His Greatest Gift

by Jedi Buttercup (jedibuttercup)

Summary

"For the last fifteen months Ben and Mike had been slowly figuring out what they were to each other within the boundaries of suits and earpieces and national responsibilities. Long enough to know whether the initial attraction between them was mostly a byproduct of adrenaline, close quarters and secrecy, or whether there was a firmer foundation there, if they were willing to take the risk...."

Notes

An Olympus Has Fallen what-comes-next, established relationship story, written for the 2015/16 Small Fandom Big Bang. Much love and thanks for maevebran for agreeing to preread this story; angelus2hot, my artist; and also everyone’s who’s begged me for more of this universe.

AU for London Has Fallen, especially one particular detail not established in OHF, though I did borrow a couple of lines. :) Part of the Duty ‘verse, though can easily be read on its own.

See the end of the work for more notes
"In this place time is not measured by weeks, or months, or years, but by deep human experience."

--President Woodrow Wilson, upon the occasion of his proposal to Edith Galt

Benjamin Asher, 44th President of the United States of America, made a disgruntled noise and aimed the television remote at the wall-mounted screen across the room. Half a dozen contentious voices fell silent at the command, muted mid-debate.

"And there you have it: my potential successors," he said, dryly. "I wish Allan would make up his mind whether or not he's going to run. If he tossed his hat in the ring, he'd sweep the primary, no problem, and then I'd sleep a whole lot better at night."

"Can you really blame him?" Mike shrugged, handing over one of the cups of coffee he'd brought to the Treaty Room from the upstairs kitchen. "His introduction to the job was a little on the Shock and Awe side."

He got along fairly well with the Vice President these days; they'd started off on the wrong foot back when the man had been Speaker of the House, but he'd shown real steel when it mattered most, and Mike had no doubt the country would be in good hands with him. Unfortunately, Trumbull wasn't very fond of the ass-kissing part of political theater, and that mattered more on the big stage than it had with his constituency back home. He was not surprised the man was taking his time making a final decision on his potential candidacy.

"He says, tongue in cheek, having stood by me while I've done that job every day since," Ben replied, a teasing glint in his eye as he wrapped his hands around the warm mug.

Behind closed doors and off the clock, Mike wasn't Special Agent Michael Banning, SAC of the President's Protective Detail, in that moment; even if they hadn't been any more to each other than two men who'd survived a terrorist attack together two summers before, that would have been explanation enough for dropping the 'sirs'. He'd have liked it better if he hadn't had to keep track of such excuses, but given his position, and Ben's... well, they still had more than a year to go before they weren't frontline public servants any more.

"Guilty as charged," Mike quirked a grin at him, gesturing toward the screen with his own cup.
"You're right, though-- he'd never indulge in this kind of bullshit. Now that the patriotic shine's worn off, it's like they've suddenly decided you're too centrist to appeal to the party base, and they're overcorrecting to the right to try to woo more voters. Never mind that that's the only way to actually get things done in this town; they'd rather grandstand over so-called traditional American values. How do they expect you to endorse any of 'em?"

"Maybe they're hoping I won't," Ben sighed. "Wouldn't surprise me. Every time I turn around they're criticizing my record on everything from taxes to carbon emissions compromises to Obergefell v. Hodges."

"For not speaking out against every change the party leadership didn't like, you mean," Mike said, smile souring. There was a particular weight to Ben's gaze as their eyes met and held, again; the same one that Mike knew was in his every time the subject of the Supreme Court's landmark decision was brought up.

Before he'd met Ben, the very idea would have been unthinkable; but then again, before he'd met Ben, it would have been impossible. Ben had been elected in 2008; it had taken until 2011 to get "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" repealed, and federal recognition of gay marriages performed in states where it was locally legal had gone into effect only a week and a half before Kang and his terrorist buddies had tried to turn the country into a nuclear wasteland. Making same-sex marriage legal nationwide had only been the most recent step on a road Mike had had no reason to believe would ever be in front of him the first time he'd joined the PPD.

Less than a year and a half left in Ben's second term, and he'd be able to ask that question... if he wanted to.

If Ben wanted him to. And that was the real question, wasn't it?

Mike cleared his throat and shifted the subject. "It's like they think they elected a king. One of the old-fashioned kind that doesn't have to answer to a legislative body. Do none of 'em remember there are actually three branches of government in this country? Sorry, Ben, but you're maybe one-third of a king, at best."

"Benjamin Asher, the forty-four and a third monarch of the United States," Ben replied, a wry, acknowledging curl at the corner of his mouth. "Has kind of a ring to it, I think. Or, wait. If we're counting by thirds... would that be fourteen and two-thirds?"

"You're asking me? Of the two of us, I'm not the statistician," Mike reminded him, then took a long draught of his cooling coffee, mind still ticking over what was, what had been, and what could be.

If Margaret Asher hadn't died, if Mike had reconciled with Leah, it would never have been a possibility either... but she had, and he hadn't, and for the last year and more Ben and Mike had been slowly figuring out what they were to each other between the boundaries of suits and microphones and national responsibilities. Long enough to know whether the initial attraction between them was mostly a byproduct of adrenaline, close quarters and secrecy, or whether there was a firmer foundation there, if they were willing to take the risk.

Long enough for Mike to wonder how long he was supposed to wait for second thoughts to come.

Ben's attention had strayed back to the TV as he sipped at his coffee; he might've muted it, but the closed captioning was still on, struggling to keep up with the ultra-religious outsider candidate that currently held the floor. The man didn't seem to have a clue that even if by some miracle he did win the GOP nomination, he was going to have to appeal to the majority of the country to get elected, and preemptively spitting in the faces of everyone he disagreed with was not the way to go about
building a successful coalition.

Mike wasn't watching the screen, though; he was watching the President's profile. The stern jaw, the thoughtful wrinkle between Ben's brows, the steely blue gaze; as many complications as loving the man had added to his life, he was pretty sure he could live another forty-five years and never find another human being who appealed to him as much as this one did. Another fifteen months 'til inauguration day, 2017. And then...?

A frown dragged at the corners of his mouth as he considered what would come next. From the beginning, they'd talked about Ben's exit from office as if it was the endgame. But halfway to that point, Mike had started putting serious thought into the fact that that day wouldn't automatically mean his own retirement. Nor would it take them completely out of the public eye. Even if he chose to return home and never work another day in his life, Benjamin Asher would remain newsfodder until the day he died. Just look at Bush 41: the eldest living ex-President's 90th birthday celebration was still making the rounds of YouTube, more than a year later.

Mike didn't want to deal with it; he never had been the best at handling the social side of things. He'd be just as happy to keep private matters private. But that ship had sailed a long time ago: the moment he'd surrendered to Ben's hands on his shoulders, savoring the taste of his Commander in Chief on his tongue.

No, longer ago than that, if he was being completely honest: the moment he'd chosen the Detail over his marriage to Leah. Realistically, the odds against that door staying shut forever, even if he and Ben could be happy limiting their relationship to the tiny slices of time they were able to steal alone, were very much against them. Only a few people on the Detail or Ben's staff had serious reason to suspect he and the President were more than not-supposed-to-be but let's-just-ignore-that-under-the-circumstances buddies, and none of that handful were the type to talk. But the longer the secret was kept, the greater the chances of someone slipping up and saying or doing the wrong thing in the wrong time and place.

Besides. Ben had given a heartfelt speech about being the best of themselves after the terrorist attack; about a chance at rebirth. About leading with dignity, honor, and integrity. What kind of example would they set if they let that sort of story define their relationship? He was a man who believed in duty, and knew Ben was, too. If they were going to head that off at the pass, the time to do so was now, regardless of short-term costs.

"Hey," he said, clearing his throat as he searched for a way to bring it up. "Speaking of... all this public appeal shit. Back when... you know." He gestured in the vague direction of the Lincoln Bedroom. "You said something about setting a different kind of example when you left office."

Ben's attention snapped back to Mike immediately at that comment. "I did," he said slowly, lines forming between his brows. "I know it was said in the heat of the moment. And we've put a lot of miles behind us since then. But in less than a year and a half, you're finally going to be out of this fishbowl. And when that happens..." His voice trailed off as he groped for words.

"Mike... are you telling me you're having doubts?" Ben asked. Mike could hear the clank of ceramic as he set his own mug down.

"No. That's not it at all." He ran a hand over his face, then risked another glance. "Sorry-- I'm not phrasing this very well. What I meant was, when we get out of here... did you want to, you know.
Date and shit. Like a normal couple, without always having to worry who might be watching."

By which, of course, he meant indulging in such luxuries as getting to sleep in the same bed; share a shower; play footsie beneath the table in a restaurant; or basically, dare to so much as hint that they gave a damn about each other in public. His marriage to Leah had been far from perfect, but they'd at least had that much.

From the outside, to someone who didn't know them, Mike knew that what he and Ben had would probably look like just another presidential abuse of power-- or a mercenary asshole trading sex for favors. He knew Ben better than that; it hadn't bothered him what people might think in the beginning, beyond the necessity to avoid scandal. But they weren't just any two guys. And the longer they kept sneaking around, the harder it was to ignore Damocles' sword overhead.

Ben looked startled, as if the subject had come winging out of left field. Okay, so it wasn't avoidance, then; he'd had blinders on, too. That made Mike feel better about bringing it up. But they'd made their choices knowing there would be consequences; they couldn't just keep hoping the check would never come due.

