooh, she’s on,” he said, turning the sound up.
“Sir,” CJ began.

“After she’s done talking.”

In the back of the room, John was avoiding eye contact as Elizabeth answered her first question. He was really going to hear it from her when this was over.

“It’s a situation not unlike what was happening a few months ago in Latvia,” she was saying. “The tensions rose to a point where a huge percentage of the poor rose up in protest. In a lot of ways, Riga was lucky that it didn’t escalate beyond that point.”

John hazarded a glance up and found Elizabeth’s eyes on him as she drank from her glass of water. He shook his head and rolled his eyes, and she tore her attention back only when the next question was asked of her.

Really, what were the odds that Latvia would come up?

“‘Compassion is the groundwork upon which all stronger relationships must be built,’” the President was reading. “And I assume you meant stronger rather than stranger.”

“Did that happen again?” Sam asked, staring at the paper. “I’ve got to find out whoever’s doing that and fire him.”

“It might be me,” said Bartlet. “You know how much I like my little jokes.”

“They’re hilarious,” CJ said absently. She had left the sofa and was instead watching the panel as it was broadcast.

“Oh, CJ,” said the President, “if I’m not allowed to watch the panel, you’re not either.”

“Hang on, sir,” she replied. “She’s doing really well.”

“This is the point where I refrain from saying ‘I told you so,’ right?” he said. “But wait, I’m the leader of the free world. I told you so.”

“Sir, really,” CJ said, “you need to watch this.”

As the panel continued, Elizabeth was getting more and more relaxed. That much was obvious to John. She wasn’t even tapping her foot. Instead, she breezed through questions with a grace that astounded him, if not everyone else in the room.

A reporter in the front row was recognized by the moderator, and he stood. “Arnaut Cézanne of *Le Monde*,” he said, his accent thickly French. “My question is for Dr. Weir. What are your feelings on Tahiti?”

She smiled widely. “I love Tahiti,” she said. “Are you offering to take me there?”

Laughter filled the room, and Cézanne shook his head. “Perhaps another time, Doctor. I meant to ask your feelings on Tahiti’s current political situation.”

Then to the surprise of everyone, including Cézanne, her answer was not in English. In clear French that startled everyone, she said, “*Je pense que la majeure partie des problèmes d’ordre politique concernant Tahiti résulte de l’habitude qu’ont les politiciens Français de considérer*...
votre territoire comme leur résidence secondaire au lieu de garantir au Tahitiens l’autodétermination qu’ils méritent.”

“Etes-vous en faveur de l’indépendance de Tahiti?” the reporter asked.

“Je suis favorable à toute mesure prise par le peuple Tahitien selon leurs meilleurs intérêts,” she replied. “Si les Français sont tellement opposés à l’indépendance, je leur suggère de chercher de meilleurs endroits où passer leurs vacances. J’ai entendu dire qu’il faisait un temps splendide aux Îles de Lérins en ce moment.”

Cézanne and a few others in the room laughed, and Elizabeth smiled. “Does that answer your question?” she asked.

“Oui, Doctor,” he replied. “Merci.”

By the time the French reporter sat down, the three people in the President’s suite were no longer working. “Did she just—” Sam began.

“Answer that guy in perfect French?” CJ finished. “How many languages does she speak?”

“Five, that I know of,” Jed replied.

The questions moved on to other people, and they turned back to the speech. After a few minutes, Sam suddenly asked, “Was she on the VP short list?”

“No,” said Jed, quite calmly marking something else on the speech.

“Why not?”

“She wasn’t ready.”

“And Bob Russell was?”

“Sam,” CJ warned.

Jed took off his glasses. “He’s got a legitimate point,” he said. “The first woman to serve as Vice President will have to be a lot more ready for the task than any man ever has, especially as an appointed VP. It’s unfortunate but true.”

“When will she be ready?” Sam asked.

Jed looked up at CJ. “What do you think?”

CJ was watching the television, where Elizabeth was fielding another question. “She’s ready now.”

Elizabeth was answering another question when the soft voice of another woman reached John’s ear. “She’s doing very well,” the person said.

John looked over and down to see Donna Moss standing beside him. “How’d you sneak up on me?” he asked.

“I’m catlike,” she replied. “And it helps that you were completely immersed in what Doctor Weir was saying.”
John looked back at the stage, where Elizabeth was wrapping up her comments on this question. “She’s doing very well.”

“Can you take a walk with me for a minute?” Donna asked. “I’ve just got an administrative thing to clear up.”

“Sure.”

They slipped out of the room and into the corridor, which was relatively empty. “What do you need?” John asked.

“Well,” Donna said, “this is going to sound a little strange. I have an old friend from college who’s a biologist, and she’s currently studying penguins in Antarctica. She emailed me today and happened to mention that they’re supposed to be getting a massive storm by the end of the week, and that they’re not expected to be able to get planes or helicopters in or out.”

He frowned. “So what does this have to do with me?”

“Well, I know you’re stationed in Antarctica,” she said. John had to remind himself not to register surprise at this, though he suspected he might be too late. “It might save you quite a bit of trouble and time if you left Sydney for McMurdo instead of going back to Washington, then Colorado, then Antarctica.”

Uh oh. That made a lot of sense, and John couldn’t think fast enough. “Well, uh, that’s, uh, that’s nice of you to offer,” he said, “but I’m pretty sure I’ve got some meetings to be at on the plane on the way back.” Never mind the fact that Donna could check the schedule for that. “Besides, I don’t want you to go to any trouble,” he quickly added.

“Trust me, it wouldn’t be any trouble,” Donna replied. “I’ve already checked into flights leaving from this area of the Pacific for McMurdo. I’d be able to get you in without any trouble.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” John replied. “I’m supposed to accompany Dr. Weir back to DC anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Thanks anyway.”

Donna smiled. “Well, I’ll let you get back into the panel.”

At the end of the two hours, Elizabeth was asked to come to a reception, but quickly passed on it. She either needed a nap or needed to find John. Perhaps she needed both.

She found him in the lobby of the conference hall, waiting for her with his arms crossed over his chest. As she walked toward him, she realized that it was the first time since the kiss that she’d actively sought him out, and momentarily she wanted to rescind her rejection of the invitation and go back inside. Seeing him with his hair sticking up in all directions was not helping her think through things very clearly.

“You did good, Elizabeth,” he said, echoing something she’d said to him many months before.

“Dad always said I could act.” It was true. The calm, collected diplomat who had just been answering questions for a couple hours was not a reflection of what had been going on in her head for most of a day and a half.
Her eyes dropped to his mouth for half a moment before she looked at the glass doors. Right at the moment her brain was getting too preoccupied with the night on the balcony. John was a very good kisser. Very good.

“Elizabeth?”

She looked back at him reluctantly. “Yes?”

“Let’s get back to the hotel,” he said. “You can change into something more comfortable, and then we can get something to eat.”

“Think I can get a nap in before the President’s speech tonight?”

“If I have to beat back the reporters with a stick.”

He smiled, and Elizabeth looked away again. It was sweet and unexpected, and right now she needed to focus on something other than how much she wanted to kiss him.

They walked toward the door, and he placed his hand on the small of her back as they stepped over the threshold. “Are you glad it’s over?” he asked.

“Yes, I really am,” Elizabeth replied. But now she had other things to worry about, not the least of which was what to do with John Sheppard.
Chapter 10

Elizabeth crashed shortly after their late lunch. John, not wanting to wake her by having the television on, decided to head down to one of the lounges on the first floor to see if he could find something resembling sports to watch. Granted, part of his motivation was just to get away from her for a little while. She was confusing him, and physical proximity seemed to make matters worse.

Truth be told, Elizabeth always confused him, from the moment she’d rushed into that chamber in the Antarctic research base. With everything that had been going on in the moments after he’d sat down in that chair, he’d tried to make sense of what was happening aside from the whole whacked-out gene thing, and Elizabeth Weir had not fit into the puzzle at all.

After that, he couldn’t figure out what she wanted from him or why. For a long time, he’d just assumed that he was there to be Gene Boy, but by and by Elizabeth began to rely on him so much it startled him. By the same token, he’d come to lean on her, though it was a lesson learned and unlearned more than once. That horrible day of the storm had put so much blood on his hands. He knew deep down that it would have been necessary anyway, but his actions that day hadn’t been in defense of the city.

Certainly, if anyone on the expedition had been killed in cold blood, he would have been livid, but it was past time to acknowledge something more. The idea of Elizabeth bleeding to death on the control room floor haunted him yet. Three words—“Weir is dead”—had sent him on a rampage.

John forced himself away from that train of thought. Still, he found himself drawn to her, and he wandered to her open door and watched as she lay on top of the covers, fast asleep. There were still newspapers on the bed with her, so he went quietly to clear them off for her. He set them on the night stand, and for a moment he felt an absurd urge to brush her hair from her forehead.

There was a knock on the suite door, and John pulled himself away from Elizabeth’s bedside to answer it. Danny Concannon was on the other side, and when the two men saw each other, Danny’s face registered surprise. “What are you doing here?” he asked.

“It’s my room,” John answered, already annoyed. “What do you need?”

“I was looking for Elizabeth,” the reporter said. “Must have the wrong room. Can you tell me which one is hers?”

“She’s asleep,” John replied, trying to obfuscate the issue.

“Where?”

“In her room.”

“Which is where?”

John resisted the urge to slam the door in his face. “You know, Danny,” he said, stepping out into the hallway, “you’re not giving me many reasons not to punch you in the face.”

“Then my work is done,” said Danny, smirking. “What’s stopping you?”

John closed the door with more force than was strictly necessary. “Her.” Without another word, he walked away.
CJ had enough on her hands trying to get President Bartlet to the site without Donna running after her at the hotel. “CJ!” the woman was calling.

“Donna,” CJ replied, “I need you to get with the press and stay with them at the speech. You’re probably going to get a lot of questions about foreign policy, so I need you to refer them to the State Department officials who’ll be answering questions at the hotel when we get back.”

Pad and pen in hand, Donna started jotting things down. “What, you don’t want me clarifying foreign policy for the President?”

“Not unless you had a briefing from State while I wasn’t looking.”

“Do you need me to assign someone to count the number of times the President’s interrupted for applause?”

“Already have Kevin on it.”

“Which Kevin?”

“Massey.” CJ glanced at her watch. “Hey, did you need me for something?”

“Yeah,” said Donna. “You know how you had me finding out what Danny’s got?”

“Yeah.” They started to walk. “You said he had little pieces that didn’t make sense, so I gave him an interview with Dr. Weir to get him to stop looking for whatever he’s looking for.”

“Yeah, you gotta cancel it.”

CJ stopped dead in her tracks, grabbing Donna by the arm to spin her around. “What do you mean, I gotta cancel it?”

“You have to cancel the interview, CJ,” Donna said. “I did some more looking in the last two days. What he’s got isn’t enough on its own, but if he talks to Dr. Weir, he’ll have it. You have to cancel the interview.”

“Donna,” CJ began, in disbelief, “how much do you know?”

“Enough.”

Slowly, CJ nodded. “I’ll get on it,” she said. “Get to the press bus.”

The only sports John could find on the television in a small lounge on the ground floor was rugby. He didn’t really understand the game, but it was better than politics. It was nice to space out for a while and watch grown men beat the crap out of each other. It was a little like hockey, only without the ice, skates, and armor.

An hour into the game, Elizabeth announced herself from the doorway by saying: “What are you watching, and why?”

“Rugby,” he replied, getting up. “And because it’s on.”

She smiled for a moment before befuddlement settled on her expression. “You don’t have to get up when I come into the room, John. And why are you down here?”
“I didn’t want to wake you.”

“I see.” Elizabeth glanced at the television. “So, rugby?”

“Yeah, I don’t get it either.”

“Do you even know who’s winning?”

“Not really, but I think that makes it more amusing.” He gestured to the sofa. “Have a seat? We can watch the President’s speech if you want.”

Her lips quirked. “That’s quite a concession.”

He shrugged. “All good things come to an end.”

So they sat down, and John found the channel, wondering just how dull this was going to be.

But before the speech even started, Elizabeth turned toward him a little, bending one leg and pulling it up onto the couch. With her arm resting on the back of the couch, she laid her hand on his shoulder. John glanced at her sidelong and decided to press his luck.

