

Post Election Promises

"And with forty-seven percent of the precincts reporting in, we're predicting Indiana and its eleven electoral votes will go to Governor Robert Ritchie."

"I told her Indiana was a lost cause," Josh muttered to the television news anchor.

Donna heard him despite the chaos around them. "Indiana's historically Republican on Presidential elections. We knew that going in."

"Somehow that doesn't make me feel better, Donnatella." Without turning, he continued, "Donna, find Sam and ask him about the line in the acceptance speech. He'll know what I'm talking about."

"Why don't you ask him yourself? He's all of six feet away from you, Josh."

Sure enough, when Josh looked around, he found Sam watching one of the monitors. Looking up to see what had Sam's attention, he found southern California results scrolling. "Whatcha watching, Sam?" Josh asked as calmly as he was capable of being on an Election Day.

"Just wondering how California's 47th was doing," Sam answered nonchalantly.

Josh looked at him in confusion. "We have as much chance of winning that seat as talking Atlantis into becoming our fifty-first state. Besides, didn't the candidate die like weeks ago?"

"Yeah," Sam acknowledged, his eyes never leaving the screen. "While you guys were in San Diego, I went and talked with the campaign manager. Pretty good guy. I was just wondering how they did."

Josh waved off the irrelevancy. "Did you get the line yet for the acceptance speech?"

Sam nodded. "Toby has it. I'm sure it'll come back, cut to ribbons any second now."

"Good," Josh answered distractedly, wandering off.

Kathy walked up to Sam moments later, holding three sheets of paper, liberally covered with Toby-scrawls. "His Highness has spoken," she stated wryly, handing him the sheets.

He half-smiled. "Yeah." Before she could turn away, he suddenly said, "Hey. What do you think of southern California?"

She looked at him strangely. "You know I grew up there. We both did. How many times have we talked about it over Chinese?"

His smile went up a notch. "Yeah. Never mind. I'll be in my office, working on this if anyone asks," he told her, holding up the pages slightly.

Sam was tapping away at his laptop an hour later, occasionally looking up to judge the expressions on the faces he could see still watching the monitors.

He was frowning in concentration as he tried to tie off a dangling participle when his concentration was broken by the door opening. Ainsley Hayes walked in accompanied by a wave of noise that cut off as she closed his door.

Leaning back in his chair, he smiled at her. "Why, Miss Hayes, what brings you to my humble abode?"

She looked at him narrowly for a moment before seating herself. "You're certainly in a good mood."

He shrugged. "What can I say? The President slam-dunked that debate and we're winning re-election out there," he waved a hand at the window behind her.

"How does that saying go? 'Don't count the chickens before they're hatched,'" she quoted to him.

He looked at her for a moment, trying to determine why she was so somber when the rest of the building looked like it could break out into a party at any time. "Why the mood? All polling puts us at least ten points ahead of Ritchie. President Bartlet will be here for another four years."

"I just don't believe in celebrating before it's a done deal, that's all. Besides, I came in here to talk to you about the Indio."

Sam perked up even more. "I heard there was going to be a hearing on that today. How'd it go?"

"Your corporate shield was pierced," she told him in satisfaction. "The owners will be going to court directly instead of hiding behind the corporate

front. The EPA and the state of Delaware are climbing over each other to sue them first."

He smiled. "Good. I didn't like doing that when I was with Gage-Whitney. I'm glad to hear that the owners will be held liable."

"Now is that any way for their former attorney to speak of them?" Ainsley teased. Standing, she smoothed the blazer she was wearing before saying, "I knew you would want to hear about the Indio. I'll just go back to my office now. Have a nice evening."

"Ainsley," Sam said before she could open his door. At her questioning look, he continued, "Will you be in any condition to talk work in about three hours?" It was no secret or surprise that a multitude of parties were going to start in the West Wing the instant President Bartlet was announced the winner.

She looked at him solemnly. "Since the Republican candidate appears to be losing this one, I thought I'd have to drown my sorrows." She smiled and swatted at him for his mock sympathetic look. "Seriously, I was planning on having a drink or two after the announcement, why?"