"I, uh. Kind of thought my dating days were behind me," Ben replied, deflecting with a self-conscious shrug.

Mike gave that all the consideration it was due. "Yeah, and I tell people I'm made out of bourbon and poor choices. Seriously, Ben. I've been giving it some thought."

"But you're... not having doubts." Ben's face did something complicated then, like he wasn't sure whether he felt reassured by that prospect.

"Just about the job," Mike hurried to clarify. "I was thinking-- now that the reconstruction's done, and the Detail's been whipped back into shape. Maybe it's time I step away for a while. Take time out for that graduate program in special operations and irregular warfare I was approached about."

Taking up that invitation would give him the option to keep doing the duty he was pretty sure he'd been born for, while still clearing the worst of the legal and ethical hurdles between him and Ben, which made it the best of both worlds as far as he was concerned. He'd make a lot more money if he retired and went into private security instead, and that would probably make for a cleaner break between his public and private lives; but it hadn't been a possibility he'd ever have seriously considered even if Forbes' actions hadn't tainted the option for him. Former agent Doug Chesnic's advice about boundaries and professional inequalities had made more sense to Mike than he'd been willing to admit the day the man had cornered him at the Lincoln Memorial; it would be easier for he and Ben to keep their lives balanced if he had goals of his own to pursue.

...Always assuming, of course, that they were going to keep sharing their lives.

Ben's frown deepened, his spine unconsciously straightening the way it did when he had to put on his Presidential face and field bad news from his cabinet. "You're thinking about leaving now? Is there a problem I haven't heard about? Has Lynne said something?"

Mike made a face, nonplussed. Ben was usually a lot quicker than that. "C'mon, Ben. You really think I'd bring it up like this if it was that kind of problem?"

"But Mike-- the West Coast?" Ben balked again.

"Monterey's pretty far from DC. I know. Believe me, I'm not suggesting this lightly. But if I start with the upcoming January quarter, I could be done by June of 2017. And it's not like I can't still visit
Ben took a deep breath. "But why now, and not after we leave here?" he asked, pained lines at the corner of his eyes conveying more than his tone did: private emotions showing through the well-trained façade of a man who'd got used to always being at least partially in public long before his own journey to the White House.

Mike took a moment to just look at him before responding, tracing the familiar features with his eyes. Part of it was the timing; if he was going to go, he had to start in either January or June, and January would be much more convenient, for a number of reasons. But it was the rest of his motivation that Ben was really asking about, and that Mike wasn't sure he'd approve of.

Masks within masks: Mike was self-aware enough to realize that that had been part of the appeal for them both, the interplay of layers of roles and realities between Commander in Chief and former soldier, President and protection agent, rescued and rescuer. But when all of this hoopla was finally behind them, and they had a chance to just be two men deeply attracted to one another... there were only a couple of ways it could go. Was it selfish of Mike to hope for a path that would end with them both on the same course? Or-- any path at all that didn't strand them in stagnation? He'd been there and done that before, and it was a relationship-killer as sure as any scandal or refusal.

"So when some nosy reporter sticks a microphone in my face to ask the same question... and you know one will, the minute they think they can get more than a 'no comment' out of me... I can tell 'em the truth," he finally said, dropping a hand to tap a finger against the Secret Service badge on his belt. "There's a man I'd like to ask on a date. But I can't do that so long as I'm on the Detail."

Ben's frown deepened as he searched Mike's face with stormy eyes. "You really have thought this through. Nothing I say is going to change your mind about going, is it?"
"Ben...." Mike began, then consciously corrected the address and backed it down a little. "Sir. It's not like-- I'm not trying to strong-arm you. Or play games, here. You know that's not my style. If you think it's that bad an idea, I'll keep my damn mouth shut and have Jacobs give me as quiet a send-off as possible. I don't plan on going anywhere-- metaphorically, I mean; I'm not drawing a line here."

He heaved a frustrated sigh, annoyed with himself for not waiting to broach the subject until he'd thought the conversation through a little better, then reached out a hand, hesitating just short of actually touching. "I just feel in my gut that this is the time to make a move. If you're planning to stay on the public stage after you leave office-- and don't tell me you're not; I don't see you taking up golf or sitting at home talking to a ghostwriter, somehow-- then I'm a liability waiting to happen. Unless I do something about it. So this is me, trying to get in front of the problem."

Ben's jaw worked; Mike could see the war going on behind his eyes, because of course he had been making plans he hadn't shared with Mike yet either, even if they hadn't specifically touched on their relationship. Then he reached to take Mike's hand, clasping tightly enough to make oft-abused knuckles creak.

"I ought to be insulted that you don't think I could write my autobiography without help," he joked, then continued haltingly. "Maybe... I'm wondering if it isn't my turn to step back, when I'm done here. It's been a rough six-plus years for both of us; for all of us. It might be fun to hang my hat up for good, shuck off the responsibilities and indulge in a little scandal."

He sounded sincere... and stupidly noble, which was Ben all over. Mike gave him a crooked smile. "Just a little?" he teased back. "C'mon, Ben; when have you ever half-assed anything?"

Ben's eyes burned, and Mike knew then that he had him.

"All right," the President finally said. "All right. I don't have to like it, but... we'll figure it out. So. Talk to Lynne, figure out an exit plan from the Detail. And... find Connor before you take off tonight, alright? If you think I'm going to be the one to break the news to him, or deal with it if he hears it from someone else first, you're gravely mistaken." He squeezed Mike's hand again-- then let go as a knock sounded at the door.

"Now that's just cruel and unusual, sir," Mike said, taking a step back to fill his hands with the coffee cup once more. Ben lifted an admonishing eyebrow as he took a seat back behind the desk, as if to say you asked for it, then folded the attitude back away behind his public demeanor, smoothing his expression into a neutral expectancy. "Yes?" he called.

The door cracked open before the sound of his voice had even died in the air, revealing one of the newer agents, clad in the ubiquitous suit and tie with her dark hair drawn back in a smooth tail. The young woman had transferred onto the Detail only a few months before, but she took no shit from anyone and defaulted to a tone like a drill instructor's under pressure. Mike was pretty sure she'd figured them out early on, though her expression was perfectly bland as she nodded to the President. "It's time, sir."

Ben sighed, a polite smile curving his mouth as he nodded back. "Coffee break's over, it seems. Thank you, Lucy."

"Sir," she said again, then withdrew, leaving the door open to the hall.

"You were saying, about cruel and unusual?" Ben turned back to Mike, shaking his head ruefully.
"I withdraw my objection," Mike replied, trusting Ben to know what he meant. They'd finish their conversation later; for now, the business of the country had to come first.

Ben straightened his tie, then stood and walked out of the room, headed for an 'informal' dinner of thirty or so downstairs; a couple of agents were waiting to escort him through the public areas. Agent Farrell, who'd been on Connor duty at the president's son's private school earlier that day, wasn't one of them, though; she was still outside the door when Mike exited a moment later.

"SPARKPLUG's day go all right?" Mike asked conversationally, carefully averting his eyes from the receding form of the President.

"Got a smile from a pretty girl between classes, and aced a pop quiz in Math. And he's already started on his history homework for the evening," Farrell replied in kind, then tilted her head inquisitively, not fooled in the slightest. "And how'd your day go, Agent Banning?"

"Well, you know, I've got my coffee," he said dryly, gesturing with his mug. "Good to the last drop."

"If you say so, sir," she said, mildly. Then she cleared her throat, shifting to all business as they headed down the hall toward Connor's room. "Any particular reason you asked?"

Mike thought about deflecting that with a joke about the Army Chief of Staff and their conversation about need to know-- then frowned instead as something occurred to him. "Actually, there is; I'll need to meet with the Director tomorrow afternoon. It'll leave a hole in my schedule. Mind covering it?"

It was a school in-service day, so Connor would be with the President anyway, and Farrell had already proven she knew which questions to avoid.

She proved it again with her next question, raising her eyebrows at him. "That depends; is that when you're supposed to be escorting the children's choir tour, or will it be when you're supposed to be boxing with STEWARD?"

"You telling me you can't handle it, either way?" Mike challenged her. He knew her history; her father was a legendary cop, her brother a CIA field spook, her husband a highly-valued consultant to the FBI's cyber crime division, and she herself had survived the '07 domestic terrorist incident up close and personal before graduating with a criminal justice degree from Rutgers. There was a reason she was where she was. He'd be surprised if anything that happened in that house could truly shake her composure.

"It might help to know the expected dress code," she reminded him, archly.

He chuckled, then nodded, conceding the point. "I'll have to check the schedule myself; I'll confirm the assignment with Agent Price on my way out," he said. "She'll let you know."

"I'll hold you to that, sir," she said, then faded back as Mike knocked on Connor's door.

The kid took the news about as well as Mike had expected him to. Which was to say, not at all.
He remembered Director Jacobs saying that Connor had missed his buddy almost as much as his mom during Mike's sojourn at Treasury after the First Lady's death. Connor was very much the teenager now, more prone to be standoffish than clingy, but even so, he wasn't inclined to take another 'family' member leaving him with good grace. Even during the worst of Mike's attempt to distance himself from Ben when he'd first realized how he really felt about the President, Connor had refused to accept the same treatment; it had been Connor, in fact, who'd finally prompted Ben to arrange an impromptu private meeting with Mike to clear the air.