“Am I forgiven?” he asked.

Elizabeth turned her head, and he met her gaze. For a second her eyes flickered down; he struggled not to smile. “Forgiven for what?” she asked in return, looking back to the television.

John smirked to himself. Elizabeth’s hand remained on his shoulder, and as the President began his speech, John patted her knee and let his hand rest on her thigh.

Her cell phone was supposed to work in Australia, but CJ was starting to wonder if it actually did. She’d tried the office of Danny’s editor six times before resorting to every White House office number she had. Josh wasn’t in, Toby wasn’t in, not even Margaret was in. She resisted the urge to kick something, knowing that she was standing in the wings of the theatre and that a crate hitting a wall or the chief of staff breaking her toes would be quite audible over the President’s speech.

Letting out a long, frustrated breath, she punched in Toby’s cell phone number and waited while the phone rang. After four rings, a very groggy voice on the other end said, “CJ, can you hang on a minute, please?”

“Sure,” CJ replied, though she suspected that he had set the phone down and didn’t hear her.

A few seconds later, she heard what she thought was crying, and Toby picked up the phone again. He sounded out of breath as he spoke. “What do you need, CJ?”

“Well, first of all, how—” She stopped suddenly. “Why are you breathing so hard?”

“Because the cell phone woke Molly up and she started crying,” Toby replied. “And at the moment she’s trying to take the phone away from me and eat it.”

“Well, don’t let her do that.”

“Brilliant suggestion.” Toby sighed. “What do you need at six in the morning?”

“I’m so sorry about calling so early. The President’s in the middle of his speech right now and—"
“How’s he doing?” he interrupted.

“The President? He’s doing very well.” Applause broke out in the hall again. “The audience is eating it up.”

“Well, that ought to make Sam happy.” There was a long pause, in which she wondered if this was the first time Toby hadn’t watched one of the President’s addresses. “What do you need?”

“Nothing that can’t wait an hour,” she replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it.”

“Well, I think you’re lying,” Toby said. “I think you wouldn’t be calling in the middle of the President’s address if it weren’t pretty important.”

“I needed to talk to an editor at the Washington Post,” she replied. “I couldn’t get anyone to pick up a phone in his office, but I suppose that’s because business hours haven’t started yet.”

“Do you need me to get a phone number for you?” he asked.

“No, I’ll just try back in a couple hours. Thanks anyway.”

“Okay, CJ?”

“Yes?”

“Don’t ever wake my kids up again.”

“You bet.”

CJ closed the phone and let out a long breath. At least now she knew she was just an idiot, rather than completely crazy.

As the President came down off the stage, CJ was applauding. “Well done, sir,” she said. “You going to walk the rope line?”

“Yeah, might as well,” he replied.

“Well, we could get into the cars, go back to the hotel, do our post-game analysis, and get a good night’s sleep.”

He looked up at her like she was crazy. “What’s gotten into you?”

CJ tried to remain casual. “I’ve got to call Danny’s editor in about two hours.”

“Why not now?”

“Why not now, sir?” she repeated. “Because it’s seven o’clock in Washington and no one in a nine-to-five job is at work yet.”

“Are we going to have to hide Elizabeth tomorrow?” Bartlet asked. They emerged in the open air then, and he started waving at the crowd.

She lowered her voice. “Donna talked to me again,” she said. “She did some more hunting, and
while she says that he doesn’t have enough for a story now, he might be able to get enough out of Dr. Weir to substantiate it.”

By then they had reached the motorcade, and after they got into the limousine, he said, “How does Donna know all this?”

“I don’t know, sir,” said CJ. “But believe me, that’s going to be one of the first questions I ask her once we get all this straightened out.”

President Bartlet’s speech went on for an hour and could have gone for another without John noticing. Somewhere around the point that Bartlet started talking about self-determination, Elizabeth shifted again, leaning her head on his shoulder instead of her hand.

By the time the speech ended, John had his arm around her and she was as relaxed as he’d ever seen her. He was playing idly with her hair even as he reached for the remote to turn the television off. “He did that well,” Elizabeth murmured.

“Lizabeth,” John drawled, “I don’t want to talk about my commander-in-chief right now.”

She looked up at him with a wicked smile, then practically crawled up his body to kiss him. He moaned as their lips met, his hands reaching to steady her. She arched into his touch with a tiny, amazing sound, and it was all John could do to keep from pinning her to the couch and having his way with her.

He heard the footsteps and voices a moment before they entered the room, and with some effort he broke the kiss. “Dr. Weir?” a man said in surprise. John twisted around to see that Seaborn fellow in the door, along with Colonel Carter.

He held back a groan for more than one reason as Elizabeth scrambled off of him. “Yes?” she said, breathlessly rearranging herself as she stood.

“Sorry, the President’s on his way back,” he said, pointing with his thumb toward the entrance of the hotel. “CJ said they need to speak to you about something.”

“Right, I’ll be—I’ll be right there,” Elizabeth said, still blushing. “Where do I—”

“I’ll walk with you.”

Elizabeth spared a quick glance at John before following the other man out. This left John alone with Colonel Carter. “I, uh, I should get back upstairs,” he said.

Carter seemed amused. “I suppose that explains the rumors about you and Dr. Weir.”

John raised a brow. “With all due respect, ma’am,” he said, carefully emphasizing the appellation, “the rumor mill at the SGC isn’t exactly silent where you’re concerned.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“Just saying that the rumors about me don’t involve violations of regulations.”

Colonel Carter flushed. “No, Major,” she said, “your violations of regulations are public knowledge.”

John rolled his eyes. “What do you want from me?”
“I want to know what I ever did to you,” she replied. She gave him a false smile. “I haven’t known you long enough to make you hate me.”

“I heard enough the first time I was in Colorado,” he said. “You practically blackmailed Dr. Weir. Now you’re buttering her up like you’re her best friend in front of Hammond and Alexander.”

“You think I have something up my sleeve?”

“Yes!” Briefly he wondered why this had to come up now, why he was making it obvious that Elizabeth had told him about Colonel Carter, but he didn’t care. “Yes, as a matter of fact, I do. People don’t just turn around like that unless they’re pushing their own agenda.”

“You’re out of your mind, Major,” said Carter. “And you’re way out of line.”


She laughed sharply. “You’re going to stand there and accuse me of trying to sabotage Dr. Weir? Have you been listening at all?”

“It’s happened before,” John replied. “Publicly supportive of a person who’s done what’s right, only to be screwed when it comes down to the wire?”

“Major, what happened to you in Afghanistan?” she asked. “Tell me, how paranoid did Antarctica make you? I don’t want Atlantis. In case you haven’t noticed, colonels have a tendency of dying in the Pegasus galaxy.”

There was a stunned, awkward silence, until a third voice said, “What are you two doing?”

John knew the voice immediately, but he turned anyway to see Elizabeth in the doorway, still imposing despite her still-red face and mussed hair. “Talking about classified information in a room that anyone can walk into,” she continued, “which I just demonstrated by walking in here! Colonel, you of all people—”

“Doctor,” Sam began.

“No, Colonel, I’m not your commander anymore,” Elizabeth interrupted. John wanted very much to sneak out through the room’s other door. It had been an idiotic place for this discussion. “I can’t give you orders, and at this point I think we’re just going to have to give each other the benefit of the doubt and assume that there aren’t any ulterior motives at play. But you know better than to do this in public.”

She turned to John. “And you,” she began, but she seemed at a loss for words for a moment, a rare occurrence for Elizabeth Weir, and a dangerous one. She stared him down as he half-hoped the floor would swallow him. “Come with me.”

The hotel was in sight when CJ decided to start going over the general plan for the rest of the night. “Sir,” she said, “we’ve got some people from State who are going to keep the press busy most of the night. You’ll stop by for a few questions. You’re likely to get at least one on capital punishment because of what Dr. Weir said on the subject this afternoon.”

“I read the memo,” he said. “Though I was disheartened to see that we still can’t figure out when it’s spelled with an A or an O.”
“It was misspelled?”

“Yes, ma’am, it was,” the President replied. “But if capitol-with-an-O punishment means we’re putting Congressmen in the stocks at the foot of the Capitol building steps, I’m changing my position.”

CJ laughed. “I’ll set up another seminar on spelling when we get back to the White House,” she said. “We’ve got some new people who still haven’t learned how to spell Tel Aviv or New Delhi.”

“So I blow off a few questions,” he continued, “and then we’re doing the staff thing?”

She nodded. “You’re going to say nice things to the staff, who came here despite the fact that it isn’t beach season. Then we’ll be going over tomorrow’s activities. It should be a light day, and then the dinner in the evening.”

“Well, that sounds good.” He looked out the window. “Oh, look, here we are.”

Elizabeth practically dragged John by the hair to the nearest empty room with a door. Once she’d settled on a vacant conference room, she slammed the door shut and got in his face. “Explain yourself, Major.”

The rank clearly startled him. Elizabeth didn’t let him answer. “Did I or did I not tell you not to get into it with Colonel Carter?”

He blinked. “No, you didn’t.”

“On Air Force One, I told you to back off Colonel Carter—”

“You told me not to call her a—”

“John!” She almost stamped her foot. “What were you thinking? I told you to back off, and I assumed you were smart enough to know that meant not to get into a shouting match with her!”

“Well, excuse me for thinking that I should stand up for you occasionally!” he yelled. “You have no idea what she’s telling Hammond and Alexander behind your back!”

“Neither do you!” Elizabeth let out a frustrated breath. “John, you can’t just run around making blind accusations like that. Colonel Carter wasn’t behaving professionally either, but at least she didn’t accuse you of attempting a coup!”

“So standing up for you is unprofessional?”

“When you do it like that? Yeah.” She sighed and leaned back against the table. “John, I have an expedition to lead, and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs is probably going to recommend that I be relieved of command and—”

“And you’re trying to do everything alone,” John interrupted. “You don’t have to. I know it doesn’t always seem like it, but I’ve been here to help you from the beginning. I can do better, but so can you.” He paused, shaking his head. “You know what scares me most?”

“What?”

“You getting removed from command,” he said. “You’re not the only one who’s worried about that.”
“John, I—”

“Elizabeth,” he interrupted. “Don’t say it if you don’t mean it.”

“I’m sorry,” she said, genuinely. “I know you were trying to help.”

“I’m sorry too,” he replied.

They stood there for a while, until the silence grew awkward and Elizabeth thought to leave. But then he shifted forward, touching her hand tentatively. “Elizabeth.”

Against all reason, she cupped his cheek. “John, you know this could be a problem, right?”

He shrugged. “So’s being mad at each other for days at a time,” he said. “We managed to get through that without sinking the city.”

She laughed softly. “I suppose we did.”

This time, she was smiling when he kissed her. It was gentle and sweet, almost polite, like he wasn’t sure she wasn’t going to run away from him or slap him. Then, when it was clear that she wasn’t going to resist, things started to get a little more interesting. With one hand on her back, he drew her nearer, and then her fingers found their way into his hair. When he drew back, she whimpered involuntarily, and John smiled.

Things started getting very warm in a hurry. He pushed her hair away from her neck and started a series of soft kisses down her skin. His stubble grazed against skin that hadn’t been touched like this in a long time, and she sighed, half-closing her eyes. When she threaded her fingers through his thick hair, he made a contented sound deep in his throat.

She wasn’t thinking about Atlantis or Wraith or politicians or reporters or secrecy. All she could think of was how he was touching her. And so it was only appropriate that at the moment she stopped thinking entirely, the door to the conference room flew open.

Her eyes flew open as the sound of people chattering filled the space and suddenly died. Elizabeth really, really didn’t want to look, but as John took a step back, she found she had no choice. There in the doorway were Jed and Abbey Bartlet, looking as shocked as she felt.

There were more people standing behind them—in fact, it seemed like the entire staff was standing behind them—but it would have been quite enough had it just been the President and First Lady who’d walked in on this. Elizabeth opened her mouth several times, trying to come up with something to say, but her vocal cords just wouldn’t make a sound.

Finally, Abbey held her hand out in front of her husband. “Pay up, boyfriend.”

