

Claiming Power

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1



Connor squirmed in the wide leather seat, his patience stretching dangerously thin. Stanley, whose bug-eyed shiny face always looked like he was being surprised, had hardly taken a breath between streams of expletives into the phone. It didn't look like he was going to stop anytime soon. They'd been sitting in the limo for long enough that Connor's restlessness was about to turn into full blown anxiety. All the deep breaths in the world weren't going to calm him down.

He could just step out for a second, stretch his legs, move his body, clear his head. Stanley's rage would be directed toward him soon enough, complete with finger-pointing and name-calling, but he didn't need to sit there and wait for it. Connor reached for the door, Stanley grabbed his wrist, and a vision of punching Stanley in the face - multiple times - held them both in place. But just for a second.

A twist of the wrist freed Connor from the hold; a kick of the door freed him from the stifling car.

He slammed the door, cutting off the string of profanities coming from inside the sleek black Towncar. He scanned the unkempt loading dock, so different than the stunning entrance of the building. Young people in chef uniforms hauled crates out of white panel trucks. He hadn't realized that they had arrived at

the Mellon Auditorium, the location for this evening's event.

He broke into a familiar pattern of pacing. It surprised him when Stanley said they had booked the Mellon. Being the closest event space to the White House made it nearly impossible to get without the highest level connections. Clearly, Stanley had them. Maybe Uncle Robert had pulled a few strings as well.

Connor matched his breaths to each long stride. This was a big night. When his campaign for Senate would become real. He'd be asking people for money and votes. Asking for them to trust him.

A burst of wind chilled his face, a cold sweat broken out across his forehead. What was he thinking? He wasn't ready for this. He was a small-town Mayor. Sure, he had a political legacy, and yes, he'd done great things for his community, but this... This was another league, entirely.

He nearly reached the caterer's van, turned and walked back toward the car. He paused at his reflection in the blackened windows and ran a hand over his hair. No reason, as he was always perfectly groomed. Just to make sure his head was still screwed on, perhaps.

"Dad," he whispered. "I need your help, here. I might have gotten myself into something way over my head."

He didn't expect a response, considering his father had died three weeks before. But what he saw in the reflection looked more like his long-gone grandfather, the one the streets and buildings were named after. The one who'd terrorized his childhood.

"Grow a set! You're not just any boy," he would say. "You're Connor Barrett. Eldest grandson of Virginia's most beloved Governor and the face of a new generation of leadership. So stop acting like a pussy and go out there and show them who's in charge!"

Connor shook his head, desperately wanting the image to dissolve in the cold day. His grandfather might not have been around, but somehow a bully still bellowed in his ear. The small, slick tyrant screaming inside the car matched all his grandfather's ire in a body half the size. Stanley Grayson, known

in the highest level political circles as the Kingmaker, had been Connor's campaign manager for less than two months. Two long, infuriating months filled with more fantasies of physical violence than Connor had ever had.

Keep the end in sight, man. He had to keep reminding himself that it was an honor that Stanley had agreed to work with him. His best friend's dad, Congressman Winston, aka Uncle Robert, had called in some big favors to make it happen. But they hadn't stopped butting heads. Stanley wanted to run things old school - and by old school, he meant wheeling, dealing, and dirty - while Connor wanted to do it better. He wanted to show all the people disillusioned by politics and their leaders that someone would have their back.

It wasn't working. Maybe he wasn't cut out for this after all.

The window slid halfway down. "Get your ass back in here!"

Connor paused before sauntering back to the car, taking his time to open the door and take a seat. He plastered a calm expression on his face. "I was waiting for you to finish your phone call, Stanley. No need for all that yelling."

"You better get your head in the game, Barrett! I was on the phone with the morning show, arguing for you to get top billing. This is NOT the time to be checking out."

Connor exhaled, praying for patience. "I'm not checking out."

Stanley tightened his lips to a nearly invisible line. "Could have fooled me... Anyway. Tonight is extremely important. Most of the big guns will be here, deciding whether you're going to be their chosen horse in this race."

Connor flinched at being referred to as a horse. This guy was disgusting. "I understand that."

"Do you? Because you've turned it into a family party. This is not the time to socialize with your buddies. This is the time to make an impression on the power players with deep pockets. They are going to determine whether you even make it to the primaries, much less the main election."

No shit. It was exhausting having this conversation over and over. "That's clear. And that's why Ramona is here. She-"

"Your knocked-up sister? She's the problem, not the solution,

Barrett. No one wants to see a woman flaunting her promiscuity around like that. As if the scandal with the Winston boy wasn't bad enough..."

Connor vaulted forward in his seat, fist clenched against his side. It had been years since he'd hit someone but it might not be much longer. "Don't you fucking dare talk about my sister that way! You and I both know she is the most talented fundraiser on this planet. I'm lucky she agreed to do anything for me, after the stunt you pulled on New Year's Eve. You," he pointed right in the man's face, "are not allowed within ten feet of her. Understood?"