There'd never been any hope of hiding their relationship from him, however circumspect they might be. Connor was pretty good about remembering the distinction between public and private, but they'd long since settled into a sort of favored uncle/nephew style of friendship separate from what Mike had with Ben, when circumstances permitted. Ben had been right to insist Mike be the one to break the news, however much he hated doing it.

"Look," he finally said. "I'm basically just going off to college, like you're going to be doing in a few years. It's a necessary transition before the next step; it doesn't mean I'm leaving you-- or your dad-- for good."

"Yeah, but you're an adult. It's not like you have to go right away or miss your chance at scholarships," Connor replied, dissatisfied with that answer. "Why can't you do it after we all leave the White House?"

"Well," Mike said, then paused, studying him thoughtfully. The kid had finally left the shaggy hair phase behind; he was still dressed for school and hadn't yet taken his contacts out for the evening. It made him look closer to an adult than a child, reminding him that Connor was now nearly twice the age he'd been when his father had taken office. Old enough, probably, to have a voice in how this played out. He nodded to himself, then spoke. "That sort of depends on whether or not I ask your father a particular question."

A frown gathered between Connor's brows. "What kind of question?"

Mike leaned forward in his chair, elbows braced on his knees and hands linked between them, and tipped his chin toward the gilt-framed photo of Margaret Asher on the kid's desk.

Connor followed his glance, still frowning-- then snapped his gaze back to Mike, eyes wide. "Really?" he asked, voice shooting up an octave as his eyebrows climbed his forehead.

"Like I said, it depends. On whether you think it's a good idea-- and whether he thinks it's a good idea," Mike explained.

Connor's reaction to that was a scornful snort. "Duh," he said, the one-syllable response layered with the typical teenager's disdain for a clueless adult.

Mike was glad to hear it; he and Leah hadn't had children of their own, which meant Connor was the closest he was likely to get-- bar the occasional visit to make sure Roma's kids were doing all right-- and his opinion mattered. "You don't think she'd have minded?" He tipped his chin toward the photo again.

Connor's expression grew serious again, and he glanced at his mother's smiling face before nodding jerkily. "She always said the thing she wanted most was for me and Dad to be happy. And that it was important to always remember that, especially here."

He swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing in his throat, then continued bravely. "It's the dumbest thing, but... one of the last things I remember saying to her was that she wasn't supposed to call me 'love'
anymore. I wish every day that I'd let her. It's not your fault she's gone, or that you made Dad smile again. I think she'd kick your ass if you didn't ask because of her."

"You know, I think you're probably right." Mike smiled crookedly at him. The First Lady had had a very generous heart, in private as well as public; a remarkable woman, and one whose memory he'd prefer not to tarnish any more than already he did just by surviving when she hadn't. The fourth anniversary of her death was coming up; he had his own nightmares about the things he'd said and done that night, and he'd have given a lot for her son not to feel a similar weight on his young shoulders. "So... do you get why that means I need to leave for a while?"

Connor's jaw set mutinously, and he looked away again. "I get why you think you need to leave. But if you're going to leave the Detail anyway, why go all the way to California? I've read some of those tell-all books Dad doesn't think I know he collects. Lots of Presidents have had girlfriends before without it being a huge scandal. A couple of them even got remarried."

"Yeah, and when was that last time that happened? 1915?" Connor had been doing a lot of reading to casually reference Julia Tyler and Edith Wilson; Mike wondered how long the kid had been quietly worrying about his dad's love life. Clearly, he should have discussed this with him sooner.

"The president's life was a lot less public back then," he continued. "And if you mean more recent 'girlfriends'-- how many of those stayed quiet after '87, when the press decided the public's right to know their leader's character was more important than his privacy?" Mike pointed out. "I can't be your Dad's dirty little secret forever. I can't be his dirty little secret, period, if what we just talked about's ever going to really be possible." He nodded at Margaret Asher's picture a third time. "I know it sucks, Connor; it won't be fun for me either, but if I do this-- by the time your Dad gets used to being a private citizen again, I'll be back."

Connor fidgeted in his seat, then sighed and looked up again. "You promise?" he asked.

"Cross my heart," Mike said solemnly, making the appropriate hand gesture.

Connor heaved another sigh, then asked another question, tentatively. "So... when you do get back, what are you going to do? I mean, besides date my dad. This special degree-- what's it good for?"

"Lots of things," Mike said. "You remember all the stuff I taught you about the Secret Service?"

Connor nodded. "I've still got the badge you gave me when you sent me up the airshaft."

Mike grinned at him. "You should have heard the peal Jacobs rang over me for 'losing' it." He made air quotations with his index fingers, and was rewarded with a small smile from Connor before he continued.

"I bet some of the things you read in those tell-all books made you wonder what all I left out, huh? Well, Lynne has cleaned up a lot since Ben appointed her as Director; but there are still a lot of systemic problems. What went down in 2013 should never have happened; one team of bad guys, no matter how well-prepared and well-armed, shouldn't have been able to take down every single agent posted to the White House as fast as they did. I'm not saying they went down easy; they were heroes, and most of them were my friends, and some of them literally died in my arms. But they didn't have the training and budget they needed to do the best possible job. I want to help make sure it can never happen again."

He wouldn't be back from his educational sabbatical until a few months after the next inauguration, of course; but he seriously doubted whichever candidate won, from either party, would replace Jacobs for any other reason than booting her upstairs to a weightier title. He wasn't senior enough for
such a role yet himself in anything other than public notoriety, but... well, that was a goal for another day. For now, he'd content himself with assuring that by the time Connor's generation made it to office, their guardians would be better equipped to protect them. If it wasn't for the controversy that would ensue when he and Ben finally did go public, he'd probably work recruiting for a while, as well; but he doubted such a level of notoriety would be an asset, there.

Connor tilted his head, consideringly. "You're kind of assuming Dad won't want to move away from DC," he pointed out.

"And I think that's a conversation for me and Ben to have," Mike cut him off there; some conversations really had to go by Ben first. Then he rose from his chair, clapping the kid on the shoulder. "In the meantime-- I'm not gone yet, and when I do go, I'll be leaving Agent Farrell in charge of your personal detail. You can go to her with stuff you don't want to talk to your dad about if you need to; she's pretty badass."

"Yeah, Lucy has some pretty awesome stories," Connor's smile grew more genuine.

Good; the kid had needed a female role model in his life since his mother's loss, and he hadn't taken to most of the others in the President's social circle. Even the SecDef, who'd been a friend of the family for years and occasionally played hostess at the White House these days when Ben needed that role filled, tended to get held at arm's length. But he appeared to be taking to Farrell like an older sister. "See you tomorrow then, kid."

"Night, Mike."

He met up with Farrell again in the agents' break room on his way out; he'd already confirmed his schedule with Price, and took the opportunity to let her know. "It'll be the kid's choir; but you ought to try on the gloves some time anyway," Mike told her. "Keep it quiet for now-- but I'll be taking a long sabbatical soon. If the President asks around for a new sparring partner, I know you'd know what you were doing."

Her eyes widened at that; but once again, she chose not to comment on the obvious. She really was an excellent agent. "I'll, uh, keep that in mind," she said, grinning.

"See you tomorrow, Agent Farrell," he smirked at her.

"And a good evening to you, too, Agent Banning," she replied, wryly.

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He caught up with Jacobs the next day, over her twice-weekly late lunch at the Old Ebbitt Grill. The Victorian-era saloon was located conveniently near the White House, roughly halfway between the FBI building on Pennsylvania Avenue and the Secret Service headquarters on G Street NW, and served excellent, unpretentious food. But the bigger attraction, he suspected, was that she and FBI Director Bowman were seldom bothered when they met there. Both Directors were divorced and married to their jobs; Mike chose not to speculate further, both because he respected them, and because it would be more than a little hypocritical of him to do so.

He knew Bowman typically left first, giving Mike a window of opportunity to chat without pissing Jacobs off unduly. He figured it would be his best chance to have the necessary conversation off government property.

His boss looked momentarily surprised, then resigned as he approached her table. She was picking at the remains of her meal; Bowman's plate had already been cleared away.

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He caught up with Jacobs the next day, over her twice-weekly late lunch at the Old Ebbitt Grill. The Victorian-era saloon was located conveniently near the White House, roughly halfway between the FBI building on Pennsylvania Avenue and the Secret Service headquarters on G Street NW, and served excellent, unpretentious food. But the bigger attraction, he suspected, was that she and FBI Director Bowman were seldom bothered when they met there. Both Directors were divorced and married to their jobs; Mike chose not to speculate further, both because he respected them, and because it would be more than a little hypocritical of him to do so.

He knew Bowman typically left first, giving Mike a window of opportunity to chat without pissing Jacobs off unduly. He figured it would be his best chance to have the necessary conversation off government property.

His boss looked momentarily surprised, then resigned as he approached her table. She was picking at the remains of her meal; Bowman's plate had already been cleared away.
“Mike,” she said, warily. “What brings you here? I thought you had a busy schedule today.”

“Lynne,” Mike nodded to her politely as he slid into the booth opposite her. The furnishings, heavy on dark wood, deep green fabrics, greenery, and artwork, helped create the illusion of privacy, despite the backdrop of conversational noise. “Farrell’s standing in for me today. I needed to talk to you about something.”

“You could have arranged an official meeting with me at the office,” she pointed out, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Not about this, I couldn’t,” he shook his head, then quirked a grin at her. “Well, technically I could, but it would have been a little counter-productive. I’ve decided to go to California.”