“What?” John said. Elizabeth was surprised that he could think, though his saying that did make it seem like he thought Abbey was calling him her boyfriend.

“Pay up,” she repeated, tearing her eyes away to look at the President. “You bet me twenty dollars that they wouldn’t end up together by the end of this trip. Now pay up.”

Behind the President, CJ suddenly burst out laughing, and several others followed suit. Wanting very much to hide, Elizabeth covered her mouth with both hands. The President shook his head in her direction while he dug through his pockets for the money. “Can’t believe I lost a bet because the world’s foremost expert in diplomacy and international relations can’t keep her hands off a flyboy,” he said.
He slapped the money down in Abbey’s palm. She looked quite pleased. “Dr. Weir, there’s a red mark on the side of your neck,” she said. “Want me to take a look at it? I’m a doctor, after all.”

Instinctively, Elizabeth covered the spot where John’s mouth had just been, suddenly fighting the urge to collapse into a fit of giggles. “No, ma’am, that won’t be necessary.”

“Are you sure?”

“Abbey,” Jed interceded, “let’s not embarrass them more than they already are.”

“But it could be so much fun!”

“Sir,” John began, “let me apologize for being out of uniform—”

“Nonsense, Major,” the President replied. “The uniform would have clashed with Dr. Weir’s flannel pants.”

Feeling rather like she was sixteen and had just been caught in the back seat of her boyfriend’s car, Elizabeth hazarded a glance at John. He looked just as dumbstruck, but then she did succumb to laughter, leaning back against the conference room table and shaking her head.

“Normally I’d tell you to get a room,” Bartlet continued, “but you’ve already got one. I know this because my office is paying for it. For that matter, I may be paying for it.”

Elizabeth nodded, still trying to control her embarrassed laughter. “We’ll let you have the room now, sir,” she said, taking John by the hand and pulling him toward the exit.

As they stepped out of the room and the staff entered it, CJ followed them into the hall. “Dr. Weir?” she said.

“Yes?”

“I’m going to need to speak to you in the morning.”

Elizabeth didn’t need to know why. It could only be about Danny and the impending interview. She nodded. “Bright and early.”
Chapter 11

When Elizabeth woke, she was confronted with two things that seemed oddly out of place. The winter sunrise was already filling the room through gossamer curtains, and a scent that was not hers occupied the space. It was deep and musky, and utterly unlike the light in the room, which cast shadows and prisms all at once. Then as cognitive function developed again, she began to realize that it was not just the scent and the light in the room with her.

There was something soothing in the way John was wrapped around her. She’d never been one to feel comfortable with another body in bed with her, but this morning she didn’t mind so much. Waking up alone to remember the mortification of the night before, when the Bartlets had walked in on them making out in a conference room, would have been worse.

He was snoring lightly, a sound that made her smile despite herself. Trying not to wake him, she reached over and ran her fingers through his hair, which for the first time seemed appropriately messy. But he was frowning, too, and Elizabeth said, in a voice thick from a few hours of rest, “Are you dreaming, John?”

He didn’t react to her voice or her touch, except to move himself impossibly closer. She smiled, suspecting he was a heavy sleeper, like she was. And it had been a long night for them both. After retreating from the conference room, they’d spent a very long time talking about the myriad of ways in which this could go wrong. They both knew that they had to be able to separate personal from professional, waging war and keeping peace in the right arenas. After they had talked and only come to a conclusion that it would be difficult, it had begun with a kiss, rich, deep, and intoxicating, and ended in each other’s arms.

Elizabeth wanted to waste the morning away in bed, letting the sunrise bathe her in the peaceful light she’d been too long without. She wanted to stay with John more than was strictly reasonable. It was Sunday—not quite the day of rest, but close enough. It was too bad she had to meet with CJ.

She sat up carefully, hoping not to wake John. The crisp air of the room greeted her skin, and while she thought about lying down to stay in the warmth under the blankets for a few more minutes, she heard a muffled groan from John as he moved into part of the space she’d just vacated, like he was looking for her. Elizabeth ruffled his hair. “I’m over here, John,” she said.

He didn’t open his eyes, but he touched her back lightly, as though confirming her presence. “Why’d you move?” he asked, sounding very groggy. “I was comfortable.”

“It’s six-thirty,” she replied. “Little after, actually.”

“And it’s Sunday,” he said. “Close the drapes and go back to sleep.” She looked over her shoulder at him, with his head on the pillow, staring up at her. “I didn’t think you’d be here when I woke up.”

She shook her head, a little confused. He must have still been half-asleep to make that confession. “It’s my room.”

Two fingers began tracing lazy patterns on her back. “I wouldn’t have blamed you if you’d left, or kicked me out.”

“John,” she said, turning away from him and looking down at her hands, “if I’d had a problem with waking up next to you, we wouldn’t have gone this far in the first place.”
There was a longer silence before she looked at him again, but in the interim his fingers never left her skin. It was a little strange. Elizabeth knew that John always wanted desperately to be doing something, but she had never considered that that might extend to his personal relationships. It was like he needed to touch her to prove to himself that he hadn’t dreamed it all. And the feeling of his fingertips against her skin was starting to get addictive.

“Why are you up so early?” he finally asked.

“I have to meet CJ, remember?”

“Well, this is a first,” he said, flattening his hand against her back. “Don’t think I’ve ever had a woman leave me for another woman.”

Laughing, Elizabeth leaned over and kissed him lightly on the nose. “I’m sure it won’t take long.”

Before she could move away, he held her in place with one hand on the back of her neck. “Tease.” With that, he pulled her down for a kiss that didn’t taste particularly good, but made up for it in other ways.

Elizabeth pulled away and got out of bed before John could get any ideas and act on them. Then she heard a knock at the suite door, so she grabbed the robe provided by the hotel, slipped it on, and answered the door.

On the other side was CJ Cregg, newspaper in hand. “Did I wake you?” the woman asked.

“No,” Elizabeth replied. “I woke up about ten minutes ago. I was just getting ready to come see you.”

“Well, I decided I really needed to talk to both you and Major Sheppard, so the mountain came to Mohammed for a minute.”

She smiled. “I’ll get him up.”

Leaving CJ in the sitting room, Elizabeth went back into her bedroom and closed the door. “John,” she said, “CJ’s here.”

He rolled over and buried his face in her pillow, mumbling something. “John,” she repeated, coming around the bed. “John, get up so CJ can talk to us.”

“Five more minutes,” he said.

In response, Elizabeth pulled the covers off the bed. “Up,” she ordered.

She headed to the door, and John turned over, sitting up in bed. “Mean.”

“Only when I have to be.”

Elizabeth stepped out into the sitting room again, where CJ was leaning against the back of the sofa. “He’ll be out in a minute.”

“No rush,” CJ replied. She waited a beat before saying anything else. “Listen, I didn’t get a chance to tell you yesterday, but you did very well at the panel. I admit, my hesitations about it were unfounded.”

“I didn’t think you wanted me to do it,” Elizabeth said.
CJ seemed surprised, but didn’t answer to that directly. “Occasionally the President gets a crazy idea he won’t shake,” she said. “It’s not usually apparent that it’s not just something he thinks would be cool.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I’ve known him for almost fifteen years now,” she replied. “I don’t think he’s changed much.”

“I’ll tell you, the learning curve with this man is pretty incredible,” CJ said. “I’ve worked for him for almost seven years now, through two national campaigns, and I’m still catching up.”

“I don’t think anyone other than Abbey really keeps up.” Elizabeth sighed and walked to the kitchen area to start some coffee. “He must trust you, though, to have named you chief of staff. Leo McGarry must be quite the act to follow.”

CJ smiled and shook her head. “You have no idea.”

“I might,” said Elizabeth. “I stepped in for a general whose staff loved him. I was just a political appointee. I had no business being there—didn’t know anything, didn’t have any appreciation for the history.”

“And your position on the military didn’t help matters.”

“Not so much. Daniel Jackson had to hold my hand through practically everything.”

“At least I have the benefit of knowing these people already,” CJ said. “Even if they are all twelve years old.”

Elizabeth laughed again. “I work with twelve-year-olds too,” she replied. “Only some of mine have built nuclear weapons in their spare time.”

CJ pointed at her. “You definitely win.”

As she spoke, the bedroom door opened, and John entered, pulling his shirt down over his torso as he came in. “Win what?”

“Worst office conditions,” said CJ.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” John replied. “Elizabeth has an ocean view. Nice little balcony just outside her office.”

“What have you got?” Elizabeth asked.

“A bush, I think?” she replied. “It’s been a while since I’ve had time to look out my window.”

John ran both hands through his hair, making it messier than it already was. “So what did you need, Ms. Cregg?” he asked.

“Please, it’s CJ,” she said. “I’ve got a few things. First of all, Dr. Weir, I’m canceling Danny’s interview.”

“Good,” John said.

Elizabeth shot him a look, but didn’t say anything to him. “Why?” she asked.

“I had Donna do some spying for me,” CJ replied. “She didn’t know anything about the Stargate, but she saw that Danny had enough information to be able to lead you into confirming something.”
She set the newspaper aside and folded her hands. “He doesn’t have it yet, but we’re going to need to keep the both of you away from him today.”

“What about McKay and Carter and Teyla?” John asked.

“They’re meeting with Hammond and Alexander for most of the day,” said CJ. “They’ll be talking about science and the Pegasus galaxy.”

“Why aren’t we being included?” Elizabeth asked.

CJ picked up the newspaper again and held up the front page. Below the fold was a picture of Elizabeth at the panel the day before, smiling at a questioner while running her finger around the rim of her glass of water. “I’ve got a dozen more where this came from,” CJ said. “*Le Monde’s* was actually quite flattering. Or at least Zoey Bartlet’s translation was. The *New York Times* has a black-and-white picture of the two of you arriving at the site. It’s back a few pages, but it’s still in there.”

“So what’s this got to do with anything?” John asked.

“You’ve never been much involved with politics, Major, have you?” When John shook his head, CJ looked over at Elizabeth. “If you’re going to be spending your time on Earth with him, you’re going to need to teach him a thing or two.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I can’t go underground for a day,” she explained. “It’ll raise more questions than it suppresses.”

“We just have to keep you away from Danny,” CJ continued, “not the press in general. So the President has invited you to join him and his family for mass. You’ll accompany him for the rest of the day, and then attend the dinner tonight.”

“And this is going to work?” John asked.

“Well, right now it’s the only plan I’ve got,” CJ said. “About half an hour before you’re supposed to meet Danny, I’m going to have Donna pull him aside and tell him it’s cancelled. He’ll fume at her for a while, at which point she’ll tell him to call his publisher. His publisher will explain to him the story I told her last night. Then he’ll come and yell at me for obstructing his story, and hopefully by then I’ll be able to lock him in a suitcase on Air Force One.”

“He really hasn’t changed, has he?” Elizabeth asked.

“Doesn’t seem like it.” CJ set the paper aside. “But speaking of cover stories—”

“Tell me we’re not using the cover about radar.”

“We’re not. I’ve got a new one for you that’ll work only because Danny hasn’t met Teyla yet,” CJ replied. “You’re on a high-security mission, code-named Prometheus.”

Mass wasn’t quite as excruciating as John was expecting, though he was apparently squirming enough that at one point Elizabeth laid her hand on his leg to still him, not even looking away from the priest as she did so. Then, almost absentmindedly, he traced a circle on the back of her hand with his index finger before slipping his hand under hers to grasp it. Thus they sat through the rest of the service, and when they followed the First Family out of St. Mary’s Cathedral, his fingers were still laced through hers.
They stepped out into the sunlight, and John squinted as he put his cover on. “Elizabeth, you didn’t get my sunglasses, did you?” he asked.

In response, she reached into her purse and pulled them out. “Don’t get used to this,” she said. He smiled, and though she rolled her eyes, she didn’t object when he hesitantly kissed her cheek.

A few feet away, the President cleared his throat. A faint, rosy blush appeared on Elizabeth’s cheeks, and John released her hand to put on his sunglasses. “I like having you around, Elizabeth,” Bartlet said. “It’s like having another easily embarrassed daughter around.”

“As long as you’re enjoying yourself, sir,” she said.