Uncharacteristically, Sam hesitated before continuing. "I may need to talk to you in a while. I don't know yet."

"Is something wrong?" she asked, immediately concerned.

"No, no," he assured her. "Nothing's wrong. It's just something we're both going to need a level head for."

She looked at him for a long moment, trying to read his meaning. Eventually she asked, "Is this a conversation you need to have with Ainsley Hayes or with Deputy White House Counselor Hayes?"

He slowly smiled as he realized she was asking if he wanted to have a personal or work related discussion. "I don't know yet if I will need to speak with Deputy White House Counselor Hayes. Either way, I would be honored if Ainsley Hayes would go out for a drink with me after that."

She smiled and a light blush stained her cheeks. "Why, Mister Seaborn, are you asking me out on a date?"

"Why yes, Miss Hayes, I do believe I am."

They shared a quiet chuckle before she agreed and quietly left. Sam thoughtfully studied the door for a few minutes, trying to decide what he really wanted.

Finally shaking his head, he turned to his laptop and went back to work.

Predictably, California was the last big state to be called. Since Bartlet had held the lead in the state for the previous two months, the champagne was already beginning to flow even before any of the major networks declared Bartlet the winner.

Sam sat on Ginger's desk, drinking a beer and chatting comfortably with Josh and Donna.

"What are you watching?" Donna asked him suddenly.

Caught off guard, Sam swung his gaze from the monitor to her. "Just curious about some of the House seats."

Josh craned his neck around to check the television that had held Sam's attention. Frowning, he looked back at his friend. "That's southern California again. Why are you so interested in California 47th?"

"He grew up there, Joshua," Donna pointed out as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

He shrugged. "I'm not following who's running in the Connecticut 4th."

She rolled her eyes. "Franklin is beating Charles, Josh. Byer is beating Thompson in Wisconsin 2nd. Just because you don't keep up with your hometown politics doesn't mean the rest of us don't."

He raised one eyebrow slightly. "Sorry." He turned to Sam. "So how's California 47th going?"

"Dead heat," Sam answered, studying the television again with a slight frown.

Kathy waved a water bottle at the television. "Wilde is doing surprisingly well," she commented.

Donna gave Josh a superior look. Josh held up one hand in surrender.

"Yeah," Sam agreed, the frown deepening slightly.

"What's wrong?" Donna asked, recognizing a different kind of stress on her friend.

Sam shook off his mood and refocused on his friends. "Nothing. Hey, did Leo ever say how that thing with Kumar went?"

"Not really," Josh answered. "He muttered something about a room full of godless infidels and a hot dog in Times Square. Then he changed the subject. On the other hand, it's been a week, and we haven't heard anything more about it. That has to be a good sign."

"Good point," Sam acknowledged.

"Here it is!" Toby suddenly shouted from somewhere else in the bullpen.

As if synchronized, every head swiveled to the same television and everyone fell silent. Clearly audible again, the news anchor said, "Now with sixty-four percent of the California precincts reporting, President Bartlet is maintaining his fifteen percent lead over Governor Ritchie. Unless Governor Ritchie can pull an amazing upset in the predominantly Democratic northern California, President Bartlet will be staying with us for another term."

The room exploded into cheers, drowning out the anchor's admonition that this was not an official result. Everyone was too busy shaking everyone else's hand or hugging each other. Sam received at least four kisses on the cheek in the next three minutes and it was only later that he thought to hope that Josh wasn't one of them.

It was nearly a half hour later before Sam thought to look at the television that he'd requested be turned to a southern California NBC affiliate. Ten seconds was all it took. Sam found himself staring at the beaming face of Will Bailey. The caption below gave his name and the fact that he was the Wilde campaign manager. Will's mussed hair and the jerky camera picture indicated a handheld camera in a campaign headquarters that was currently undergoing a party. If Sam was harboring any doubts of what he was seeing, Will's sudden duck and the pint of champagne poured onto his head from behind sealed the deal.