Jacobs’ eyebrows shot up, and she sat back a little in her seat, setting down her fork to appraise him thoroughly. “Well,” she said. “Well. At least one of you has some sense. How’d he take it?”

Yeah, Mike had figured her for one of those in the know. If Agent Chesnic had picked up on it just watching his expressions on TV—well, Lynne undoubtedly knew him even better, no matter how much he and Chesnic might have in common. “Poorly at first. Connor, too. But I talked them both around.” He stole a French fry from her plate when the impulse to fidget struck him; he’d already eaten his own lunch, not wanting to presume.

“I suppose I’m to consider this your giving notice,” she continued, frowning at him. “I don’t suppose I can ask you to stick around until it’s time for you to leave? Considering your fame these days—you level of attention is usually saved for deputy director or director level retirements, but we should compose a low-key press release as soon as possible. There’ll be a lot of scrutiny on your replacement, too; more than last time, I’m sure.”

“More than you think,” Mike grimaced. “And no; I’d prefer two weeks, if possible.”

Her eyebrows rose again, and she slapped at his hand as he reached for another fry. “Is that so,” she said, suspicion hardening into conviction in her expression. “I’m assuming, then, that you chose this venue so you could bring to my notice something I’ve been carefully not noticing for the last several months?”

“I wouldn’t if I could avoid it— but, well, that would be a little difficult, considering what’s probably going to happen the first time a reporter sticks a camera in my face.” He shrugged, sheepishly.

“Considering what?” Mouth set in a grim line, Jacobs laid her hand over the handle of the steak knife beside her plate as though wishing for a more formidable weapon. “Don’t make me drag it out of you, Mike; you won’t like those last two weeks you’re asking for, if I do.”

“I’m not trying to be difficult, I swear. Or make your job more difficult. It’s not like this is any easier for me— I’m used to being the guy who fades into the background.”

“Go on,” she said firmly.

Mike took a breath, then just came out with it. “When they ask why I’m leaving now? I’m going to tell them it’s because there’s a man I’d like to ask on a date.”

“Jesus, Banning!” she exclaimed in dismay, voice harsh with the effort to keep quiet. “You could hardly make my job any more difficult if you tried! Do you know what that’s going to do to the threat index? And I shudder to think of the headlines on the next day’s Post. Please tell me you’ve at least cleared it with STEWARD.”
Even in a place where they were unlikely to be under surveillance, she still used the President's Secret Service code name rather than his name or title; Mike was being as circumspect as he could, as well.

"You know, he thought the same thing you just did?" He winced. "But no; the only one I mean to out is myself. Why do you think it took me so long to make up my mind? I've thought this through, you know. Keeping my mouth shut only works if it's a temporary thing. Either I'm the dirty little secret, and we'll be parting ways when he leaves office anyway, because neither of us can live like that forever; and if we're lucky, one day they'll bring me up in tell-all books about the corruption under the heroic veneer. Or...."

"Or?" she prompted him, irritably.

Mike stilled in his seat, the urge to fidget fading as he pitched his best-case scenario. "We break it in stages, play for the court of public opinion, and when I get back from California I make a visit to the jewelers."

Jacobs' expression abruptly went blank at that. "It's that serious, then?"

He gave her a sharp nod. "It is."

She considered that, finally pushing her plate away and linking her fingers atop the table, thinking it over. Then she sighed. "Then you're right about your choice of successor-- it can't be Agent Price, much as she might deserve it. Or any of the male agents you're noticeably friendly with; as good as you are, you've never had the most professional demeanor, to put it mildly, and the slightest hint of favoritism will be like fuel to the fire. I'd like to avoid any of my agents being dragged over the coals by OPR, if at all possible."

That was fair. "I'd recommend Daga, then; Agent D'agustino. It won't look like you're favoring another good ol' boy over Price, and she disapproves of me-- thinks I'm too informal. She's a good agent, though. She respects STEWARD, and he respects that she knows what she's doing when she has to give him security recommendations." The experienced female agent, in her mid thirties and an Air Force veteran, usually led one of the off shifts when Mike himself wasn't with Ben.

"I'll keep her in mind, then," Jacobs nodded. Then she pierced him with a shrewd, softer glance. "You know, I saw you with Leah, and I've seen you with him. I don't pretend to understand the workings of the masculine heart. But... if you'll take a recommendation from me in return?"

"Of course," he replied. What else could he say? None of this had exactly gone according to plan, so far.

She surprised him with her answer, though. "Don't put everything off until you get back. A year and a half is a long time, as I know you're well aware, and while a long, public courtship would quiet a lot of rumors, it's not likely to do much for the Commander in Chief's peace of mind. I agree you should let it go long distance a while. But half, two thirds of the way through? Fly back and do the thing proper."

"While he's still in office?" Mike objected. Ben hadn't seemed to want that; and Mike did understand his reasons, as frustrating as they were in the short term. "I did pitch the whole thing to him as a way to start seizing control of the narrative early-- but I don't think he'd go quite that far."

"Well, I wouldn't call it a fairytale courtship, but I'd give it decent odds of working," she nodded. "The religious right will crucify him for it, of course... but there'll be a significant minority that will herald him as the second coming, as well. Remember that; this country is made up of more than just
the conservatives who elected him, especially now that we've had a solid seven years plus to climb out of the hole dug by Thomas Gabriel's Fire Sale. Even Kang couldn't put much of a dent in that."

Mike wiped his hands on his thighs at that, belatedly noticing that his palms had been sweating during the conversation; funny that this sort of thing stressed him more than being in deadly combat. "I'll talk to him about it," he temporized. "Any other advice?"

Jacobs looked up for a moment rather than reply, nodding to a server who'd stopped by to snag her abandoned plate; Mike waved him off as he started to ask whether he wanted anything. But as soon as the man was gone, she gave him another long look and shook her head, the delicate diamond drops he thought of as her 'date earrings' throwing sparks of light. "Be prepared for the reporters to bring up SINGER. Sooner or later, no matter how you phrase the reveal, some of the questions will get ugly. Make sure you cross every t and dot every i in your last two weeks-- the less I have to clean up after you, the better. And for God's sake, call Leah."

It was Mike's turn to startle at that; it hadn't occurred to him that he'd need to do so. His ex-wife had divorced him five months before he'd taken up with Ben, closing in on two years ago now. Last he'd talked to her, she was doing well at the hospital, still active in the same social circles. She was even engaged again; some lawyer with an old New England name. Not her lawyer, they hadn't been that cliché, but one she'd met through a co-worker. She'd seemed happy; he'd been relieved to hear her laughing again.

"It, uh." He cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Won't exactly come as a shock to her."

Jacobs snorted. "Why am I not surprised? Still, you need to warn her; she won't thank you if she answers a knock at the door only to find half the Washington news establishment on her doorstep."

"Ah, damn." Mike cringed, imagining Leah's reaction. She'd been patient with his failings as a husband for the most part, but she did have quite a temper when provoked. "You're right about that."

"Any other hot potatoes you want to drop on me while you're here? Because I think I'm already going to need to order dessert to deal with this one, and I don't plan to offer you any."

Mike clapped a hand to his chest, as though wounded. "Ah, that gets me where it hurts. I promise, I'll be good."

"I'll believe that when I see it," she replied tartly as he got up to go.

"I want you to know," he added softly, as she raised a hand to flag the server back down. "I never would have made a move, even after Leah divorced me; I never wanted to bring any heat down on him, or harm the Service. But I couldn't turn him down. Not to excuse my part in it, but...."

"Did I ask you for the details? No, I did not," Jacobs said primly, then snorted, a light flaring in her eyes as something occurred to her. "You do realize this means your code name will change, though? You won't be BIG TOP anymore. You'll become a part of his household."

Actually... Mike hadn't; his eyes widened as he thought it through. Traditionally, the Secret Service came up with a short list of alliterative names for each person in a protectee's family. That meant it would be two syllables, starting with "S"... but that left a lot of options open.

"You're brilliant, and stunningly beautiful, and the best boss I've ever had...?" he tried.

"I am; but that's hardly going to get you out of it." She was still chuckling as he made for the door.

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Mike had walked over to the Grill from the White House; the walk back gave him a few moments to think. He took his phone out of his pocket as he strolled down the sidewalks around the Treasury building, staring at the picture of the rebuilt Washington Monument he'd set as the swipe screen. You could see three distinct layers of color now, as the quarries that had supplied marble for the original two phases of construction had been played out long before the reconstruction efforts began in 2013. There'd been some controversy about that at the time; some of the memorial stones inside the internal stairwell had been destroyed as well, and the arguments about replacing those had been even louder. In the end, though, it was just one more part of the living history of the nation's capital... and something those that had been there could look at and remember, when every visible sign in the White House itself had long since been patched, painted over, or washed away.

There was a new memorial plaque inside the Monument now too, listing the names of those who'd perished when the falling stones crashed down on picnickers, joggers, and tourists alike, not to mention those who'd been on the viewing level when the C-130 had clipped it. One of Leah's old friends had been among them, a fact she'd only found out much later; a woman she'd gone to high school with. Mike had been freshly returned to the Detail at the time, dealing with the funerals of all the agents whose names also graced a new plaque at the Secret Service Memorial Building; he supposed it hadn't helped their marriage any to add that extra layer of grief to all the other distractions pulling them apart in the wake of the attacks.