“Are you sassing me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Do you hear that?” he said, looking at Abbey. “She’s sassing me. Here we are on the steps of a cathedral, and she’s sassing me.”

“Sir,” Elizabeth said, “we’re not on US soil, so I figured I could claim diplomatic immunity or something.”

“We’ll see about that,” he replied, pointing at her. “Come on, let’s get some lunch.”

The press corps wasn’t following the President on Sunday—they rarely did if the President was actually going to make it to mass—so Danny spent the morning preparing. He wasn’t exactly nervous about this interview, as it wasn’t going to make or break his career, but there was something big going on. He’d become a journalist because he wanted to be right and to tell the truth. This was huge.

Every once in a while, since the moment CJ had announced that Elizabeth was on the trip, Danny had wondered if this desire was heightened at all by the fact that things had not ended well between them. He’d used her, but that had probably only made things worse. When they first started seeing each other, she’d confessed some amount of discomfort at being that close to a man who might want information from her. But that kind of rejection seemed to be a common theme in his life. Just because he was interested in women who shared his passions.

And then there was a part of him that just wanted to see her again and talk with her. She had one of the finest minds of her generation, and he’d give anything to have a long, leisurely conversation with her. Unfortunately, he suspected that she was sitting atop the biggest story of his life, if he could just find what held all these pieces together.

It was their warmest day thus far in Sydney, beautiful, cloudless, and crisp. Soon after they’d finished lunch in a restaurant which had been cleared by the Secret Service with impressive efficiency, Zoey Bartlet grabbed John by the arm and dragged him off for a few hours of shopping (which John would probably term torture later). Elizabeth thought it was rather amusing, but she wasn’t about to say that in front of a frowning father who also happened to be the President.

So they and Abbey headed back to the beautiful park near St. Mary’s. With Secret Service agents in various places on Hyde Park’s Avenue of Figs, Elizabeth and the Bartlets walked along the tree-lined path. For a little while, the clicking of the two women’s heels against the tiles was all they heard, but then the President spoke. “Elizabeth,” he said, “I noticed Major Sheppard didn’t take the Eucharist this morning.”
“He’s not Catholic, sir,” she replied, “but he thought it would look bad if he stayed in the pew while everyone else with the President went up.”

“In other words, you told him.”

Elizabeth smiled. Jed Bartlet had always been able to read her well. “Yes, sir,” she said. “He told me he wasn’t Catholic before we left the hotel, so I told him what to do.”

“Well,” said Abbey, “it’s good to know you haven’t lost your touch.”

“Speaking of that,” the President added, “you did very well yesterday at the panel. CJ didn’t want me to let you do it, but you proved her wrong.”

“Thank you, sir,” Elizabeth replied. “It was my honor.”

“I was particularly impressed with the part where you answered the reporter from *Le Monde* in French,” he continued. “Though for all I know, you were saying that I’m a frumpy old man who fell off a turnip truck in Idaho yesterday.”

Elizabeth laughed. “I thought you spoke French, sir.”

“Are you kidding?” Abbey said. “He once called me his little cheese. I have no ungodly idea what he meant to say.”

“Abigail,” Bartlet said, “I thought we weren’t going to mention that again.”

“Oh, shut up.”

As they neared the War Memorial at one end of the lane, Elizabeth smiled and shook her head. Around Washington there had been rumors about this couple during difficult times, but she had never believed them. They adored each other, and the arguments were only testament to that.

It had been almost ten years since Elizabeth, then working on her doctorate, had had to place her ailing father in a nursing home in upstate New York. Jed Bartlet, then Governor of New Hampshire, had invited her to Manchester for part of the Christmas holidays. Having no family left but a father who didn’t remember her, she had made the decision easily. Late one night she had wandered into the kitchen and heard Jed and Abbey arguing in the next room. At the end of it, Jed had found her, and Elizabeth hadn’t been able to deny that she’d heard it all. When she’d tried to apologize, he merely shook his head and said, “You’ll get it someday.”

Elizabeth wasn’t quite sure, but she thought she understood that now. They loved each other enough to challenge each other, and the strength of these two never interfered with their loyalty.

Jed and Abbey were holding hands at the pool in front of Anzac memorial, and Elizabeth almost felt as though she were intruding. But then the President said, “Elizabeth, would you be up to a game of chess?”

“I haven’t gotten much better since the last time we played, sir.”

“That’s okay. I like winning,” he replied. “Besides, we can talk over chess.”

“Zoey,” John was saying, “I’m really starting to regret not kicking you out of the staff cabin a few days ago.”
“Why?” the girl asked, walking up to the register. John followed, carrying the purchases of the last two stores with one hand and his hat and sunglasses with the other. “Because I made you come shopping, or because I think you should get flowers for Dr. Weir?”

“Does it have to be one or the other?”

She gave him a sweet smile as she handed her credit card to the cashier. “I heard you were being a jerk to her yesterday. You ought to make up for it.”

“I wasn’t—hey, where’d you hear that?”

“Word travels fast, John,” she said. “If you’d wanted it to be private, you should have had that argument outside.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he replied. The cashier thanked Zoey for the purchase, and they headed out.

“I gotta say, though, it’s weird talking about an old professor like this.” Zoey waited at the exit for John to put his sunglasses and hat back on. “It’s one of those rules never to think about your professors dating people.”

“I don’t know about that,” John replied as they continued their walk. “I had a sociology professor when I was an undergrad—never mind. You don’t want to know.”

Zoey laughed. “Seems like there’s an awful lot you won’t tell me.”

“Well, some of it I can’t tell you without risking court-martial.” They kept walking for a bit, and then John asked, “Zoey, did your father tell your agents to kill me if I move too quickly?”

“Not that I know of,” she said, “but you never know with Dad.”

“It’s kind of weird having armed guards around.”

She looked pensive for a moment. “I’m still not used to it,” she said, quietly. She took a deep breath. “I don’t think I’ll ever like it or get used to it, but…”

As she trailed off, she looked down at her feet. John had to take her gently by the arm to guide her around a small sign that had been placed outside a shop entrance. “But?” he prompted.

It was a long time before she looked up. “An agent died because of me,” she finally said. “I didn’t even know her that well. It was her first day on my detail.”

“Would it have been easier if you’d known her?” he asked.

Zoey shook her head. “I don’t think anything would,” she replied. “But I don’t complain about them being there any more. Not when they’re doing their job.” She looked up at him and smiled briefly. “But that’s how it’s supposed to be. Sorry if I’m ruining the mood.”

“It’s okay,” said John. “It’s not like that’s really an easy thing to deal with.”

“You’ve been in battles before,” Zoey replied. “Have you ever had to see something like—”

“Not quite like that,” he said, “but… There’s this movie. I’ve been trying to remember the name of it for months. This guy’s flying a plane in an air show, and it catches fire on the runway. His friend runs up and tries to save him, but he can’t get him out of the cockpit. So he kills the pilot to save him from burning to death.”
“What are you saying, John?”

“I had to do that once.” Now it was his turn to stare at the ground. “I had to kill a man to save him from a horrible death.”

They stopped walking, and Zoey quietly said, “I don’t know what to say.”

“It’s hard to live with,” John replied. “It gets easier, but… I think that might be what it’s like for you.”

They walked in silence for a while, until they reached a florist. “Oh, look,” Zoey said, “a flower shop.”

“I am not getting her flowers.”

“You could get me flowers.”

“Zoey…”

One of the State Department officials who had come on the trip was scheduled to give the press briefing that afternoon. He was expected to get continued questions on the President’s speech the night before, and likely a few on Doctor Weir’s comments. There were also some anti-Japanese riots going on in China, so the official had his hands full. In the meantime, Donna stood in the back and desperately wished that CJ had given this assignment to anyone else.

Danny was uncharacteristically quiet during the briefing, which was making Donna more nervous. She had information Danny didn’t have, but he also had a brilliant investigative mind. He was going to figure it out eventually, and she knew that he was sitting quietly in the briefing because he was at the precipice of a much bigger story. She could only hope that this would work.

The man from State called a full lid, and the reporters thanked him, slowly dispersing. Donna started walking through the crowd. “Danny?” she called.

He turned around at the sound her voice. “What can I do for you, Donnatella?”

She took a deep breath. It was showtime.

Elizabeth was not the world’s greatest chess player, and it was entirely possible that she was facing off against the world’s greatest chess player, so it really wasn’t helpful when she saw the chess set the President intended to use. On the west side of Hyde Park was a giant chess board, complete with pieces that almost came up to her knees. She hazarded a glance at Bartlet, and when she saw the eager, almost boyish grin on his face, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“Are you laughing at me, Doctor?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” Elizabeth replied, still laughing. “This is your chess set?”

“I’d get the agents in here to be the chess pieces, but they’ve got some crazy rules about how they need to be looking for people trying to kill me.”

“Jed,” Abbey said, “you won’t mind if I head back to the hotel, do you? I’d rather not watch Elizabeth get crushed.”

“Thank you for the vote of confidence, ma’am,” Elizabeth said dryly.
“Any time.”

“It’s fine with me,” Bartlet replied. Abbey came over and kissed his cheek. “I wanted to talk to her about some stuff anyway.”

“Well, I’ll just find Zoey and steal John back from her,” said Abbey. “That’s if you don’t mind, Elizabeth.”

“As long as I get him back after business hours.”

Abbey waved to them as she walked off, an agent speaking into a microphone at his wrist as he followed her. Elizabeth looked at the President, and they stepped down from the path to the chess board. They spent the next few minutes rearranging the pieces, as they’d just been left in the middle of a game. Then, after flipping a coin, Elizabeth took the white side. From across the board, Bartlet said, “You know getting involved with him is dangerous.”

“Yes, sir,” she replied. “But I think ignoring it is just as dangerous.”

“What do you mean?”

She thought about how to answer him while lifting a giant pawn and moving it forward two spaces. “He was upset about what happened to me with Kolya,” she replied.

“When the—the Genii tried to take the city?”

Elizabeth nodded. “He was angry with himself for not being able to stop Kolya when he thought I was dead,” she continued. “It just got worse from there. After it was all over, he wanted me to start carrying a gun, but I absolutely refused.”

“Do you even know how to fire a gun?”

“Yes, actually.” She watched as he moved a pawn with his foot. “When I started talking about wanting to be a diplomat, my father made me learn.” She shook her head. “But a gun wouldn’t have done me any good with Kolya.”

“But the major didn’t like you being so helpless,” the President said.

“Not at all.” Elizabeth picked up her king’s-side knight and carried it across the row of pawns. “I wasn’t going to back down about carrying a gun, and John was frustrated with that. But the only way he could act out his frustrations—”

“Was by defying an order.” He walked forward, moving a pawn before stepping back to his place on the other side. Elizabeth watched, unsurprised that he knew of Kavanaugh’s report. “He couldn’t make you carry a gun, but he could force you to let him take action.”

“Yes, Mr. President,” she replied. “That’s exactly what happened.”

Bartlet shook his head as Elizabeth moved another pawn. “You really shouldn’t try to psychoanalyze your boyfriend, Doctor,” he said. “It only leads to all manner of unpleasantness.”

“Sir, he’s not—”

“Don’t even try that on me, Elizabeth.” He tried looking stern, but she wanted to laugh at the attempt. “I lost twenty bucks because of you, and while I suspect my wife’s interference, I’m not going to question it. However, you ought to call it what it is.”
“For the record, sir,” she replied, watching him move a bishop, “I would have lost that bet too.”

Bartlet chuckled. “I figured as much.” Then he grew somber, and Elizabeth was struck for the thousandth time at the great presence his small frame commanded. “Hammond and Alexander spoke to me yesterday,” he said.

She closed her eyes but said nothing, letting him continue. “Don’t worry,” he said. “Alexander would like very much for me to pull you and Major Sheppard both from the expedition, but he’s the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, not overlord of the armed forces. I picked you to head the most important mission in the history of mankind, Elizabeth. I stand by my decision, and I stand by you.”

“So you’re going to come back with me to Atlantis?” she asked, a small smile forming.

“To meet the life-sucking aliens? No,” he said, drawing out his last word. “I’ve got Congress to deal with, and that’s quite enough.” As Elizabeth nudged a rook forward, he continued, “I would, however, like to talk to you about Major Sheppard.”