Kathy came up beside Sam and followed his eyes to the monitor. "Hey, Wilde won! Who'd a thunk it? A Democrat in the California 47th. Wonder who they're going to get in there."

He looked over and smiled at her. Glancing at the champagne flute she was holding, he said, "Don't drink too much, Kathy. You need a clear head. You and I need to talk business."

Her mouth fell open slightly. "Sam! We just won re-election. You really think we need to talk business tonight?"

He nodded. "Definitely. Come with me." He loosely grabbed her arm and started to steer her toward the hallway, intending to head over to Ainsley's office. He needed to talk with the both of them together. Changing his mind at the last moment, he stopped her outside his office with a curt instruction of, "Wait one second."

Ducking into his office and closing the door, he called the switchboard. After a forty-five second wait, he finally got to a live voice. "Hello. This is Sam Seaborn. I'm expecting a call from either Will Bailey or Kay Wilde. If either of them call, try me first at Ainsley Hayes's office, then my cell. Got that? Okay, thank you."

He came out of his office and pulled Kathy away from her excited, whispered conversation with Carol and Bonnie. Sam smiled at the other assistants in apology, and gently but firmly led Kathy toward the Counsel's office with a hand to her back. Just outside Ainsley's office, Sam and the mildly protesting Kathy found four of the White House's attorneys chatting in the hallway, each with a drink in hand. Sam stopped and waved toward Ainsley's office. "Turns out we need to have that discussion, Deputy Hayes," he said to the woman in question.

Understanding him immediately, she turned on her heel and opened the door.

One of the male lawyers that had been talking to Ainsley objected, "Hey, Seaborn. You already brought one good looking woman with you. Were you intending on stealing one of ours, too, or were you thinking of leaving the first one here as a trade?"

All three stopped in their tracks, turning to stare at the obnoxious man who'd clearly had a few too many. Ainsley's look could have melted the floor he was standing on, Kathy looked somewhere between shocked and outraged, and Sam looked ready to kill.

Before any of the three could comment, Oliver Babish stepped out of his office a couple of feet down the hallway. "Mister Whithers," he began to the frightened shock of the man, "that ill advised comment just opened you and perhaps the White House up to at least two charges of harassment. Whatever Mister Seaborn wishes to discuss with both Miss Hayes and his own administrative assistant is a topic for just the three of them. If they wish to do it in her office, his office, the Rose Garden, or the Lincoln Bedroom is totally irrelevant." He turned to the two women. "Do either of you wish to charge sexual harassment suits against Mister Whithers? I daresay with four witnesses it shouldn't be terribly difficult, though I politely request that you refrain from suing the White House as part of the deal." Both women shook off the shock long enough to give Babish negative answers. He turned to Sam. "Mister Seaborn, I don't have a handy desk pad for you to sign, but I'm sure we could come up with something. What say you, sir?"

Sam smiled in amusement. "Lionel told you about that?"

Oliver nodded. "He did, indeed. Also something about a 'White Knight Complex', but that is beside the point."

Sam looked over at the frightened but confused attorney. "I defer to the ladies on this occasion."

Babish nodded. Turning to Whithers, he said, "I suggest you read up on the abolitionist movement since you appeared to refer to Miss Hayes as property. Now go away."

Whithers bolted. The two other attorneys who had watched the entire affair curiously slowly headed down the hall, resuming their conversation. Once they were out of earshot, Babish turned back to Sam. "Mister Seaborn, have you done something illegal, immoral, or potentially so that requires the services of the Deputy White House Counsel?"

"No, sir," Sam answered steadily.

Oliver relaxed minutely. "In that case, I respectfully request that you not detain Miss Hayes any longer than necessary with your meeting. She's been working very hard recently and deserves a night of celebration."

"Careful, Oliver, your heart is showing," Sam teased, knowing full well that Babish projected an armored appearance at all times.

Babish glowered at Sam before turning and going back into his office and slamming the door without a word.