Well; the heart was a mysterious thing, and he'd wished the best for her when they'd parted ways. And he'd hoped to maintain their friendship in future, as circumstances allowed them the opportunity. Leah was a good woman; she'd been a pillar for him when he'd needed one, and more forgiving than he deserved when she'd discovered he didn't anymore. Which made this particular call even more awkward to make.

He paused and found a bench near the corner of the building, where he could see the monument itself rising above the trees and other manmade structures in the area. It was a partially cloudy day, not particularly cold but not exactly warm either, even if every other jogger that passed him was still wearing shorts against the mugginess of the air. He quirked a smile at the observation, then took a fortifying breath, raised the phone, and told the automated assistant to call his ex-wife.

The phone rang three times; then, just when he thought it might go to voicemail and let him off the hook, it picked up. "Mike?" Leah said slowly, probably picking his name up off the caller ID. "Hey, Leah," he said, lamely. "Ah, how are things going?"

"Uh, pretty good, you know. Pretty much the same as the last time we talked. What's up with you?"

Mike winced at the clear wariness in her tone. He didn't blame her. It was sort of a random time for him to call, when they were both supposed to be at work. "You remember that question you asked?" he said, getting right to the point. "The one I didn't answer adequately enough, that day."

It didn't take Leah long to realize what he meant. Her voice was just as sharp as she replied-- though she sounded more worried than suspicious now, for some reason. "Of course I remember," she said, then lowered her voice; the sounds in the background grew fainter, as though she'd stepped away somewhere she'd be less likely to be overheard. "Look at that man, when you're standing behind him like a guardian statue, and tell me you'll be able to make a clean break again when he leaves office," she quoted softly. "Mike, did something happen? Is everything all right?"

"Depends on how you define 'something'. And 'all right'," he chuckled nervously. "I can definitely
answer that question now. And it's a firm 'no'."

"What does *that* mean?" she asked; though it was clear from her tone that she had an idea already.

Mike really hadn't deserved her; he hoped the new guy did. He'd been tempted, when he'd first heard, to slip an FBI background check request in among the routine ones the Secret Service did on scheduled visitors to the White House. But he'd ultimately refrained, because he knew how Leah would react if she found out; she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself, or asking for help if she needed it.

"It means that in a couple of weeks, I'm going to make an announcement," he replied, and took a deep breath. "And the press is probably going to chase you down afterward... to ask how it feels to be the ex-wife of the ex-heterosexual ex-Agent in Charge of the Presidential Protective Detail."

Leah sucked in a sharp breath, so quickly that it caught in a cough; when the spasm ended, she swore under her breath. "Holy shit, Mike. Way to warn a woman."

"Yeah," he said. "Sorry; I guess I'm no better at talking about this kind of thing than I ever was. But if you want to duck the nosy parkers, or, you know. Otherwise. I don't plan to name any names; and I'd appreciate if you didn't, either. But anything else you want to say-- it's your right to say it. I just thought I should warn you."

The other end of the line was silent for nearly another minute; Mike just kept holding the phone to his ear, waiting it out. He knew she'd have more to say.

Finally, Leah blew out a sigh. "Would you..." she started to say, then cut herself off and began again. "If I hadn't asked for a divorce...."

"You don't even need to ask," he tried to assure her. "I tried to back off as it was; I mean, I'm not kidding myself that you don't know who we're talking about, here. I figured there was no sense wishing for the moon and shooting myself in the foot in the process. But he called me on the carpet a few months later and asked me point-blank what the hell was going on."

"And you've never been a very good liar," she said, a faint, watery note in her voice. Then she cleared her throat again. "Why now, then? If you're not going to be naming... that name?"

Mike sighed, rubbing a hand over his mouth. "You really know how to ask the easy questions," he joked feebly. "It's a long story-- but the short version is, politics. To get to point B without causing a scandal...."

"So much for Point A. So I *was* the other woman, then. I'd say you made your own bed, but...." she chuckled, wryly. "Duty, I know. Don't tell me."

"I thought you said I wasn't a good liar?" he teased by way of evasion; he knew better than to comment on that.

Leah snorted. "Right. Please promise me you at least try to communicate better with him than you did me?"

He knew better than to answer *that* question, either. "Promise me you'll tell me if you ever need me to kick the new guy's ass?" he replied.

She laughed ruefully. "Oh, Mike," she said, then grew more serious, a slightly wistful note in her voice. "We were good for each other once, weren't we?"
"You know we were," he replied. Until the people they'd been, who'd clicked together like puzzle pieces once, suddenly found they'd changed shape and didn't fit one another anymore. "You're an amazing woman."

"Then-- because I seriously doubt anyone else is going to be saying this to you for a while-- congratulations," she said, softly. "I really hope it works out for you."

Mike swallowed, touched by her reply. "You too, Leah."

"Goodbye, Mike."

He sat there for several more minutes digesting the fallout of that conversation, feeling better than he had before placing the call; he'd have to buy Jacobs a bottle of her favorite zinfandel for suggesting it.

Then he glanced down at his watch and swore. If he didn't get back in the next twenty minutes, Farrell was going to break out that drill instructor voice of hers for sure. She never crossed the line to outright disrespect, but she was a master at making a man feel the error of his ways; that was one of the reasons he'd trusted her with Connor from the start. Her husband must really be something else.

He tucked his phone back into a pocket and picked up his pace, fording his way through the sea of tourists always thronging the streets, and wondered how many of them would be cursing his name in a few more days.

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He was slightly out of breath when he arrived at the Residence's third floor workout room to take up his gloves, collecting curious eyebrows from the other agents he exchanged nods with along the way. Ben was no exception in that regard, but he didn't comment any more than they did, other than a wry remark about the weather.

They weren't alone. They seldom were, really. Mike was looking forward to the day that changed.

Farrell had also given him a quick debrief on his way in; apparently the thing with the youth choir had gone without a hitch. Connor had been bored but on his best behavior, and was currently running 'rifts' with Agent Archer in his favorite MMORPG; he wasn't much into first-person shooters anymore. The visitors had been pleased, and that had put STEWARD in a good mood... though he'd seemed a little distracted.

Probably-- hopefully-- because he was looking forward to that day, too.

"Got anything new for me today?" Ben asked as they stepped into the ring, one corner of his mouth drawn into an attempt at his usual easy smile.

"Been working on what we talked about yesterday," Mike shrugged back, echoing the expression.

"Been working on what we talked about yesterday," Mike shrugged back, echoing the expression.

Ben's eyes widened; then he nodded once, decisively, and put up his gloves. "C'mon, then," he said, making a beckoning gesture. "Show me what you've got."

If only. Mike stepped up to meet him, slipping into a ready stance, and went to work.

They didn't get a chance to exchange another word on the subject-- covert or otherwise-- until much later that evening; until the President finished up his busy day and withdrew to the Treaty Room again, which he tended to use as his private study slash office. Pretty par for the course, as days in the White House went, though the hours dragged more for Mike than usual. It reminded him of
another day over a year before, filled with lingering tension and the ghosts of words not yet said.

As the Treaty Room was on the residence floors, the Secret Service agents usually left the President to himself there unless he was meeting with someone not on the cleared list or on his way to or from some other event, and there weren't any electronic ears listening in. Much more private than the Oval Office, where there was even a fisheye lens on the door of the private john, just in case something happened to the Commander in Chief while he was taking a leak. Mike tried not to push the time he spent with Ben there to noticeable levels, and made sure he never left any evidence that they'd got up to anything but friendly conversation when he dropped by. But it was one sure window he had in their shifting schedule, and he seized the opportunity whenever he could.

He found Ben bent over a stack of briefing pages, brow furrowed and one elbow propped on the desk to make it easier to rub at his left temple as he read.

"Worked yourself into a headache again?" he asked as he closed the door behind him. He had fond memories of the last time he'd found Ben suffering from a stress headache; he'd put the fact that endorphins were the brain's natural pain killers to excellent use.

Ben looked up at the sound of Mike's voice. His eyes brightened at the sight of him, though his welcoming smile looked a little wan. "Nothing a few minutes of your company can't cure," he said. "One more thing I'm going to miss while you're away. Are you sure you have to go?"

"I don't know about 'have' to. But considering that when I brought the matter up to Jacobs, she said at least I was finally showing some sense...?" he replied, mitigating his boss' words a bit for her consumption.

"Ouch," Ben said, sitting back and studying him contemplatively. "I know I signed up for it, so I'm only getting what I deserve here, but the layers of masks and bullshit in this town honestly do drive me crazy sometimes. I knew Lynne was probably in the know, but the fact that she actually addressed it still makes me feel a little like I'm starring in The Emperor's New Clothes. Did you get the sense that she'll make things difficult...?"

Mike snorted, though hearing that sardonic tone in Ben's voice always had an uptick effect on his mood; something about the man peeking out from under the straight-laced surface. "Nah. She's not best pleased with me for complicating her job, but she'll support the move." He paused, then decided Ben should know about the other conversation he'd had, as well. "She also recommended that I talk to Leah."

"Your ex-wife? What about, exactly?" Ben's tone sharpened warily. She was still a bit of a sensitive subject with him; Ben had implied more than once that he felt guilty for instigating the breakup of Mike's marriage by asking that he be reinstated to the Detail, as if Mike hadn't already been asking Jacobs for the very same thing the morning the White House had been attacked. Mike didn't think it was strictly jealousy; more personal insecurity, a thing which he found oddly endearing considering the professional hats the man juggled with such ease.