“Mr. President, I know my opinion on the matter is somewhat biased,” she said, “but we really can’t lose him. To the expedition, it would be like having both arms cut off. There is no one else more necessary to the city and to the people in it.”

“Relax, Doctor,” Bartlet replied, waving one hand. “I’m not pulling him back to Earth. I’ve got something different in mind.”

Donna led Danny into a little-used room a few feet away from the impromptu press briefing room and closed the door behind them. “Danny,” she said, “we have to cancel your interview with Dr. Weir.”

For a minute, Donna thought he was going to take this pretty well. Extraordinarily well, even. But then she saw the subtle change in his expression, and braced herself for impact.

“Why?” he demanded.

“Because—”

“CJ’s screwing with me, isn’t she?” he interrupted. “She’s the one who set this up in the first place! You know what, I didn’t want an interview with the President. I want to interview Dr. Elizabeth Weir, and I’m going to.”

“Danny,” Donna began, but Danny was into a full-blown rant.

“What makes her think she can do this?” he yelled. “What makes her think I was even going to ask about anything sensitive?”

“Because she knows you,” Donna replied. “Dr. Weir’s been out of touch for months, and CJ knows you want to know why.”

“Yeah, I want to know why!” Danny almost looked like his nostrils were flaring. “She’s had people spying on me, hasn’t she? You and Larry and the phone call—”

“It was Ed, but yes,” she said. “You’ve got a lot of information that you’re not supposed to have access to at all, so I think you’re lucky CJ isn’t tracking down your sources.”
“How do I know she isn’t?”

“Because she isn’t, Danny,” Donna said, starting to get a little frustrated herself. “This is CJ. She knows you can’t control leaks. And this is me telling you she’s not.”

“She can’t cancel the interview.”

“Call your publisher,” she finally said, showing the last card in her hand.

“You mean my editor.”

“No, your publisher,” Donna repeated. “CJ talked to her. She’ll explain this.”

“Donna,” Danny said, shaking his head, “what the hell is going on?”

“Call your publisher.” With that, Donna turned and left.

Abbey caught up to Zoey and John as they were coming out of a touristy gift shop, and she smiled to see the major carrying most of her daughter’s purchases for her. For all his complaining, he really was a gentleman.

She stepped out of the limo and waved to the pair. “Mom, what are you doing here?” Zoey asked.

“Well, hello to you too,” Abbey replied. “Your father was using Dr. Weir as a sacrificial lamb, so I decided to find you two instead of watch.”

“He’s doing what?” John asked, a look of alarm on his face.

“They’re playing chess,” Abbey said, quite nonchalantly. “Elizabeth isn’t exactly a match for Jed.”

“She’s a terrible chess player.” He frowned. “Why would they bother?”

“Because my husband likes to win.” She smiled. “He also wanted to talk about some things with her.”

Abbey reached up then and straightened his hat. “Hey!” he said, backing away from her. “You’re as bad as my mother.”

“Excuse me?”

It took him a beat to figure out what he was supposed to say. “You’re much worse than my mother, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” She smiled at them, and they moved toward the limousine. Once they were all settled inside and an agent thumped the roof, Abbey asked, “So did you two have a good time?”

“It was shopping, Mrs. Bartlet,” John replied.

“Yes, we did,” Zoey said, giving John a look. “Even if he wouldn’t take my advice and get Dr. Weir flowers.”

“I got you a flower,” he countered, waving at the bright orange flower currently tucked behind Zoey’s ear.

“You did,” she said, “but you should have gotten her flowers to apologize for being a jerk last
night.”

“I think they made up for it last night, Zoey,” Abbey said.

“Well, he didn’t tell me that!”

“You said there were things you didn’t want to know about old professors,” he said.

“Then why did you just tell me?”

John let his head hit the headrest. “Is there any way I can get out of this conversation?”

Abbey reached over and patted his knee. “Not in this lifetime.”

Danny had had stories killed by the White House before. They were good at hiding things, almost too good. CJ had done her best to get him off the Shareef story, and if it hadn’t been for a couple lucky breaks on his side, she probably would have succeeded. But this was just outrageous. There was no way Elizabeth was off selling Girl Scout cookies in Mozambique. The secrecy engulfing her had to be proportional to the size of the story.

Once he was back in his hotel room, he was feeling a little less like strangling CJ, but he was sure that feeling was going to return as soon as he saw her again. It was too early in the day to start drinking (even for him), so he settled instead on watching soccer. Then, a few minutes later, he picked up the phone and dialed.
“Finished the crossword already?” Abbey called from the other room.

“Twenty minutes ago,” Jed replied. He’d been ready and waiting to go down to the ball room for at least that long now.

“What I right?”

He sighed and picked up the paper. “Seven across, ‘Plato’s account of the sinking of Atlantis,’” he read. “It was Timaeus.”

“Critias,” she countered, coming into the room. She was putting earrings on, though Jed wasn’t sure why she needed anything else sparkly to go with this gown, which was rather sparkly and green already.

“Plato never finished it,” she continued as she put on her shoes. Jed stood up, sensing that it was almost time to go. “He got through descriptions of this beautiful utopia and stopped writing.”

“But he never got around to the sinking in Critias,” he argued, putting his coat on. “‘In a single night and day of misfortune, the island of Atlantis disappeared into the depths of the sea.’ That was from Timaeus. And Plato wasn’t writing Atlantis as a utopia. They were the ancient enemies of Athens. I don’t know why everyone keeps forgetting that.” Of course, when the people at the SGC had first proposed the Atlantis expedition to him, he’d wondered why none of them thought Plato’s opinion of the Atlanteans warranted consideration.

“Because most of us never bothered reading Plato, Jed,” Abbey replied. “Someone says Atlantis and they think of Disney movies.”

“Right,” he said, as she straightened his tie. “Because we should definitely use movies with singing crustaceans as historical sources.”

Abbey sighed. “Why did I marry you again?”

“Because you enjoyed being corrected.” He kissed her before she could object. “Now, can we get out of here?”

Afternoon chess ended with the expected humiliation, though the President claimed she had gotten better. Elizabeth rather suspected that he was trying to apologize for sending her to a galaxy of life-sucking aliens, with a headstrong, ridiculously attractive pilot who could talk her into almost anything.

Not that she could blame John’s presence on Bartlet. She’d been the one to plead with him, shell-shocked as he was that day, to come with her. No one could have imagined the consequences.

Elizabeth finally came back to the room with an hour to get ready for the dinner. John was nowhere in sight, though she suspected he was getting ready. He never liked to be late, and from a cryptic comment he’d made earlier in the week, she suspected he wasn’t all that familiar with the uniform he was supposed to wear. So she didn’t bother him, instead heading to her room to get ready.

She’d gathered up everything she needed for a shower before she looked at the bed. The bed was
neatly made with new sheets, so it wasn’t entirely surprising that it took Elizabeth a moment to see the stuffed kangaroo sitting on top of the blue comforter. Curious, she set her things aside and picked it up. It was small and cute, and in its pouch a folded piece of paper had been stashed. Elizabeth pulled it out and opened it. In hurried handwriting was written, “Sorry about last night, Elizabeth. I didn’t mean to embarrass you in front of old friends. Or the President, for that matter.”

Elizabeth smiled and shook her head. Sometimes John was impossibly sweet.

Half an hour later, after taking a shower and getting into her evening gown, she stood in front of the mirror and took it all in. It had been a while since she’d had an invitation of this level, and despite the fact that she knew she was going to want to leave after half an hour, it was exciting at the same time. There would be music and dancing and fine food and elegant clothes, and it would be nice to play dress-up for a while. It had been nice to spend time in clothing of the real world instead of cargo pants and a t-shirt.

Of course, even when she was living in Washington, she didn’t often have the chance to dress up like this twice in one week. At the opera she had been conservatively dressed in black simplicity, but not tonight. Despite the fact that John couldn’t tell the two dresses apart, this one was quite different from the first. For this night, she would sparkle.

As she skimmed her hand against the shimmering overlay, she heard John calling her name in the other room, sounding rather panicked. She stepped out into the sitting room just as John burst out of his room, a white band in his hand. His jacket was elsewhere, but otherwise he was fully dressed. “Elizabeth, I have no idea what to do with this,” he said.

She almost started laughing at him. Here was a man who faced certain doom with no more anxiety than the amount with which he would face a cup of tea, and he was almost terrified by the prospect of having to tie his own bow tie. “Never done this before?” she asked.

“Well, on the three occasions I’ve had to wear a bow tie, I’ve used one of those pre-tied ones,” he explained.

“Those are no fun,” Elizabeth replied. “With this you can untie it at the end of the night and look classy.”

“Elizabeth,” he said, “am I ever classy?”

She took the tie from him and looped it around his neck. “Classy enough.” She pulled his head down for a quick kiss before starting to tie it for him.

“Why do you know how to do this?” he asked, running his fingers down her bare arm, from shoulder to elbow.

“Simon always liked bow ties, but never could figure out how to tie them himself.”

It took Elizabeth a moment to realize what she’d said. When she did, her fingers slowed and made a mistake. “Who’s Simon?” John asked.

She took the tie apart and bit her lower lip, not looking up at John’s face as she tried again. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Well, yeah, it does,” he said. “You said it like I was supposed to know who he was.”

She hesitated again as she folded one end of the tie into a loop and pulled the other end over it. “An
old boyfriend,” she said. “Not that long ago. I left Earth without saying goodbye to him in person.”

She hazarded a glance up as she adjusted the tie and saw a puzzled look. “Why?” he asked.

As she was done with the tie, she had to remove her hands from him, but then he took her hand in his. It was a feeling that was becoming all too comforting. “I wanted to go,” she replied. “More than anything. The President had asked me to serve, and I wanted to so badly. But Simon would have talked me out of it, or at least tried.”

“I can’t imagine a man who wouldn’t.”

Elizabeth looked down at their joined hands. John was rubbing his thumb against her skin. “What do you mean?”

He brought his other hand to her chin and made her look up. “I wouldn’t want you in another city, let alone another galaxy.”

“John.”

He shook his head, and his eyes searched her face, his fingers brushing across her hair. Then he kissed her, a touch that began almost ethereally in its softness. Elizabeth thought of the night before, when John had talked and kissed her into bed with him. His powers of persuasion were really something quite remarkable, she mused, though she hoped he didn’t use this particular method on just anyone.

“You look beautiful,” he said, his mouth a breath away from hers. She could smell his musky aftershave; she touched his face and decided he must have just finished shaving.

“We better finish getting ready,” Elizabeth said.

“Yeah,” he replied, releasing her hand and taking a step back. “I gotta figure out where all the hardware goes on this uniform.”

She turned to go, but at her door she paused. “John,” she asked, “did Zoey Bartlet talk you into apologizing?”

“Nope,” he said. “Her mother did.”

A presidential motorcade was always comprised of a small armada of vehicles, including two limousines. The group from Stargate Command was settled cozily into the back of the second one. On the way to the dinner, the three women spoke cordially and casually to each other, to John’s surprise. It seemed that Teyla and Carter had spent quite a lot of time together during this trip and come to like each other quite a lot. Teyla’s friendship with both Elizabeth and Carter seemed to soften the two women’s attitudes toward each other, and nothing blew up before they arrived.

John and Rodney, being closest to the door, exited first, and John stayed to help the women out. It seemed that the local news was covering the event, so the White House Press Corps was augmented by some fifty more people. When Elizabeth placed her slender hand in his gloved one and stepped out into the twilight, flash bulbs went off all over. She gave him a small, private smile and rolled her eyes before she turned to the press and gave a little wave.

“The hat looks ridiculous, you know,” she said, taking his arm.

“I’ve thought so ever since ROTC.” They watched as an usher escorted Teyla, Carter, and McKay
elsewhere. “Why do you think I’ve been in a rush to get inside all week?”

“I just figured you were cold.”

Up ahead, the President waved them forward, and they made their way over to where Bartlet was standing and talking with the press pool. “Ladies and gentlemen, Doctor Elizabeth Weir,” he said as they approached. “And some guy she picked up off the street.”

“Major John Sheppard,” she said, laughing. “You needed us, Mr. President?”