Sam chuckled and waved one hand at Ainsley's open door. "Ladies."

"Desk pad?" Kathy asked as she took one of the guest chairs.

Ainsley smiled. "I'll explain it later. It was actually a very sweet thing that Sam did for me shortly after I started working here." She turned to him. "Now what was it that you needed to talk with me about?" She flicked a glance to Kathy and amended herself, "With us about?"

Before Sam could answer, Ainsley's phone rang. "Ainsley Hayes speaking." She paused and answered, "Yes," before handing the receiver to Sam. "The switchboard is transferring a call to you."

Sam smiled and took the receiver. "This is Sam Seaborn." "Yes, Ma'am." "That is correct." "I'm pleased to hear that." "Yes, I do understand what you're asking of me." He pulled a notepad from Ainsley's desk and grabbed a handy pen before asking, "Could I have a phone number where I could reach him tomorrow at ten your time?" He scribbled a number down before tearing the sheet off the pad and tucking it away. "Could you please give me until tomorrow evening before you announce this? I have a few things to do first." "Thank you, ma'am, and let me say that it's an honor that you called me. I'll see you in a few days to go over things." He smiled at her response. "Congratulations and good night." He hung up and smiled at the phone for a few seconds before looking up at the confused expressions of the two ladies in the office with him.

He turned to Kathy. "You asked earlier about who they'd get to take Wilde's seat?" He waited for her nod before finishing with, "That was Kay Wilde." He paused and let the two of them make the connection.

It only took Kathy two seconds. "You didn't."

Sam nodded. "I did."

"Last week?"

He nodded again.

Ainsley was still confused. "Wilde? Where have I heard that name?"

"California 47th," Kathy answered without taking her eyes from Sam.

"But didn't he die? Did they . . . And you . . ." She trailed off, eyes widening.

Sam grinned widely. "Ainsley Hayes is speechless? At least I got to see it once in my life, though I would have preferred two years ago when she was sitting across from me on national television."

She rolled her eyes at his quip before asking, "Are you saying that you, just now, accepted a seat in the United States House of Representatives?"

"Yes." His simple acknowledgement stunned the two for a few moments.

"When were you going to tell me this?" Kathy asked.

"It didn't matter unless they actually won. Which at the time appeared to be very unlikely."

"Are you upset that they won?"

Sam thought about it for a few seconds before shaking his head. "No, I guess I'm not. When I made the offer, it didn't look like it mattered. Now that it does, I'm both shocked and thrilled. I did make Will a promise, so I will follow through either way, but the more I think about it, the more I like the idea."

"Should I begin calling you Mister Congressman?" Ainsley asked facetiously, still trying to come to grips with his announcement.

He grinned. "Unfortunately it isn't quite that simple. Orange County will hold a special election within the next ninety days to fill that seat. But Kay Wilde and Will Bailey showing strong support for me will definitely simplify my campaign."

"Why are you telling us this?" Ainsley asked. "Would not Misters Ziegler or Lyman be a better choice to tell first?"

"I'm starting with you because I want you two to work for me in the House." He turned to Kathy. "I need an administrative assistant. I like you, we know each other, and the fact that you're from the area helps."

She smiled. "How does it pay?"

He blinked. "You know, I'm not sure. I'll have to get back to you on that." He turned to Ainsley. "And I'll need a chief of staff." Her eyes got wide while Sam continued, "Frankly, I'd prefer Josh, but that would be something of a demotion for him and the country needs him where he is, not in the staff of a freshman congressman. Now, that may not sound terribly complimentary to you, but it actually is. You and I are alike in some ways, Ainsley. In our respective fields, we're only one step from the very top. This move may not appear to be a promotion for either of us, but it does put us into a whole new arena. One where the top spot is a great deal further away." He grinned and pointed. "About a hundred yards that way, I think."

Kathy raised an eyebrow, and Ainsley stared in astonishment. "I do believe that you are serious about sometime in the future pursuing such a position."