"Just to warn her she might be getting a call from a few reporters in a couple of weeks, wondering how she feels about her ex-husband coming out of the closet," he explained. "She would have skinned me alive otherwise, and I'd have deserved it. But she did more or less guess the rest from there."

"Do we need to worry about that?" Ben's frown deepened as Mike approached the desk. With the slightly disheveled hair-- he must've been running his fingers through it at some point-- and loosened tie and shirtsleeves, he looked more like a professor or a scientist or something than National Command Authority. Mike found that pretty damn endearing, too. If he'd still had any doubts how
far gone he was, that probably would have done it.

"No. Believe it or not, she actually congratulated me," he replied, giving Ben a crooked grin. "I think she got all her mad out back when she divorced me; either that, or her new boyfriend walks on water. It was the best conversation I've had about all this so far. You and Connor were both upset; Jacobs was annoyed; and my ex-wife was the one who wished me luck. Go figure." He shook his head in bemusement.

Ben's eyebrows rose. "I definitely wasn't expecting that," he said. Then he stood and came around to Mike's side of the desk, reaching to settle his hands on Mike's upper arms. Not to pull him in for a 'hello there' kiss, though-- just to hold onto him, scanning his face from close range. Then he sighed, shaking his head ruefully. "But then, I wasn't expecting much of anyone aside from you, was I?"

"...Ben? What's wrong?" Mike asked, feeling his stomach drop as his own hands came up to anchor on Ben's flanks. Had he made the wrong call, assuming it was okay that Leah knew? Or had something else happened that day to upset him?

"Nothing's wrong," Ben replied, his voice low but very clear, shaded with turmoil. "Except that all this strategy and subterfuge is necessary in the first place. It doesn't seem fair, does it? I'm still amazed that you put up with me at all, much less that you're willing to go to such lengths for so little in return. If I was anyone else...."

Mike made a scoffing noise, meeting Ben's eyes firmly. One thumb slipped up under the untucked hem of the other man's shirt to move in a soothing circle on his side, where a certain gunshot had left its mark. "If any little thing had been different, I know. Some of the things that've brought us here, I wouldn't wish on anyone. But I can't regret this. We are who we are, Ben. And who you are, to me...."

His other hand lifted to brush the side of the President's face. A day's worth of five o'clock shadow prickled against Mike's calloused palm; he dipped the pad of his thumb into the dimple on Ben's chin, then swept it across his beckoning lower lip. Ben's eyes darkened in response, and Mike felt something in his innards lurch dizzyingly at the look. Leah-- quoting one of her romance novels-- would probably have said 'his heart turned over in his chest', and flowery as the phrase was, Mike couldn't argue with it. "Ah, fuck," he finished helplessly. "I love you, you know that, right?"

He leaned in before Ben had time to react to the words, feeling a little raw from actually saying it out loud and wanting a little buffer before having to hear whatever the reply would be. It wasn't like he hadn't as good as said it to him, before... but there was still a certain magic in that one particular four-letter word that he'd been instinctively holding back.

Ben might've been the first to make a move-- but he was still the President, and there was a part of Mike that still thrilled in disbelief and smug pride every day that the man was, even temporarily, his. Probably the same part that had bid him wait so long to seriously think about taking these first steps toward going public; that had feared Ben wasn't in it as deep as he was, and would take the other option Mike had mentioned to Jacobs. That he'd decide it had all been a mistake, and part ways the minute the pleasure stopped being worth the cost.

Luckily, Mike had never been the kind of guy to let his fears stop him from pursuing his goals.

Ben's mouth moved hungrily under his, in a fierce and needy kiss; up close, he smelled just faintly of aftershave, mint gum, and the stuff the makeup department slathered on him for TV appearances. He must have been on camera at some point that day. His fingers tightened convulsively on Mike's
jacket sleeves; then he gentled the kiss slowly, until they broke far enough apart to stare at each other with wrecked and breathless expressions.

The silence held for a long moment; Mike could almost feel the charge in the air. Then Ben broke it, still holding his gaze.

"How did I get so lucky twice in one lifetime?" he said roughly. "Some part of me still thinks I should feel guilty for saying it to anyone but Maggie-- but I love you too, Mike. I can't regret this, either. Wherever it takes us."

Mike took a shaky breath at hearing the word returned. Not that he'd really doubted, but... there was always a difference between believing and knowing. Like taking the proverbial leap from the lion's head, and finding firm stone under your feet. There'd be no resuming the status quo, after this.

... But he hadn't missed the last four words Ben had just said, either. He abruptly remembered that Ben's mood had been mercurial from the moment Mike walked in, before he'd even mentioned Leah, and had to wonder. "You did something too, didn't you. What was it?"

Ben gave him a subdued grin. "Can't put one over on you, can I?" he said. "As it happened, I had a meeting with Allan today. You should remember that; you usually know my schedule better than I do."

"You told the Vice President?" Mike had locked heads with Trumbull enough when he was Speaker for Mike to know damn well what the man's disapproving expression looked like; he could picture it instantly.

Ben shook his head ruefully. "Not in so many words. But while we were talking, the subject of whether he intended to run came up again, and it occurred to me that if he did intend to do so, the timing of his press release versus yours might be an issue."

That honestly hadn't occurred to Mike. "So you told him that I was leaving, and that my exit might prove to be a little... public," he ventured, to a nod from Ben. "What else?"

"That was it," Ben shrugged, the corners of his mouth quirking with amusement. "He inferred the rest. Like Leah did, apparently. Told me in pretty scathing terms that he'd retire and leave DC himself before he'd accept me resigning prematurely-- scandal or no scandal-- just to make sure he'd get stuck with the job."

"He said what?" Mike blurted, automatically clenching his hands in reaction.

"Trust me, my reaction was colorful enough for the both of us," Ben replied, cupping his hands around Mike's fists and stroking his thumbs across his knuckles. "But then he raised an eyebrow and said pretty much the same thing Lynne did to you; that at least one of us was showing some sense. Which makes two for two."

"Three for three, counting Leah," Mike blew out a breath, letting the rush of turbulent emotion fade as unwelcome thoughts percolated around the revelation. He stared down at his hands, framed by Ben's, then caught his breath as something different about them came to his attention: a pale white band of skin around Ben's ring finger. His widower's ring, the one he'd kept wearing since Maggie's death; he'd removed it.

Mike's first thought was to wonder when that had happened-- and the second to worry whether anyone else had noticed. And that made him shake his head and take a couple of steps back, torn between the personal thrill and a stomach-turning thread of sudden panic he told himself was
professional concern. "I guess we haven't been all that subtle. Maybe I've been wrong to push this; maybe I should just keep my mouth shut and let it ride 'til you're out of here. Count my blessings, and let the next generation make it unexceptional, like you said once."

"Mike...." Ben reached after him automatically, a look of dismay on his face; then he sighed and followed those couple of steps back into Mike's personal space, reaching out to rest his hand on Mike's chest. "You would do that for me," he said. "Sacrifice your own best interests for what you think I need from you. Again."

He couldn't tell from the tone whether or not Ben meant that positively; he'd said something similar the day he'd cornered Mike in the space behind the walls of the Lincoln Bedroom. That he was afraid Mike had only followed Ben's lead because he felt it was his duty. But he could only give the same answer he had then; the only answer he would ever give.

"Always. And in all ways," he replied, sincerely. Hoping that would be enough.

Ben made a scoffing noise. "If you remember everything I said that day-- then you should also remember that I told you to let me be the judge of my own needs."

Mike swallowed, body flushing with the vivid sense memory of being pressed back against the old stone of the White House's original walls as Ben shifted the foundations of his world-- the first time. "And what are those needs, Sir," he managed to reply, thickly.

Ben smiled softly at him, then lowered his hand and stepped away rather than toward Mike, retreating wordlessly to the desk. He picked something up from its surface, then walked back, offering it with a flourish.

Mike took the thing, frowning in bafflement. It looked like a White House visitor's pass. Something he'd seen a lot of over the course of his career... but this one had his name on it. Ben couldn't actually be suggesting...?

"I'd recommend you spend the next two weeks in the office, arranging the details of the transition," Ben said, interrupting his train of thought. "Because that's all the buffer you're going to get. The weekend after you start your leave, you're going to show up at the White House. And then you're going to take me out to dinner."

"What?" Mike stared at him in incomprehension. He couldn't have heard what he thought he just heard. "But I thought...."

"Don't tell anyone-- this is code word level information, here-- but sometimes, I can be an idiot," Ben gave him a crooked smile. "Let's just say, talking to Allan clarified some things for me. If we're going to take this, between us, to the court of public opinion? Then I'd be stupid not to go all in, no matter what happens. I lost Maggie all at once, in circumstances no one could have done anything about; but if I let you go-- I'm not going to lose you by stages, not now, when there's something I can do about it. You deserve better than to be my 'dirty little secret'. And if the country doesn't like that... so maybe the politicking gets a little uglier for a while; I can handle it. What I can't handle is watching you walk away from me and pretending not to care."

"Ben, are you sure?" That was far more than Mike had hoped for.

"My mother and my aunt will think I've gone insane," Ben chuckled mirthlessly, "but they'll keep that opinion private; they don't think it's appropriate to air dirty laundry in the press. My brother will flounder, and then look up the local chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans in an effort to show solidarity. Connor already loves you. And on this subject? No one else's opinion matters."
"But what you said about risk, and the DOJ...."