“We’ve got a question about Tahiti,” the President replied, “but mostly I just wanted to embarrass you.”

“Well, you’ll have to try harder.”

“Don’t tempt him, Elizabeth,” said Abbey, standing on the other side of her husband.

John looked around while Elizabeth heard and answered the question about Tahiti, and he found Danny Concannon in the back of the group, watching him. He didn’t look very happy at all. Had the circumstances been any different, John would have gotten Elizabeth out of there as quickly as possible.

But there was nothing he could do for the moment, so he turned his attention instead to Elizabeth, and found himself rather amazed by the effortless ebullience she displayed, joking around with the President while answering reporters’ questions. A few times they engaged John in the round robin, but mostly he watched in awe at her capability.

CJ walked up behind them, and after a few moments, she said, “One more question, guys. We’ve all got to get inside before the food’s gone.”

“Major, how do you spell your last name?” someone asked. “It’s for photo captions.”


“If I’d known we were going to have a spelling bee,” the President said, “I wouldn’t have let Zoey go in ahead of us.”

They laughed politely and thanked the President as he and the rest headed inside. “The press is going to be let in?” John asked as they made their way toward the elegant etched glass doors.

“It’s not entirely uncommon,” Elizabeth said. “But we’ve been seated higher than them, so it’s really Rodney, Teyla, and Colonel Carter who are going to have to deal with them.”

“What do you mean, higher?”

“You’ll see.”

A few minutes later they passed the President, descended some stairs, and alighted in the spacious ballroom. Music and light filled the room, making John feel rather like he had stepped into a movie of some sort. Tables with long, white tablecloths were scattered about, and a large area had been left open, presumably as a dance floor. At the moment, it seemed that people were mostly mingling and drinking. As he and Elizabeth came down the last few steps and an usher led them to their table, the latter seemed like a very good option.

The others were some distance away, seated with three of the President’s staff. John pushed
“Elizabeth’s chair in for her, and as he sat next to her, he said, “Can’t we sit with people we know?”

“Well, I think we’re going to be in the same boat tonight,” she replied. “I doubt I know anyone we’re sitting with.”

“Seems to me like you know half the Western world.”

“This is uncomfortable for you, isn’t it?”

He resisted the urge to loosen his tie. “You could say that.”

Elizabeth placed her hand over his, and he clasped her fingers. “It’s not entirely comfortable for me either,” she confessed. “I know what to do, but I’ve gotten used to not having to.”

John thought about risking her lipstick and kissing her, but then someone else arrived at the table.

“Why, Elizabeth Weir,” the person said, “what a surprise.”

She turned to the intruder and suddenly smiled. “Your Lordship,” she said, getting up, “you are the last person I expected to see tonight.”

“Well, I must do a better job announcing myself, mustn’t I?” The tall British man kissed her cheek, and then looked around at John. “Shall I assume you’ve got rid of your old boyfriend in exchange for a better model?”

“Your Lordship, this is Major John Sheppard of the United States Air Force,” Elizabeth said as John stood up. “John, Lord John Marbury, Earl of Sherbourne, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s Ambassador to the United States.”

“It’s a pleasure,” John said.

“Ah! It seems we have something in common,” Marbury said, shaking John’s hand. “Aside from taste in women.”

“Elizabeth,” he began, “did you—”

“No,” she replied. “Never even let him kiss me.”

“Well, I’ll have to rectify that immediately,” Marbury said.

“No, thank you, your Lordship.”

“A military man,” Lord Marbury said, looking John up and down. “Bit of an odd choice for you, isn’t it?”

“I’ve learned to broaden my horizons,” she replied. “Did you just come by to say hello?”

He suddenly looked around like a swarm of bees was coming at him. John decided that this Marbury fellow was rather twitchy. “No,” he said. “Unless I’ve been led astray—which has happened before, but not very often—this is my table.”

“Well, this ought to be interesting,” John said dryly.

Elizabeth shot him a look, but the Englishman laughed. “Indeed it will,” he said. “Now, I wouldn’t object to a drink. What say you?”
At a state dinner back home, Zoey would have been seated with the staff or with a date, but since her parents were guests at this one and not the hosts, she was put at a table with them. This would be interesting, or excruciating. Her father would complain about her dress being too low in the back while her mother would be finding single men to set CJ up with. All in all, once dessert had been served, Zoey wandered away.

Not far away, she spotted Dr. Weir with the British ambassador and John. There was an empty seat at the table, so walked up, touched John’s shoulder, and said, “Mind if I sit here for a few minutes?”

He looked up, surprised. “Hi, Zoey,” he said. “Have a seat.”

She slipped into the chair and nodded in Marbury’s direction. “Good evening, your Lordship,” she said.

“Hello,” he replied. “Have we met?”

“About a million times,” she said. “I’m Zoey Bartlet. The President’s daughter.”

“Ah!” he exclaimed. It seemed he’d already been into the alcohol. “You must excuse me; I have a terrible memory for faces.”

Zoey glanced at the other woman at the table, who was sipping from a glass of wine and looking like she was trying not to burst out laughing. “Hello, Dr. Weir,” she said. “It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s good to see you too, Zoey,” Elizabeth replied. “It’s been a while.”

“Well, I don’t think you have much reason to come up to New Hampshire very often.”

“Not particularly, but we’ve been on the same trip for a few days now,” she said, her eyes sparkling. “I was beginning to think you were avoiding me.”

Zoey smiled in kind. It was no wonder her father liked this woman so much. “What did you guys think of dinner?” she asked, instead of acknowledging Dr. Weir’s question.

“The main course was excellent,” said Lord Marbury.

“Dad said that it wasn’t as good as René’s,” Zoey said. “But he complains about everyone’s cooking unless it’s his own.”

Elizabeth laughed, and Zoey looked at John. He shot her a cocky grin and said, “Anything’s better than military food.”

They all laughed a bit at that, and Zoey glanced around the ballroom. The orchestra was playing a light waltz. “There’s supposed to be dancing,” she said. “I wonder why no one’s started it yet.”

“Most people don’t like starting things,” Elizabeth replied.

“Well, I don’t mind,” Zoey said. “John?”

He raised an eyebrow and looked over at Elizabeth. “Since when do you need my permission for anything?” she said.

“And here I was looking for a way out.”
John stood anyway, looking down at his uniform for a moment and turning a small medal over. He held his hand out to Zoey, who smiled. “I’d be delighted.”

Once on the dance floor, John led her in a simple waltz, with the occasional turn thrown in for fun. “Where’d you learn how to dance?” Zoey asked.

“Eh, my mom made me learn,” he replied. “She thought it might come in handy. No idea why.”

She glanced over at her parents’ table. Her father looked like he was trying to be grumpy about this, while her mother was smiling and shaking her head. “You’re an awfully polite dancer, John,” she remarked.

“Yeah, well, I find that helps when my partner’s father could have me shot and just make up a reason later.”

Zoey laughed. “He’d never do that.”

“Fine,” John replied. “He can still banish me to Antarctica, and while I didn’t mind it the first time, I don’t really want to go back.”

She shook her head. “You have to learn to live a little, John.”

“Trust me,” he said, “I live enough.” He looked over the top of her head for a moment. “Looks like your plan worked.”

“What do you mean?”

“More people decided to dance.”

Zoey kept John on the dance floor a while longer, through at least two more dances. By the end of the first, they’d run out of alcohol back at the table, and Lord Marbury had left Elizabeth alone in search of inebriation. Briefly she considered joining Rodney and Teyla for a few minutes, but any such plan was abruptly rendered impossible by the appearance of last reporter she wanted to see.

“Hi, Liz.”

Elizabeth’s shoulder blades twitched back at the sound of the voice. She forced the muscles to relax, but Danny had certainly seen the motion already. He came around her and sat in John’s chair. “Hi, Danny,” she said.

“Is anyone sitting here?”

“Of all the things in the world,” Elizabeth replied, “stupidity suits you least, Danny.”

“Glad to know you haven’t changed much either.” He grabbed her glass of water and drank from it. She sighed. “What are you doing here?”

“My job, Elizabeth.” He looked at her squarely. “It’s what I do, and I’m good at it.”

“Yes, Danny, you are.” She looked out to the dance floor. “Sometimes I wish you weren’t quite so good at it.”

He stood abruptly. “Come dance with me, Liz.”
Elizabeth simply glared. “Oh, come on,” he said. “It’s just a dance with an old friend. And I promise not to call you that again.”

Warily, she stood. “Are you still a reporter?”

“It’s not something I switch on and off, Elizabeth.” Giving her no more room to object, he grabbed her hand and led her away.

Across the increasingly crowded dance floor, John caught sight of Elizabeth and assumed Lord Marbury had taken her to the floor. But two turns later he realized that she was with Danny, and he froze in place.

Zoey stepped on his foot. “John? What’s wrong?”

“I’m sorry,” he said, taking a step back. “I have to stop him.”

“Who?”

“Danny Concannon.”

John rushed toward the tables as quickly as he could, hoping to find a friendly face who could intervene while he found someone to take care of Danny. At this point he’d settle for Rodney, but when he reached the table where he’d been sitting earlier, Lord Marbury had returned.

“Strange,” Marbury said, “I left a pretty brunette here. What did you do with her?”

“Your Lordship,” John replied, “I need you to get Elizabeth away from a reporter.”

The man looked down at his scotch. “I’m sorry. Do I know you?”

John just stared for a moment. “I was sitting four feet away from you all through dinner.”

“Oh, yes, you’re the one sleeping with Doctor Weir. How silly of me.” John blinked and let it slide, not really wanting to know how he had that piece of information. “Now, young man, what is it you want me to do?”

“I need you to put down the scotch and get Elizabeth away from the reporter she’s dancing with.”

“You want me to put down my scotch,” he repeated, pointing at the glass in his hand, “and rescue Elizabeth? Isn’t that your job?”

“I have to find someone else while you do this,” John said. He was almost at the end of what little patience he possessed.

“Does this by chance have to do with the little excursion you, Elizabeth, and some others have been on in the last few months?”

Had he not been gripping the back of a chair anyway, John might have fallen over. This raving, alcoholic lunatic knew about the Atlantis expedition?

“I’ll take it from your stunned silence that it does,” Marbury continued. He set his drink down. “Now, I will go interfere with your people’s freedom of the press, while you find someone to fix this.”
Donna was supposed to stay with the two astrophysicists and the nomad for the evening. But when she saw Major Sheppard rush from the dance floor, leaving Zoey Bartlet behind, she deliberated for only a moment before leaving the three unattended and heading toward him.

She caught up to him as he was leaving the British ambassador, and he nearly ran into her. “Major Sheppard,” she said.

He spun around. “Donna, I really can’t—”

“You need to find CJ,” she interrupted. “She stepped out to take a phone call.” Donna pointed to a door. “She’s out there.”

The major touched her arm. “Thanks, Donna.”

He hurried off again, and Donna moved amid the tables. She watched as Lord Marbury strode up to Danny and Elizabeth, neatly removed the woman from Danny, and continued the dance with her. Danny headed off in the opposite direction, and Donna started walking as quickly as her heels and gown would allow.

She caught up with him ten feet away from the orchestra, on the far side of the ballroom. “Danny,” she called.

“Donna,” he replied, “you’ve been screwing with me enough this week. Now, unless you’re telling me I get to talk to someone about the garbage my publisher gave me today—”

“CJ’s going to talk to you in about ten minutes.”

He stopped. “This is for real?” he asked. “You’re not screwing with me again?”

“Ten minutes,” Donna said.

“Ten minutes. I’m holding you to that.”

She watched him walk off before heading back in the direction of Major Sheppard, waiting near the door until he came back in. “Is everything all right, Major?” Donna asked.

“Yeah,” he said, running his hand through already-messy hair. “CJ wants to talk to him soon.”

“Good, ‘cause I told him he was meeting with her in ten minutes.”

Donna stepped through the door and found CJ on the other side, cell phone in hand as she took deep breaths. “CJ?”

“Donna, I need you to give me a reason not to have him shot right now,” CJ said, quite calmly.

“It’s against the law?” Donna suggested.

“That the best you can come up with?” CJ sighed heavily. “Did you talk to him?”