"Yes," Sam stated definitely. "I figure eight years as a Congressman, four as Governor of California, eight as Vice President, then eight as President."

"You seem to have it all planned out," Kathy noted.

"I'm an optimist."

"How much does this offer have to do with me being me and how much does it have to do with me being a female Republican?"

Sam nodded easily. "Mostly I want you for you, but the fact that you're a blonde, Republican sex kitten helps," he added slyly.

Kathy stared in slack jawed amazement. "Sam, after what Mister Babish just said to Ted . . ."

Ainsley waved her off with a smile. "It's okay. That's an inside joke between Sam and me." She studied Sam for a few moments before slowly nodding. "This will take some thought on my part. When do you need an answer?"

"Couple days at the least. I don't know exactly. I need to fly out there and talk with Kay Wilde and Will Bailey before starting my campaign."

"Let me know about the specifics of the position and where my office would be here in DC."

Sam nodded and turned to Kathy. "How about you? You want to get the chance to become the next Missus Landingham?"

She smiled back, remembering with fondness the President's late personal assistant. "As Miss Hayes said, please let me know the specifics of the position and I'll think it over." She stood and looked at him steadily. "In the meantime, is there anything I can do for you as the assistant of lowly Deputy Communications Director Seaborn?"

He smiled at her. "Yes. Set up a meeting with Toby tomorrow at twelve thirty. Block it for an hour. Immediately after that, see if you can get fifteen minutes with the President, Leo, CJ, Josh, and all the assistants. Book me on a flight to LAX Wednesday night or early Thursday. Arrange a hotel room for me in LA near the campaign headquarters for Wednesday or Thursday night through Sunday morning. And clear my schedule Thursday through Sunday. After that point, we'll play it by ear. While I'm gone, please dig up what you can as far as pay rates, common sizes of staff, what I have as far as office choices, like that."

"Okay, boss. If you don't mind, I'm going to get the immediate stuff done and then go on home or at least join one of the parties again."

"No problem. Have a nice night."

Kathy quietly let herself out, looking slightly dazed.

Sam turned back to Ainsley to find her staring at her desktop in thought. "Penny for your thoughts."

Her mouth quirked into a little smile. "A North Carolina Republican as the chief of staff to a California Democratic Congressman?"

"I could suggest you think of the possibilities it represents so far as bi-partisanship, but that would make it sound like I'm only asking you because you're a Republican. The truth is that I think you'd be good at it. I'd like to think of us as friends, and you know the ropes here in DC. What more do I need in a right hand woman? The fact that you're Republican will only help to keep me honest."

"If I do accept this, you have to know that I'm not going to change my opinions."

"Like I said, it will keep me honest. If I promise not to get mad at you for your opinions, you have to promise me not to get mad at me for mine or how I vote on any given bill."

She blew out a breath, still staring at the desk top. "Give me some time to think about it."

"No problem. Now about that date I asked you on . . ." He trailed off with a hint of a smile.

She quirked an eyebrow in amusement. "You do believe in striking while the iron is hot."

"I already told you that I'm an optimist."

"Make it somewhere we can get something to eat in addition to the drink, and you have yourself a deal."

"Done."

"Toby?" Sam poked his head into his boss's office at 12:30 the next afternoon.

"Yeah, Sam. Whaddya need?"

Sam closed the door behind himself and took a seat on the couch. "Did you hear that Horton Wilde won California 47th?"

"No, I hadn't. As fascinating as that fact is, I trust that you blocked an hour of my time for a better reason than to tell me this."

"I also found out who wrote Tillman's speech last week."

"Sam, is there a point here?"

"Actually I met both him and the one who wrote the jokes. They really worked, don't you think?"

"Maybe if you admitted there was no point to this discussion, I could help you look for it."

"Will Bailey wrote it and Elsie Snuffin did the jokes. These two also got Wilde elected."

"You can start the search in your office, and I'll start in here."

"You need to hire him, Toby."

Ziegler stopped and looked at Sam. "You want me to hire another speechwriter? We have only about a dozen working for us."