"This is what I have a chief of staff and speechwriters for," Ben waved that away. "I'll tell them tomorrow that you're leaving; and the reason you'll be giving the press. And then I'll ask them to come up with a strategy that'll allow me to take you up on it without shooting myself in both feet."

"They're going to lose their minds. So is the rest of your staff," Mike warned him. "Everyone will. I'm no fairy tale princess, here."

"A third of one, maybe, to go with my third of a king," Ben scoffed. "If they can't handle it, I'll find someone who will. Mike, are you actually trying to argue me out of this?"

"Fuck, no," Mike shook his head in amazed disbelief. "Put me up on stage in a tiara if that'll make you happy. I just want to make sure...."

"I'm sure," Ben said, reaching up to run his fingers through Mike's hair. "A tiara? Really? Be careful, you'll give me ideas. Actually, better question: are you sure?"

Mike choked on a laugh, then reached for Ben, reeling him in close with a hand around the back of his neck. "I've never been more sure of anything in my life," he murmured against Ben's mouth, while his other hand worked at the fly of Ben's trousers. "And you can have all the ideas you want; I'm secure in my masculinity," he grinned, then wrapped his fingers around what he found behind the zipper, straining to reach him.

"Securing mine, you mean," Ben groaned, then bit Mike's lip; and there were no more words for a while.

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Some of the things that've brought us here,  
I wouldn't wish on anyone.  
But I can't regret This.

+  

The next two weeks were a special form of hell. It hadn't fully sunk in until after Mike parted from an even more disheveled President with a renewed glint in his eye that he wouldn't be seeing the man up close and personal again until he'd turned in his badge and gun. If it had, he'd probably have dragged their time together out as long as he could. Mike had been exiled from the White House before, but back then he'd been an emotional wasteland, the President had been a grieving widower, and almost everyone had walked softly around them both.

He had no such buffer, now; after the first day in which he didn't go near 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, everyone seemed to feel the need to get all up in his space. To ask why he wasn't with STEWARD; why he was leaving in October instead of December; if the graduate degree story was even true; if he knew why the President had suddenly switched up his exercise routine; and even if the fact that Trumbull had asked to meet with him meant he'd be running for President after all and if Mike would be back to lead his Detail.

Mike talked around or no-commented all of them, especially on the Trumbull question. The Vice President hadn't said a word about Ben, or anything explicit about his campaign, though the inference had been there; he'd mostly asked about Mike's own plans, and a given a promise of support in future. They'd talked about the ongoing restructuring efforts of the Secret Service before,
as Trumbull had been involved with the President's national security team even before taking second chair in the administration, but Mike felt no need to share that. The only one Mike spoke frankly with was the Director, who informed him with a particularly smug smile that the moment he set foot back on the White House grounds he could expect to answer to the codename STRIDER.

"That's ridiculous," he tried to argue with her. "He's the one that's a third of a king."

"I don't think I even want to know the context for that comment," she arched her eyebrows at him, "but it seemed appropriate to match a STEWARD to a STRIDER. And with your past in the Rangers, and the fact that you even recognized the source reference as Tolkien, you can't even argue that it's not fitting."

"If I ever find a broken sword in my locker, I'm going to find and choke the person who put it there, just so you know," he informed her, baring his teeth in what could only charitably be called a smile.

"We'll see," she waved him off, looking very satisfied with herself.

And the whole time-- every day of those two weeks-- Mike only saw Ben, if he saw him at all, from a distance. That was something he'd forgotten to account for; doing the distance thing longer term when he was in California was going to be torture if he couldn't get his hands on a private method of communication. He could always go old school and write letters, but at least as many eyes would probably read them as ears would hear any call he made to a White House line. He'd take text messages, encrypted email, CB radio even, anything he could be sure was private. But they hadn't set anything up, so he didn't have it available to him now.

He resorted to purchasing one of those tattooed toy horses with the neon-colored hair that were all the rage with the toddler set, ostensibly for Roma's youngest, then stole the surplus plastic tiara out of its packaging and handed the thing to Farrell one morning with a gruff hint to pass it on.

Later that day, he saw Ben on the news applauding the Vice President's announcement that he was joining the race-- and grinned to see the plastic trinket winking from Ben's tie like a particularly tasteless tie-tack. The next morning, Farrell showed up for a meeting with a little Lego character's grey plastic weapon tucked in her pocket, a carefully jagged mark drawn on it in black marker. Apparently, the President was already in on the joke.

"Seriously?" she laughed at his expression as she handed it over. "I have never seen two more ridiculous grown men in my life. Unless you count my dad trying to retire for the umpteenth time, or my brother trying to beat him at... well, anything. Pretty sure I married the only smart male in the family."

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" Mike replied, curling a hand over the back of one ear. "You'll have to speak up; I'm not as young as I used to be."

"Oh, hell no, I'm not getting dragged into this any more than I am already," she replied, holding her hands palm-out and empty in front of her. "And if you repeat what I just said to anyone who shall not be named, I won't be answerable for anything I pass on to your little padawan from the non-classified parts of a certain personnel file that may or may not have been obtained through quasi-legal means."

"Would I do any such thing?" He widened his eyes in mock innocence, then conceded defeat. "You know, anyone who looks at your family and assumes you're the least dangerous deserves everything he gets."

"Save your flirting for someone who cares," she said, then went serious for a moment. "Which
reminds me, Agent Banning...."

"Mike," he corrected her. "Not like I'm going to be your immediate superior for much longer."

"Mike," she frowned at him, brow knitting. "When I joined the Detail... scuttlebutt was that we newbies shouldn't expect the usual turnover; that the Agent in Charge spent more time hands-on than in the office, and that he'd probably stay in charge until January, 2017. When they told me why, I got it; there's a reason people sometimes think my dad and my husband are the ones who are together. Because of what they went through, and because they're both that kind of guy. No one officially knows any details, but everyone knows there's something to know, you know? So you leaving now... there's a lot of speculation around the water cooler."

He wasn't surprised. "I don't doubt it. And there'll probably be a lot more than speculation flying in a few more days. But sometimes that's the price of trying to be authentic in this town." He jabbed her in the arm with the tiny sword. "Lighten up-- and be there for Connor, would you? I know I set a bad example, and I shouldn't drag you into that as well, but he's going to need someone else to talk to when I'm not around."

Farrell swatted the miniature toy weapon away, and frowned. Not in disillusionment, because that would imply she'd had any illusions to start with; more by way of pointed commentary. "Someone told me once that in this town, all you can do is live your life the best you can. But even then the best you can hope for is for people to think you're smart enough not to get caught, because they know everybody does it."

Mike snorted. "Yeah, everybody does something, that's for sure," he agreed, obliquely. The evasive words tasted bitter on his tongue, the way unpleasant necessities always had-- but he knew that was all the more reason to keep his mouth shut. He trusted Farrell, but people could surprise you, and he was hardly about to risk spoking his own wheel so close to the finish line.

Farrell shook her head in response, frown curling up at one corner into a resigned smile, and let the conversation turn back to his actual question. "Of course I'll be there for Connor. You don't even need to ask."

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Alas, not everyone reacted to the pending news with that much equanimity. The President's chief of staff would have bored a hole clear through Mike with his eyes the next time they encountered each other if glares were weaponizable, for one. He heard a few rumbles regarding the speechwriter's reaction, too, but neither of them took their opinions public. Private conviction trumped by duty, something Mike could at least understand even if their attitudes bugged the crap out of him. He'd already known it would be impossible to please 'em all.

Several other coworker relationships soured a few days later, in the wake of Mike's first interview-- an outcome as inevitable as it was disappointing. But compared to what it would have been even as recently as eight years ago, Mike wasn't complaining.

The press release had actually been very concise, not even enough to cover a single sheet of paper, with the date and their parent Department's logo at the top and a paragraph at the bottom summarizing the Service's history with an invitation to contact its Office of Government and Public Affairs with any questions. It wouldn't have been worthy of comment if its subject had been anyone else-- but he still had a small and dedicated coterie of cyber stalkers, and the moment one of the #BanningSighting crew picked up the link from the Secret Service Twitter feed, it went viral. The first reporter had been on his doorstep by the time he left the office that evening.
Luckily, it was just the one; probably looking for a human interest story to liven up a slow news day, sparked by the social media storm. Mike smiled politely and confirmed that he was taking advantage of an elite educational opportunity, the better to do his duty in future, and generally did his best to present a professional face-- after all, not getting both their asses fired was half the reason for his chosen strategy, after all.

Then the guy with the camera gave Mike the opening he had been waiting for. "Agent Banning, your actions on that terrible day a year and a half ago have been a source of inspiration to the public, and have made you a very visible public face for the mission of the United States Secret Service. And let us not forget that it was the second time you saved the life of President Asher, though the first occasion was also marked by tragedy. Does it concern you at all that you'll be leaving the President vulnerable, with more than fourteen months of his term remaining?"

"Now, Steve-- can I call you Steve?" Mike replied. "Any Secret Service agent would have done the things I did; I simply happened to be the man on scene at the time. And I have every faith in my fellow agents to do their duty in my absence with diligence and excellence, as they already do every moment of the day when I'm not on shift. I'm not like Mayhem; I can't be everywhere, and I won't let my notoriety take away from the dedication and achievements of all the other men and women who serve this great country further out of the spotlight."