Donna nodded. “I told him you wanted to see him in ten minutes. I’ll let him know you’re back here.” She started to go, but paused. “Can I get you anything?”

“Bottle of Jack Daniels?”

“This is a pleasant surprise, your Lordship,” Elizabeth remarked as Danny turned away.
Lord Marbury took one of her hands in his and placed his other on her back. “The pleasure is all mine, of course,” he replied. “I am, as you know, always one for rescuing damsels in distress.”

“I was handling it just fine, thank you,” she said as he started leading her.

“Well, the gentleman you brought along tonight seemed to think you needed some assistance.”

Elizabeth looked up at her partner curiously. “John sent you?”

“Yes, he was off to talk to someone else about the issue, I believe.” They turned counter-clockwise, and Elizabeth was somewhat amused by the setting of this conversation. “You should have told him that I knew what you’ve been doing.”

She raised a brow. “You should have told me you were coming tonight.”

“Alas, a diplomat’s work is never done, as you well know.” He sighed extravagantly. “I didn’t know until yesterday that I was coming at all.”

“So you came for the food and the booze?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, why did you come?”

She smiled and shook her head. “The President of the United States requested my presence on Air Force One, and I complied.”

“Oh, and speaking of Presidential requests,” Marbury continued, “I did manage to see some of your speaking engagement yesterday. I was quite impressed.”

“Thank you, your Lordship.”

“Your French is still quite sharp, as is your wit.”

“I still can’t believe I was flirting with a French reporter.”

“It’s something we all do from time to time. I nearly married one.”

Then, as Elizabeth was laughing, a hand landed on Lord Marbury’s shoulder. The pair stopped moving abruptly, and Marbury looked around. “Oh, it’s you again,” he said to John. “Tell me, did I complete my task faithfully and well?”

“Thanks,” John replied. “Hope you don’t mind if I cut in.”

“Not at all.” Marbury took Elizabeth by her hand and passed her over to John. “I believe I left a glass of scotch somewhere. I should see to it immediately.”

“You okay?” John asked as the ambassador left. He laced his fingers through hers and pulled her closer than her previous two partners had.

“I’m fine, John,” she said. “Lord Marbury was going to talk me to death, but that was better than him trying to get me to sleep with him.”

“I meant Danny.” Softly, he kissed her cheek.

“He had a lot of questions,” Elizabeth replied, “but he wasn’t getting answers from me.” She moved her hand from his arm to the back of his shoulder. “Can we talk about anything else?”
True to her word, Donna escorted Danny into a narrow, badly lit corridor ten minutes after Lord Marbury cut in and swept Elizabeth away. He had reason to think that that had been planned somehow, but the idea of the crazy British ambassador getting involved in this coverup was absurd enough to convince him to dismiss the idea. Besides, he had bigger fish to fry.

CJ was waiting for him, dressed in red, which was a color appropriate for how angry she looked. “Daniel,” she said, pointing to an open door, “in.”

He did as he was told, while CJ stayed outside a moment to say something to Donna. Then she came in, slamming the door behind her. “Danny,” she said, “there are no words for how much I loathe and despise reporters right now.”

“Glad to know you haven’t changed,” he replied. “Want to tell me what the hell’s going on, since you know I’m going to find out anyway?”

“Yeah,” she said. “You’re going to stop pursuing this story in the interest of national security.”

“You’re going to have to do better than that, Claudia. You’ve tried that one on me before.”

“Danny, I’m not pulling the wool over your eyes.” By then she’d come dangerously close to him. He could smell her perfume. “There are real matters of global security at stake here.”

“You know, that might work on anyone other than me, but I know her!” Danny lowered his voice. “It would take an act of God to get her past her objections to the military enough to have her dating that pilot she brought along.”

“It’s been fifteen years since you dated her!”

“And I’ve kept up with her!”

“Danny, I’ve said this to you before, and I’ll say it again. If you had a story, you’d write it instead of stalking a renowned diplomat.”

“Who fell off the face of the earth for months.” He narrowed his eyes. “You think I believe she’s been in North Korea all this time?”

“So you talked to your publisher.” CJ looked mildly relieved.

“Yes, I talked to my publisher,” he replied. “She told me Elizabeth had been in North Korea.”

“So why are you bothering me?” she demanded, her voice skyrocketing into a much higher register.

“What’s she doing there with an Air Force pilot with a black mark on his record and one of the world’s leading astrophysicists? Who, by the way,” he added, “hasn’t published since about the last time Elizabeth was seen in public.”

“She’s been in secret negotiations with them regarding their nuclear program,” CJ replied. “But as nuclear weapons aren’t exactly her forte, she’s taken Dr. McKay and Colonel Carter with her, since they’re both experts in nuclear technology.”

“And Major Sheppard?”
“He’s there as security for Dr. Weir,” she said. “On top of that, he’s one of the best pilots we’ve got, despite his record, so he stayed with the group in case they needed a quick escape.”

“And what’s Prometheus?” he demanded.

“The code name for the project,” she replied coolly. “We’ve suspected for a while that North Korea might sell its nuclear technology to, I don’t know, Iran, so in this case we’re the gods—”

“Trying to stop Prometheus from bringing fire down from the mountain,” Danny finished. “Wow, you really know how to cover something up, don’t you.”

“Danny—”

“Don’t worry about it, CJ,” he said. “You’ve done a better job covering whatever this is than you did with Shareef.”

John and Elizabeth only stayed on the floor for one dance. It was getting crowded now anyway, so they decided to head back to the table to check on Lord Marbury. “Why didn’t you tell me he knew?” John asked, out of the blue.

“If I’d known he was going to be here, I might have,” Elizabeth replied.

“How’d he know anyway?”

“Two years ago the ambassadors of France, China, and the UK were informed,” she said. “From what I understand, Lord Marbury’s reaction was rather incredulous.”

“Drunk people often are,” John said dryly.

Elizabeth laughed softly. “He is somewhat larger than life.”

“By which you mean an alcoholic.”

“As are countless other men with brilliant minds.”

They reached the table as Lord Marbury was wandering back to it, and suddenly they were joined by none other than Danny Concannon. Elizabeth fought the urge to lose all composure and just slap him. “Danny, are you learning impaired?”

“How very diplomatic of you,” Danny replied. “I was just coming over here to tell you I’m dropping the story.”

“Really.” Elizabeth felt John’s grip on her fingers tighten just a little.

“Secrets are secrets,” he said. “And whatever you’re doing must be tremendously important, or else they wouldn’t have you doing it.”

“That’s… very gracious of you.”

“I try. But I gotta tell you,” he replied, “a secret as big as this isn’t going to stay secret forever. Something this big is going to out itself. And when it does, I’ll be right there.”

“I’m sure you will.”

He stepped forward, and Elizabeth stiffened. Then, under John’s glare, Danny kissed her cheek.
“Good seeing you again, Liz. You look great,” he said. “I’ll see you around.”

He walked away, and for a while Elizabeth could think of nothing to say. Then Lord Marbury commented, “What troublesome creatures reporters are.”

Toward the end of the dinner, Donna came up to the President’s table and handed Jed a note. She took a few steps back, and he opened it and read the words “situation with Danny resolved.” At Abbey’s curious look, he smiled and put the note in his pocket. “Message from CJ,” he said. Then he turned to Donna. “I’d like to speak with Dr. Weir and Major Sheppard.”

She nodded and left. Abbey frowned at her wine glass. “I’m looking forward to the day when you’re not knee-deep in conspiracies,” she said.

“Well, look on the bright side, Abbey,” he replied. “At least I don’t get you involved in most of them.”

She gave him a very dirty look, and out of the blue she said, “It was Critias.”

Donna returned then with Elizabeth and John, so Jed turned to them. “Doctor, Major, please, have a seat.”

They took the two unoccupied chairs at his behest, and he continued, “Elizabeth, seven-letter word, Plato’s account of the sinking of Atlantis.”

“I saw that in the paper this morning,” she said. “The answer they wanted was Critias, but he never got around to the sinking in that one. A more correct answer is Timaeus.”

“You knew she was going to agree with you,” said Abbey. “Timaeus wouldn’t fit with the other words in the puzzle. Critias was the answer.”

“Is this how you do surgery?” Jed asked. “I’m supposed to put this car accident victim’s intestines back together, but instead I think I’ll put in a bubble gum machine. It’ll fit just as well.”

“Oh, don’t be absurd, Jed.” She rose from the table, picking up a bottle of champagne. “I’m going to find CJ. She looked like she needed a drink.”

Jed watched her depart, and it was a few seconds before he turned his attention to his guests. “Sir,” Elizabeth said, “you wanted to see us?”

“CJ tells me the situation with Danny has been resolved,” he said.

“Yes, sir,” John replied. “He told us he was backing off the story.”

“That’s good to know.” Jed sighed. “It’s not going to be the end of him on this, though.”

“No, sir.” Elizabeth leaned forward. “He told us as much. And he’s right. It’s all going to come out eventually.”

“Well,” he replied, “here’s hoping it’s a problem for the next guys. I’ve had enough trouble with secrets not staying secret.”

“Toby would tell you the first rule of damage control is to get it out yourself.”

“Toby’s paranoid.”
“Not arguing that.” Elizabeth smiled tightly. “I’m getting worse at this.”

“You’re just out of practice,” Jed replied.

“No, I…” She looked at John, who seemed to be at a loss for words. “I used to be comfortable in this setting. I’m not anymore. It’s like I’m not supposed to be here.”

“It’s because you were born with higher purpose,” he replied. “You both were. We all are. But you two are part of that lucky few who find it.”

“Yes, sir.” She paused for a moment. “Was there anything else?”

“There’s more I want to talk about, but it can wait until we’re on the plane tomorrow.” He picked up his glass of water and drank from it. “But I wanted to thank you both, and apologize for the hassle of following me halfway around the world.”

“It’s been an honor, Mr. President,” John said.

And Elizabeth added, “It always is.”
Chapter 13

Jed talked to reporters for a few minutes before boarding Air Force One. He’d intended to start back to work immediately, but then Abbey suggested (repeatedly) that he take a nap. It had been a late night, after all, what with the conspiracy to keep Danny from winning another Pulitzer.

So he slept for a few hours before heading into his office, where CJ was waiting for him. “What do I have today?” he asked.

“The team from Stargate Command,” she replied. “You’ve wanted to talk to them since you heard they were back on Earth.”

Jed put on his glasses and lifted a page from his desk. “I’m sensing mockery.”

“No, sir,” CJ said. “But you probably ought to meet with them and talk about something other than opera.”

“Bring ‘em in,” he replied. CJ moved to a door and opened it, and seven people walked into the room. “And what’s wrong with opera anyway?” he asked.

“Just not my cup of tea, Mr. President,” CJ replied as she exited.

“What about you, Major Sheppard?” Jed asked. “Dr. McKay? General Alexander?” He paused, walking around his desk. “I’ve never really understood people who say opera isn’t their thing. So it’s in another language. Most of the world speaks another language. Dr. Weir speaks five, but they’re only words, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Elizabeth replied.

“Only words,” he repeated. “Just things on paper. Just the foundation of human society. Or are they?” He turned to the dark-skinned woman, Teyla, looking strangely out of place in her Western clothes. “Do we reach for words alone?”

“No,” she replied, tipping her head to one side. “We reach for ideas. For dignity and honor. For family, in whatever form it comes.”

“That’s right,” Jed answered, nodding. “Put it another way, Dr. McKay.”

“We reach for music,” the scientist said. “The more perfect truth.”

“What makes the angels weep.” He looked back at Elizabeth, who was smiling a little. “The spirit of humanity is captured in thoughts too beautiful and complex for our lowly words, so we had to borrow a higher form of truth-telling. And that spirit is dignity and honor, family and love. Grasping at a point of light so dim we hardly believe it is there, and, when reaching it at last, searching the skies for the next challenge to conquer.”

He placed his hands on the desk behind him and leaned back. “You have gone farther than any group of people from this fair planet and made friends amid distant stars,” he said, with a glance at Teyla. “You’ve learned so much, and you’ve only begun to scrape the surface.” His eyes rested on Elizabeth, standing tall and smiling proudly next to John. “You’ve made mistakes. We all have, and we’ll continue to, but you must remember that you have good people with you, and supporting you here on Earth.”
At his last words he looked over the rest of the group, seeing silent affirmation of his words.
“There’s a poem,” he began, “about flying. Anyone know it?"