"I think you should hire him as your primary speechwriter," Sam expanded.

"You realize that this is your job we're talking about here."

"Yes, I know."

"Do you not like your job?"

"I love my job."

"Then . . ." he made a vague gesture that Sam took as request for more information.

"I found a better job."

"What could possibly be better than working for the President of the United States?"

"Becoming President of the United States."

Toby stared. "You realize that the citizens of our great country actually managed to do something intelligent, and they re-elected Jed Bartlet."

"Yes."

"They did this quite recently. Last night, in fact. I vividly remember it. You were even there."

"Yes."

"If that is the case, then how can you become President? The Constitution only allows one President at a time unless there was some sort of coup last night and nobody bothered to inform me of it."

"I'm not going to be President right now. I'm thinking about twenty years from now."

"Because, after all, these things can't be rushed."

"That's right," Sam agreed.

"What in God's name are you talking about, Sam?" Toby snapped, finally tired of the verbal fencing.

"Remember how I just mentioned that Horton Wilde won the California 47th?"

Toby paused for a moment. "You didn't."

"I did."

"Last week when we were in San Diego?"

"That's right."

Toby paused again and asked the most relevant question he could think of. "Why, Sam?"

"I could give you all sorts of answers, Toby, but it all boils down to the same thing: because it's the right thing to do," he answered simply.

Toby wiped one finger over a brow before settling his chin to his hand in one of his common mannerisms when he was trying to combat shock. "You know, I always thought that the day after re-election would be calmer than this."

"Think about how I felt last night when I got a call from Kay Wilde," Sam grinned.

Toby gave him a sour look. "Who knows about this?"

"At the moment, you, Kathy, Ainsley, Will Bailey, and Kay Wilde."

"Ainsley?"

"I asked her and Kathy to come work for me on the Hill."

"Why Ainsley?"

"Because I think she'd be good at it, and Josh wouldn't want the job as chief of staff."

"When were you planning on telling CJ and the President?"

Sam glanced at his watch. "In forty minutes."

"You don't waste time, do you?"

"Speaking of not wasting time, I'm going out to California tonight. I'll be back by Monday. Latest version of the Treasury thing will be in your hands by the time I leave tonight."

"Let it not be said that Sam Seaborn let moss grow underfoot."

"That's all you're going to say?"

"What were you expecting?"

"I don't honestly know. But not . . . this."

Toby continued in a softer voice. "Even Batman had to eventually let Robin grow up."

"I'm not sure exactly how, but that sounded demeaning."

Toby's mouth attempted to twitch into a smile. "Will Bailey?"

"Grew up in Brussels, Belgium. His father was part of the NATO high command."

"That Bailey?"

Sam nodded. "That Bailey."

"Andi mentioned Tillman's speech. I dug it up and read it. It was pretty good stuff."

"I also watched him at a press conference. He's not in CJ's league, but give him a few years."

Toby appeared mildly impressed. "If I have to lose Robin to another team, I want at least a good BatBoy in trade."

Sam stared at him. "Please tell me that awful pun wasn't planned."

Toby looked back blandly.

Sam rolled his eyes and pulled Toby's phone toward himself. Retrieving the note from the previous night, he quickly dialed the phone number that Kay Wilde had given him.

"Will Bailey," the voice answered over speakerphone.

"Hi, Will. This is Sam."

"Hey, Sam. Missus Wilde mentioned that she gave you this number and to expect a call this morning."

"How are things out there?"

"The Press is crawling all over me, wanting to know who Missus Wilde and I want to be in this seat. What do I tell them?"

"Give me three hours, and then give them my name if you still want me."

"I told you a week ago that we weren't going to ask anyone else."

"You also said that nobody else wanted it."

"Nobody did."

"So what does that make me?"

Toby chimed in, "A hopeless optimist with an insane wish to be an underdog. Made you perfect to hire four and a half years ago when Josh drug you to Nashua."

Sam quickly said, "Will, I would like you to meet Toby Ziegler. He's my boss."