That brought a chuckle as Mike continued. "In fact, that's part of the reason I'm taking two months of PTO now, before my educational sabbatical officially begins."

"Oh?" The reporter perked up, ears practically twitching at this potentially interesting twist in the story.

If he only knew. Adrenaline flooded Mike's system under his calm façade; this was the moment, his last chance to back out and keep the status quo. Sua sponte, he reminded himself, thinking about the look on Ben's face the last time they'd been together, and decided to go with almost exactly the same thing he'd said when opening this subject only a few days before.

"Yeah. You see, there's a man I'd like to ask out on a date. But I can't do that so long as I'm on the Detail, and I'd like to take the chance to see where things might go before I put the whole country between us."

He could almost see the reporter flail as he fielded that answer, trying to come up with a swift response. "Wait... so, you're saying... the United States Secret Service discriminates against homosexuals?"

Now it was Mike's turn to flail; he hadn't expected that interpretation. Politics first in this town, he supposed; maybe he should have gotten a speechwriter of his own. "No-- that's not what I'm saying. For one, I'm actually bisexual. I used to be married to a wonderful woman, you know, and I loved my wife. The issue is that Secret Service regulations-- not to mention the UCMJ, which I lived under for a lot more years-- have some very strict things to say about fraternization. I defend the laws; I don't break 'em."

The other man's eyes widened. "So... your partner is....."

"I'm not saying anything more about my prospective partner before I have a chance to actually ask him; which necessarily won't be before Friday, at the earliest," Mike interrupted with a sharp-edged smile. "What I am saying is that in the interests of professionalism, integrity, morale, and not creating an opening for the sort of scandal that has brought fire down on the Secret Service and other government agencies in the past, I've chosen to enact one of my fundamental rights as an American citizen-- the pursuit of happiness-- as a private citizen. And in doing so, to hopefully serve as a
positive example in another way."

"But Agent Banning--"

"But as long as I'm still an active government employee, I'm afraid I'll have to decline to comment any further. I'm sure you understand. Thank you, Steve; and you have an excellent evening."

Mike retreated inside his apartment, palms sweating, swamped by a sense of disbelief that he'd actually managed to get through the whole thing without a single swear word. He'd done his part; the ball was in Ben's court, now.

Was the public ready for a not-entirely-hetero President? Or, at least one the public knew about; recent biographers had posed a lot of questions about James Buchanan, the fifteenth President, and his ten-year cohabitation with a man who'd referred to their very close friendship as a 'communion'. The job existed to be the head of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people... but those people were currently pretty actively divided on the issue of what two consenting adults should do behind closed doors.

Well, regardless of what the public thought, Mike would hopefully be 'communing' with his own President again soon enough. *Alea iacta est.*

He retrieved a beer from the fridge, then turned on the TV and settled in to watch the game-- and wait to see what, if anything, would make the evening news from the interview.

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The answer was: not much at first, and the tone seemed a little mixed, on the Internet as much as on the news. The harshest comments seemed to come from the same redblooded conservative types who'd held him up as an example of ideal American manhood after the White House takeover. Unfortunately, some of those wore the same uniform Mike had served in, and had some pretty contemptible things to say not only about him, but about the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell and related topics in general. At least a few of his soon-to-be-former coworkers held similar beliefs, if the way they avoided him like the plague the next day was any clue.

On the other hand, if one asked his so-called screaming fangirls? The #BanningSighting folks started applying rainbow icons to every pic they hosted and speculating enthusiastically and supportively about which of the many other men they'd caught in their snapshots of him might be the 'prospective partner' in question. Farrell, Price, and a couple of the others on the Detail forwarded him a few of the funnier photos and more positive article links for his perusal, tagged with those strange little smiley-faced icons Connor said were called 'emojis'.

Mike made sure they were rotated through the next week's worth of the Boss's early morning runs around the National Mall in retaliation. The team was probably going to give him hell the first time he showed up at the House as a visitor, not an employee; this would be his last chance to preemptively get even.

Most people's opinions, though, seemed to fall into the 'wait, this kind of thing still makes the news?' middle ground. Contrary to his fears, the First Lady's death didn't get brought up at all other than as a background tragic note in his history with the Secret Service-- though that might change, when Ben's side of the story broke. Leah had no-commented, as he'd expected, and said that she wished him the best, and no few of the people who ought to be able to guess by context who he was leaving for gave him wide-eyed, knowing, 'you've got big brass ones' looks before getting on with whatever'd brought them to Headquarters.
Finally, the last day arrived, accompanied by all due ceremony: cake, beer, raucous jokes, and one last strategy meeting with Jacobs.

"Tomorrow, then?" she raised her eyebrow at him.

"Yup," he nodded, biting his lip. "So far so good, you think?"

"So far. But you're not the President," Lynne pursed her mouth at him. "I hear he's changed the script on you."

"Yeah, well, he is the President. It's his call," Mike gave her an apologetic shrug. "I'm certainly not going to fight him on it. I am sorry about what it's going to do to the threat index, though. Keep me informed, would you? I might not be able to stand post anymore, but I'll still carry a gun when we're off White House grounds, and I'm not going to suddenly cower in the face of danger."

"I'll pass that request on to your Secret Service detail, in a week or so. STRIDER," she sniffed at him.

"My what?" he blinked at her in startlement.

"We're already working out protection plans for next year's presidential candidates, particularly the more controversial ones; do you honestly think we'll get away with not assigning one to the First Boyfriend?" she asked him wryly. "Or hadn't you thought about what life on the other side would be like?"

"Please drag that out as long as possible," he made a horrified face. "Me with a detail of my own? Christ, that's a train wreck waiting to happen."

"One of many you're about to let yourself in for. Not to mention the President. Mike...." She sighed, linking her hands together, and met his gaze evenly. "Are you really, really sure about this?"

"I've never been surer of anything," he replied in kind. Then he gave her a wry smile and crossed his arms over his chest, tapping at his left ring finger with the index finger of his other hand as a reminder.

"All right, then. I suppose I'd better get busy hiring more agents," she shook her head at him irritably, then waved him off. "Go on, then. Get out of here."

"Yes, ma'am."

Mike took off the suit that night with a pang of nostalgia. He wouldn't be able to wear it, or any of its duplicates, to the White House again anytime soon if he wanted to keep the separation between professional and private lives clear. But he'd made a lot of memories in that uniform-- most of them good-- that it would always remind him of. He supposed he'd have to save it for special occasions.

The next day, he went for dressy casual instead, with a blue dress shirt a little lighter than the one he'd stormed the White House in, a crisp new pair of jeans, and a striped tie-- but no jacket. Then he got the visitor's pass Ben had made up for him, a bottle of Ben's favorite scotch-- because what the hell would the man do with yet another bouquet of flowers at the White House?-- and drove up to the visitor's lot.

The Uniformed Service Division guy at the gate went to let him in as automatically as though it were any other day-- then paused to do a double-take, then stared as though the Pope had just appeared, unannounced.

"Agent-- I mean, Mr. Banning...?"
"Mike'll do, Bruce." He nodded at the man, flashing the pass at him. "Pass me through?"

One flustered check of the expected visitor's list later, he was in-- and parking the car, because he wasn't going to insist on chauffeuring the man and add to the length of their cavalcade through town.

Ben was waiting on the portico out front when he got there, eyes dancing; Mike couldn't stop himself from grinning in response as he walked up, a little giddy with the sense of at last, at last.

"Mr. President," Mike nodded to him, as he came to a halt an arm's length away.

"Mr. Banning," Ben nodded back, smile carving dimples in his cheeks to match the one in his chin. "Mike."

"Ben," Mike's grin widened as he stared, drinking in the sight of the man up close after a two-week drought. "I, uh. I've got a question to ask."

Every other agent and staffer in earshot exchanged looks at that; Mike made an effort to ignore them.

"I heard you might," Ben replied, then stopped there-- making him do all the work, of course.

"I, uh, have dinner reservations? If you'd care to accompany me." Mike cleared his throat. "On a date."

"Oh, is that what that block of 'to be announced' time on my evening schedule was about," Ben smirked. Not that he hadn't known; and not that Jacobs hadn't already been informed, to smooth out the security arrangements, but for the theater of the thing. Well; he'd already known the man was a politician. "Why Mike. I thought you'd never ask."

"Was that a yes?"

"I don't know, was that a question? I thought you sounded a little unsure."

Behind him, Mike heard a sudden muffled shriek from the fence where tourists normally gathered, taking selfies of themselves with the White House in the background, and guessed that at least one fan was out there that day; so much for any breathing room.

"Fuck it," he murmured, then stretched out a hand.

The President chuckled as he took it. "Not yet; I don't put out on the first date."

Behind him, the Beast pulled up, waiting to convey them to dinner; Mike restrained the response he wanted to make with an effort. "Noted."

"Here we go, then. You ready for this?" Ben cocked an eyebrow.

What the hell else had all this been about? Well, they'd see, wouldn't they, after the President's statement went live on Monday.

"Now ask me a serious question," Mike scoffed, and led his no-longer-prospective partner to the car.
As always, Secret Service details were mostly embroidered from fictional depictions and Wikipedia. A couple of agent names were borrowed from Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan series; and one (female) character was borrowed entire from the Die Hard universe. (Because I alluded to a John McClane quote in a previous story, and decided it would make sense for a Republican to have been elected instead of a Democrat in 2008-- judging by the in-movie timeline-- if "Live Free, Die Hard" happened to be canon.)

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