“‘Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth,’” Colonel Carter began quoting, “‘and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings; sunward I’ve climbed and joined the tumbling mirth of sun-split clouds,—and done a hundred things you have not dreamed of, wheeled and soared and swung high in the sunlit silence.’"

“That’s the one,” Jed replied. “Anyone know the rest?”

“‘Hov’ring there,’” General Hammond continued, from the back of the room, “‘I’ve chased the shouting wind along, and flung my eager craft through footless falls of air… Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue I’ve topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace where never lark, nor e’er eagle flew—’”

The general stopped suddenly, and Jed glanced at John. The major, like the other two pilots, didn’t hesitate. “‘And, while with silent lifting mind I’ve trod the high, untrespassed sanctity of space, put out my hand and touched the face of God.’”

Jed put his hands in his pockets and glanced at Elizabeth. “Maybe words aren’t such imperfect vessels after all,” he said.

“Perhaps not, Mr. President,” she replied.

“We’re no longer under the threat of Anubis,” he said, walking around his desk again to retrieve a cloth bag. He set it on the desk and beckoned the four from the expedition closer. “Generals Hammond and Alexander, along with Colonel Carter, have informed me that the threat to Earth—to the whole galaxy, in fact—is so diminished that the reason we sent you to the Pegasus galaxy no longer exists.”

“Sir,” Elizabeth said, beating Teyla to it, “we have an obligation to the people of the Pegasus galaxy, now that we’ve awakened the Wraith. And I believe…”

“Yes?” Jed prompted.

“I believe we still have something to accomplish there for our own people,” she finished. “I don’t believe our charter was limited to just defending Earth.”

He smiled. “Neither do I.”

He reached into the bag then, but paused. “My wife always tells me to give people things,” he said. “Apparently it’s some form of apology or gratitude or something, and I suppose this could be an apology for sending you off to the feeding ground of the Wraith. Or maybe for making you come along on this trip and causing you all kinds of inconvenience.”

He pulled two books from the bag. “I found these in a bookstore the other day,” he said. “They’re collections of photographs of Sydney, some of the most famous pictures in the world. Teyla, I’m sure your people are going to ask you to tell them of your visit to this world. I thought you might like to show them some of the places you saw.”

Jed held the books out to the young woman, who looked quite startled by the offering. “Thank you,” she said, as she stepped forward gracefully and took the books from him. “My people will be anxious to hear of Earth. I am sure these will be of great value in that.”

He smiled a little and nodded to her. “Rodney, John,” he continued. The two men looked away
from Teyla. “Elizabeth tells me you’re quite the chess masters, and that a man named Zelenka was the only one who decided to take a chess set to the Pegasus galaxy.” Jed pulled two boxes from the bag and handed them to the men. “Chess sets,” he said. “And I expect a game with each of you before we land.”

John was grinning. “Yes, sir, Mr. President.”

McKay was still staring down at the box. “Sir,” he said, “I’d like to take this opportunity to say I would have voted for you if, you know, I’d been an American citizen.”

Jed laughed and nodded. “Yes, Doctor,” he replied, “I’m sure you would have.” He pulled the last and smallest item from the bag. “Elizabeth,” he said, “this is for you.”

She recognized it as a jewelry box immediately, and she had a puzzled look on her face as she opened it. Then she gasped. “Sir…”

John looked over at it. “Wow,” he said.

Elizabeth lifted a necklace from the box, a simple, silver cross with a blue stone set in the center. “That stone is an opal,” Jed explained. “Apparently Australia is the only place in the world where opals are naturally found in colors other than green. I didn’t know that. Anyway, the fire in that stone is remarkable.”

“It’s beautiful, sir. Thank you,” Elizabeth replied softly. “I don’t know what else to say.”

“Just don’t forget who you are, Elizabeth,” he said. “Or where you came from.”

She put the necklace back in the box and closed it. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, I’ve got one more order of business before I kick you all out of my office,” he said. “General Hammond, are you ready?”

“Yes, sir,” the older man said, coming around the group.

Jed picked up a piece of paper from the desk. “You’ll have to bear with me. This is the first time I’ve done this,” he said. He adjusted his glasses and proceeded. “The President of the United States, acting upon the recommendation of the Secretary of the Air Force, has placed special trust and confidence in the patriotism, integrity, and abilities of Major John Sheppard.”

He hazarded a glance up and saw the shocked look on the major’s face, as well as the widening smile on Elizabeth’s. “In view of these special qualities,” he continued, “and his demonstrated potential to serve in the higher grade, Major John Sheppard is promoted to the permanent grade of Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force, effective on this day, by order of the Secretary of the Air Force.”

Then the President came around the desk again, where he and Elizabeth stood on either side of John, still looking somewhat dumbstruck. There they removed the gold insignia on his shoulders and replaced them with the silver oak leaf clusters of his new rank. “Son,” Hammond said, “if you’ll raise your right hand and repeat after me. ‘I, John Sheppard’.”

John did so, his voice reflecting heightened nerves. “I, John Sheppard—”

“‘Having been appointed a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force’.”

“Having been appointed a Lieutenant Colonel in the United States Air Force—”
“Do solemnly swear that I will support and defend.”

“Do solemnly swear that I will support and defend—”

“The Constitution of the United States.”

“The Constitution of the United States—”

“Against all enemies, foreign and domestic.”

“Against all enemies, foreign and domestic—”

Jed looked around the group as the two men recited the oath. In the back, General Alexander looked on with respectful attention, and Colonel Carter seemed impressed. Teyla was engrossed by the sight, while Rodney seemed quite pleased that his friend and colleague was being promoted. Next to John, Elizabeth was smiling proudly.

“That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same,” Hammond continued.

“That I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same—”

“That I take this obligation freely.”

“That I take this obligation freely—”

“Without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion.”

“Without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion—”

“And that I will well and faithfully discharge.”

“And that I will well and faithfully discharge—”

“The duties of the office upon which I am about to enter.”

“The duties of the office upon which I am about to enter—”

“So help me God.”

John took a deep breath. “So help me God.”

Hammond nodded, and John saluted him sharply. The general returned the salute, and then shook John’s hand. “Congratulations, Lieutenant Colonel,” he said, smiling.

Jed then stepped in to shake his hand next. “Congratulations, Colonel,” he repeated.

The new colonel still seemed a little shell-shocked as the congratulations continued, including an odd kind of salute from Teyla which involved touching foreheads. Jed shot a confused look in Elizabeth’s direction. She merely shook her head and suppressed a laugh. Then John was back at her side, and she kissed his cheek. “Congratulations, John,” she said.

“You were in on this,” he replied.

“A little.”

“All right,” Jed said, “party’s over.”
The group started filing out, but then Jed thought better of it and said, “Colonel Sheppard, Dr. Weir.”

The two turned around, though John less quickly than Elizabeth. Adjusting to the new rank was going to take a while. “Sir?” Elizabeth prompted once the others had closed the door behind them.

“Have a seat,” he said, gesturing to chairs on the other side of the room. They did so, and he sat across from them. “Elizabeth,” he continued, “are you scared?”

“I used to be,” she said. “Every day. I was always worried that something I said or did was going to lead to someone dying.”

“What changed your mind?”

“It sounds terrible, but I realized that that was going to happen whether I was in charge or not,” she replied, with a glance at John. “I had to do what was best for everyone, because I couldn’t save them all.”

Jed nodded. “Would it surprise you to know that there were many people inside and outside the White House who wanted your name on the short list of potential nominees for the Vice Presidency after Hoynes resigned?” he asked.

Elizabeth suddenly sat up straighter. “I’m very surprised to hear that, sir,” she said.

“You didn’t make the short list because you weren’t ready for that kind of leadership,” he explained. “But I’ve always known you have it in you.”

“So you selected me for the SGC and the Atlantis expedition…”

“To get you ready,” he finished. “I threw you in the deep end, but that’s what you needed. This is going to be your office someday, Elizabeth. I’m going to have the great pleasure of voting for you, and you’re going to be President of the United States. And you’ll do great things, just like you’re doing now.”

She was a long time in responding. “I’m flattered, sir.”

Jed stood, and they followed. He shook her hand. “It’s been good to see you again,” he said. “And sorry about the near-death experience with the press.”

Elizabeth laughed. “What came of that?”

“Danny talked to CJ again,” Jed replied. “He’s dropping it for now, but I think we can all rest assured that when this story breaks, it’ll be in his hands.”

“I don’t know about you, Elizabeth,” John said, “but I think I’ll be glad to be going back someplace normal.”

“You call a city with semi-sentient technology in a galaxy with life-sucking aliens normal?” Jed asked.

“Compared to operas and state dinners and bloodthirsty reporters, yes, sir.”

Jed laughed. “Go get some sleep,” he said. “I’ll see you in a few hours for that chess game.”

They headed to the door, and as John was closing it behind them, Jed called, “Colonel?”
He opened it up again and stood in the threshold. “Yes, sir, Mr. President?”

“I know I don’t need to give you this order, but keep her safe out there,” he said. “I need you to make sure she can come back someday and serve her country as well as she’s served her world.”

John nodded. “Yes, sir.”

He shut the door quietly, but then there came a knock from the room’s other door. “Yeah,” he said. The door opened. “Sir,” CJ said, “Donna’s here to see you.”

“Come on in,” he said. The two women entered, and he waved them over to the seats where John and Elizabeth had just been. As they sat, he asked, “How are you today, Donna?”

“A little confused, sir,” she replied. “CJ just made me sign something that has to be the longest non-disclosure form ever.”

“Probably is.” He leaned forward. “Donna, how much did you figure out?”

“How much, sir?” Donna asked, pushing stray hair behind her ear.

“How about Doctor Weir and our other guests.”

The woman flushed and opened her mouth several times without saying anything. “Donna?” CJ prompted.

“This is going to sound really silly, but I’m just going to... throw it out there,” she said. “Is it possible that they’ve been—that they’ve been on another planet?”

She winced as soon as the words were out of her mouth. Jed resisted the urge to laugh. “How’d you come to that conclusion?” he asked.

“Well, that Teyla woman was just strange, but I’ve met plenty of strange people, so that wasn’t really an issue, even though it was weird that they’d put a nomad on an Air Force research team,” Donna replied, talking rather quickly. “But Dr. Weir... She didn’t realize her credit card had expired four months ago. I’ve never heard of anyone not noticing that. And if she were on a diplomatic mission, well, we usually reimburse people for that kind of thing, so of course she’d be using her credit card.”

“Yeah, but,” CJ said, “how’d you figure outer space?”

“Something weird came across Josh’s desk a while ago,” Donna continued. “Something about a reporter doing a story on how we had a spaceship and we were covering it up. The story got killed, but I remembered there was a name attached to it. Prometheus.”

“The name Danny got,” Jed supplied.

“Yes, sir,” Donna said. “And there was something else Dr. Weir said. When CJ had me keeping them away from the press, she said she hadn’t been near a photographer in a year. There’s no way you can get away from photographers anywhere on the planet, especially if you’re someone as high-profile as her, so I started wondering if there was any way she wasn’t actually on the planet.”

Jed chuckled. “And here I thought if anyone ever figured it out, it’d be Toby.”

Donna’s mouth fell open. “This is some sort of joke, right?”
“I had the same reaction, Donna,” CJ said gently.

“I’m impressed,” Jed added. “And since you already had to sign the non-disclosure form, I might as well tell you the rest.”

“There’s more?”

“Quite a bit more. Might as well send out for coffee.” He looked up at CJ, who nodded and headed out of the office. “Donna,” he continued, “in the course of an archaeological dig in Giza in 1928, a device known as the Stargate was found. The Stargate allows for instant transmission of matter from one gate to another. Interstellar travel. For the last eight years, a top-secret military team has been operating out of Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado Springs, traveling to other planets.”

Donna blinked. “Seriously?”

Sitting back in his chair, the President laughed. “Don’t worry,” he said. “It gets a lot more unbelievable from here.”

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