"Mister Ziegler."

"Mister Bailey."

Sam added, "I just recommended that he hire you to take my place."

The California end of the connection was silent for fifteen seconds. "Sam, I'm not so sure that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Who will you have run your campaign?"

"You if you want to stick around to see the job through. Between you, me, Elsie, and Toby, we can all cover this job while I'm out there campaigning. After that, you move out here and I move down the Hill."

"What about my people?"

"They stay there. I'll need to maintain an office there as well as here. Elsie can run it if she's as capable as she appears to be. I might even spring for better cubicle walls."

"Very funny. You know what kind of budget we were working under. Especially when DCCC cut us off."

Sam winced. "I'm sorry, but the fact that you won anyway only makes the victory that much the sweeter."

"Nice attempted save."

"Sam tells me that you wrote Tillman's speech for the Stanford Club," Toby said.

"Not that I'm going to admit to that," Will hedged.

Toby's face softened a fraction. "Good answer. Congresswoman Wyatt suggested that I read it. She implied that it was as good as what I can do, and I would wish I had actually done it."

Will said nothing.

"She was right," Toby grudgingly admitted.

Will still said nothing.

"You there, Will?" Sam asked.

"Yeah, I'm here," a very subdued Bailey responded.

"You two need to talk some things over. Will, I'm going to be flying into LAX at nine tonight your time out of Dulles. If you could have someone pick me up, we can get this thing moving."

"Sure. See you tonight, Congressman."

Sam grinned and stood to leave. As he was exiting, he heard Toby start up. "If I ever even get a hint that you bowed or scraped to Sam -" The closing door cut off the remainder of Toby's rant.

He stepped over to Kathy's desk and shuffled through the stack of call slips she handed to him. "Your meeting with the President is in thirty."

"With Josh, CJ, Leo, Charlie, Debbie Fiderer, Ginger, Connie, Margaret, Donna, and Carol?"

"And a partridge in a pear tree," she finished with a grin.

He returned her grin at her quip. "You, too, if you want," he offered, "but you already know what it's going to be about."

She nodded. "Wouldn't miss it. How'd Toby react?"

He rolled his eyes. "Exactly the same as yours. 'You didn't.'"

"I hardly expected him to break down into a sobbing mess, but maybe a little more excitement than that."

"You didn't break down," he noted.

"I was in shock."

"He didn't show it, but you know Toby. He cares despite himself. He's scaring Will Bailey to death right now in an interview. But Will will come and do a better job than I do."

She smiled back.

"I'm going to go talk to Ainsley."

"Give her a kiss from me," Kathy suggested with a sly grin.

Sam didn't even pause. "If I give her a kiss, it most definitely will be from me."

Kathy blinked at Sam's back at the rejoinder.

He knocked on Ainsley's half-opened door and pushed it open. She looked up from the law books scattered over her desk and smiled up at him. "Hey, Sam."

"Hi. How's your day been?" he asked, dropping into one of the guest chairs.

"Less stressful than yours, I would imagine. You told Mister Ziegler?"

Sam nodded. "And started his interview with Will Bailey. I think he'd be good at my job. I'll want him to stay for my campaign, but then he could come here and do this."

She looked at him curiously. "You don't want him as your chief of staff?"

He slowly shook his head, eyes never leaving hers. "I'd rather have you." He held up a hand before she could utter a word. "I know I said I would give you some time to think it over, and I am. I'm just stating a fact." He paused, never releasing her from his gaze. "Now," he said suddenly, standing up, "I'm going to go and explain to the President of the United States why I have to resign immediately after helping get him re-elected." He held an arm to her and smiled his most charming smile. "Care to join me?"

She softly echoed his smile and slowly shook her head. "You're something else, Sam, do you know that?" She stood and slipped her arm through his. "Let's," she said simply.

Exiting her office, they comfortably walked arm in arm all the way to the anteroom of the Oval Office, ignoring the looks they received.

