

he allowed grief to swallow him, there would be nobody to comfort Rita, his wife of forty years.

But how could he comfort Rita when he himself felt more pain than he ever had?

He didn't know how long he'd been sitting there, somewhere in the hospital, when his cell phone rang. Automatically, he pulled it from his pocket and looked at it. He wasn't sure why he answered the call, when he could barely speak, but he did it anyway.

The familiar voice was cheerful. "Morning, Eric, how far out are you? The horses are saddled. We're burning daylight here."

"Mike," Bolton said, his voice breaking.

Mike Faulkner, the President's Chief of Staff had been his friend since they'd both been members of the same fraternity. While at first their career choices had taken them in different directions and to different locations, their friendship had only strengthened, until they'd both ended up in government, Faulkner in the executive branch, and Bolton as a defense contractor with ties to lobbyists, and as a major donor.

"Did you forget?"

"Mike..." Bolton collected all his strength to force the next words out of his mouth without breaking down. "Maddie... she's dead. My little girl is dead." A sob tore from his chest. It didn't matter that Maddie was thirty-two years old and lived on her own in a swanky townhouse in Georgetown. She would always be his little girl. And now she was gone. Her infectious smile gone. Her laughter gone.

"Oh my God, what happened?"

Bolton pushed another rising sob down. "I don't know. Lucia called me. She found her when she got in. They rushed her to the hospital, but it was too late. She's..." This time, reality sank in even deeper, and he couldn't get the word over his lips. The image was too raw, too painful.

"Eric, I can't even imagine what you and Rita are going through right now."

“Rita doesn’t know yet. She’s at home.” His voice broke, but he pulled himself together. He took a breath. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I’m here for you, Eric. Whatever you need. You just let me know. You have to be strong for Rita, and I can be strong for you.”

A sob tore from Bolton’s chest. “Maybe there is something you can do. The police... they’ll want to investigate what happened. And I need to know too. I need to know what happened and why. But I don’t want the police to drag her name through the mud.”

Even though he loved Maddie more than his own life, he wasn’t blind. She’d been a wild child in her twenties, and had experimented with drugs. Her lovers spanned the globe. Not all of them decent men. He didn’t want that to be her legacy.

“Don’t worry about anything. You let me handle this. I’ll make sure she’ll be treated right. I’ll send my own people in,” Faulkner promised.

“The Secret Service? Can you do that?”

“Ordinarily, no. It’s not within our jurisdiction. But I can call in some favors so DC Police won’t take point on this. The Secret Service will make sure nothing leaks that you don’t want the public to know about. And they’ll be thorough. I promise you. That’s the least I can do for my goddaughter.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.”

“No need to thank me,” Faulkner said. “Take care of Rita. She needs you now more than ever.”

Before Bolton could utter another thanks, Faulkner disconnected the call, and shoved his cell phone into his pants pocket.

Faulkner stopped at the stable door. He’d looked forward to riding out with Bolton. He didn’t get to ride his horses much anymore since he’d become President Robert Langford’s Chief of Staff over two years ago. In fact, he didn’t get to stay at his equestrian estate in rural Virginia much at all. Instead, Faulkner spent most of his days

and nights in his house in Washington D.C. It was close enough to the White House so he could be in the Oval Office with fifteen minutes' notice, traffic permitting.

Sometimes he wondered why he'd taken the job. Was it because he liked the power the position afforded? The prestige? Or had he given in to the President's offer because they'd been friends since college? Like Bolton, the President had been a member of the same fraternity Faulkner had pledged to. Maybe it wasn't either of those reasons. Perhaps not remarrying after the unexpected death of his wife when their son was still a child had contributed to his quest for more professional challenges. He'd been no good at raising his rebellious and grief-stricken teenage son.

"Morning, Mr. Faulkner," the groom said.

Robert Woolf looked like a crusty old sailor, his face leathered from the time he spent outdoors whatever the weather, his hands calloused from the hard labor he performed without complaint. Faulkner knew a good man when he saw one. And Woolf was a good man, honest, reliable, invaluable.

"Morning, Robert."

"Has your guest arrived?" Woolf asked.

"I'm afraid he had to cancel. Something came up. And I have to return to Washington D.C. immediately."

Woolf sighed. "Hmm. The President sure rides you hard, if you don't mind my saying so. He never lets you enjoy a day off."

Faulkner let out a bitter laugh. "Normally you'd be right, but this time, I have to help an old friend out." He rubbed his hand over the horse Woolf had already saddled. "Perhaps you and Caleb can ride out instead. I'll call him and see if he has plans to come out."

Before he could reach for his cell phone, Woolf waved him off. "Don't think so. He was here yesterday."

“Caleb? Good!” Though his only son wasn’t as much into horses as Faulkner and his wife had been, he occasionally did show some interest.

“He didn’t take any of the horses out. He wasn’t here long enough. I was ready to saddle Lucky for him, but he said he didn’t have time.”

Faulkner’s forehead furrowed. “Then what did he do here?”

Wolf shrugged. “He said he forgot something last time he was here.”

“Oh well, why don’t you ride Lucky then? And maybe that boy who helps out here occasionally wants to ride the mare. I don’t mind. He seems responsible enough.”

“Will do, sir.”

“Thanks, Robert.”

Faulkner turned and marched out of the stable, pulled his cell phone from his pocket, and scrolled through his contacts.

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THERE WAS NO PARKING outside the quaint Georgetown two-story townhouse when Detective Adam Yang arrived with his partner, Detective Simon Jefferson. It was to be expected. There was never any parking in this part of Washington D.C. to begin with. And today, it was even worse: a car was already double-parked.

Yang exchanged a look with Jefferson, his black partner of only two years. They'd both become members of the Washington Metropolitan Police Department in their early twenties and risen through the ranks, making detective within six months of each other. But that was where their similarities ended. Jefferson belonged to the black majority at DC Police, where roughly sixty percent of all officers were black, and only a little over two percent were Asian.

While Yang felt at home in the multi-cultural department, he was certainly the odd man out. Just like he was the odd man out in his extended Chinese family. His siblings, two sisters and a brother, as well as his many cousins, were professionals: lawyers, doctors, accountants. His parents had meant for him to follow in their footsteps, but he had no interest in medicine or accounting. The law had called to him, though not in the way his parents had hoped. A lawyer or judge in the family would have satisfied their ambitions for him, but Yang had chosen to join the police force instead.

"Just park behind the black car," Jefferson said with a shrug.

Normally, Yang would at least have made an effort to find a proper parking spot, but after an early morning phone call with his soon-to-be ex-wife in which they'd fought