Charlie looked up at them as they approached and decided against saying anything regarding their proximity. "Five minutes, Sam. What's this about, anyway? Kathy wouldn't say."

Sam looked back and forth conspiratorially and whispered, "You'll find out in a few minutes anyway. I've come up with a secret plan to fight inflation."

Charlie managed to give him a dirty look without a single muscle of his face having moved. "Sam."

"Lighten up, Charlie. You'll find out in five minutes like everyone else."

The door to the Oval Office opened up and Admiral Fitzwallace exited. "Sam," he greeted.

"Admiral. How're things on your side of the street this fine day?"

"I haven't managed to blow anyone up yet if that's what you're asking."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir. I'm sure you'll feel better soon."

Fitzwallace gave Sam a bemused look before turning to Ainsley and pointing a finger in recognition. "Miss Hayes, right?"

"Yes, sir," she said, giving a quick head bob.

He stuck out a hand. "Percy Fitzwallace. How do you do?"

"Fine, sir," she answered, shaking his hand nervously.

"Charlie," Fitzwallace said with a quick nod as he left.

"Admiral," Charlie said, hardly looking up at him. He finished off the memo he was reading and stood up, facing Sam and Ainsley. "You can go on in. I'll send in everyone else as they arrive."

"You and Debbie are invited, too," Sam said.

Charlie shared a surprised look with Debbie Fiderer. "Nice to be appreciated," Debbie commented.

Sam escorted Ainsley into the Oval. President Bartlet looked up over the rims of his glasses from where he was standing behind his desk. "Hiya, Sam." He glanced at Ainsley before returning his attention to Sam. "I see you brought your favorite blonde, Republican sex kitten along."

He turned back to her as she muttered, "Oh, God."

Ignoring her and Sam's blushes, Bartlet continued, "I'm sorry I don't have a bathrobe handy, Miss Hayes, but Leo's office is through that door if you

need to use his closet."

"Oh, God," she repeated quietly. To Sam, she muttered, "Will I never live that down?"

"He wouldn't tease you if he didn't like you," he consoled her, grinning at the chief executive.

Bartlet finally relented and put down the paper he was reading and removed his glasses. Stepping toward them, he motioned toward one of the couches. "Please have a seat, Miss Hayes. I don't bite." He glanced over at Sam again and said, "I'll leave that to Sam."

"Sir," Sam started, turning gradually more red.

Bartlet waved one hand. "Relax, Sam. You know I'm only teasing. So what brings you two here today?"

Before Sam could answer, Leo's connecting door opened and he and Margaret entered. Margaret sat primly beside Ainsley while Leo leaned casually back on Bartlet's desk and folded his arms.

"What's this about, Leo?" Bartlet asked.

Leo shrugged. "Sam wanted to talk with all of us. I don't know what it's about, but Kathy assured Margaret that it wasn't bad."

Most of the senior and junior staff from the communications area trooped in by Charlie's desk, followed by Donna dragging a confused Josh by one arm.

"Donna, will you please tell me what we're doing here?"

"Sam called a meeting," she explained to him patiently, "and since your watch sucks, I knew I had to drag you here to get us both into the Oval on time."

Kathy herded Debbie and Charlie into the room before closing the door behind herself and giving Sam a nod and a smile.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," CJ intoned. "Now will someone tell me what's going on?" She glanced around as most of the women took seats on the couches. "Wait, where's Toby?"

"He already knows," Sam answered.

"Do I need to be sitting down for this?" Bartlet asked.

"Might not be a bad idea, sir."

Leo studied Sam while Bartlet went around his desk and sat down. "Now that you have everyone's attention," Leo said, waving an arm around the room crowded with fourteen bodies, "perhaps you'd like to make an announcement."

Sam took a breath to steady his nerves. He glanced at Kathy only to receive a nod and encouraging smile. Ainsley had a softer smile for him, but she nodded as well.

Slipping an envelope out of his coat pocket, he placed it gently onto Bartlet's desk. "Mister President, it has to do with the California 47th."