The older man slid back in his seat, that self-satisfied smirk on his face. Again. "Now, that's more like it. That's the kind of fire people are waiting to see in you. That's the stuff that's going to get you a seat in that very impressive building down the street."

And this was how it went. Stanley got to be as offensive as he wanted to be, then shrugged it off as part of the plan. Connor pulled off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, working to manage the rage that brought a throb around his temples. If this was the price he had to pay to get elected, he would have to pay it. There just didn't seem like another option.

The caterers scurried as he wound his way through the prep kitchen. Only a few stopped what they were doing to stare and whisper. He walked a little taller and put on his 'future Senator' face. Looking the part was half the game.

Stanley escorted him into the green room, where he'd wait until it was time for him to speak. He wasn't allowed out until that point, probably because Stanley didn't trust him to not say something wrong. As if. Connor Barrett had his faults but saying the wrong thing wasn't one of them.

He was grateful Stanley had to step out to deal with some emergency or another. A minute away from that man was good for his mental health. Congressman Winston—Uncle Robert—arrived a few minutes later. During all those hard years when his family was shredded - Mom fleeing to California, Dad lost in the bottle, Granddad on the war path - he'd depended more and

more on his best friend's family. Lucas Winston was more like a brother than a friend and his dad, a longtime Congressman, had been the one to support Connor in his political journey. He'd done so much to make this evening happen, it was hard to express enough thanks.

"Uncle Robert. So glad to see you."

The man put his palm on Connor's face. "Lookin' good, kid. Are you excited?"

Excited? Terrified, more like it. "Yes, I am. We've got a full house and-"

"You know, I remember my first big rally, when I decided to leave my position in the State Senate and run for Congress. I don't think I stopped shaking for days. I get what a big deal this is. But your time has come. Virginia needs you. Our country needs you."

The two men hugged briefly before Robert pulled away. "Now, who do I have to fuck to get a drink around here?"

Two young women carried trays into the room minutes after Connor's call down to the kitchen. He was surprised Stanley didn't breeze in after them, admonishing him about the food they'd requested.

"Never eat before a speech," he'd say. "It makes you look fat and lazy. You want to look hungry. That's what sells."

The women set up the table in the center of the room with the bottle of Scotch, several bottles of water, and an assortment of the appetizers he assumed were being served to the guests. He caught Robert enjoying the view, a bit too much. A pat on the back pulled Robert's attention from an admittedly fine derriere back to Connor.

"Did you get the draft of my speech?"

"Sure did. Looks good." A quick glance back over at the women. "I'd say it's better to err on the side of too little than too much. These folks won't be lingering over their decisions. And our speeches are just going to get in the way of them eating, drinking, and talking about themselves."

He was probably right. You didn't get to be a Congressman

for so many decades if you didn't know what to do in these situations. "Okay, maybe I'll cut some from the middle."

Robert slapped him on the back. "Just be yourself, Connor. Have a conversation with the crowd. You're naturally charismatic. Use it. The women will be swooning, the men will remember when they were as young and handsome as you. It'll be fine. Just fine."

The two women snuck a look before disappearing out the door. He could have sworn the blonde actually winked at him.

Robert smirked. "It's good we got some nice looking waitresses, too. That always helps. Especially, if you're looking for some company tonight." He winked. "After the rally."

Not going to happen. By the time the VIP after-party was done, it was going to be late. Then he had his regular workout first thing in the morning and a day full of appointments. Although, it had been a long time since he'd had another outlet for all that energy of his. And it would probably be a while before he could go out and bang just anyone.

Young and single was not necessarily a kiss of death for a male Senator, but it rarely helped. He had to make sure he wasn't coming across as a player. Gotta promote those conservative values, as Stanley reminded him. Frequently.

He pulled out his phone and jotted down a note to talk to Lorena, his matchmaker, the next day. So far, all her offerings had been duds. Too boring. Too chatty. Too wild. Too power hungry. Dating, when you were on a fast track to a serious political position, was much more complicated than finding someone to warm your bed.

He needed a woman who was smart, serious, and driven, but not too much of either. Someone who understood the life of a political wife and wanted all that came with it. A busty brunette would be great. He would have thought in this part of the world, the streets would be teeming with that type of woman. So far, no luck. Especially since Lorena kept insisting on sending him blondes, who were almost always an immediate *no*.

This woman, wherever she was, had to be White House ready.

2



Jenna fought her way through the crowd like a salmon swimming upstream. She had no interest in following everyone toward the stage, where an older man was droning on about government and the future and blah blah blah. With everyone's attention on Mr. Boring Pants, it was a perfect time to head toward the now empty bar.

She scanned the impressive collection of booze. Not bad. Could rival any of the fanciest bars she'd seen. Not that she liked fancy bars. Dark and dirty was more her speed. This being her very first political rally, she wasn't aware of the high caliber alcohol they would serve. Her favorite tequila, in fact.

She eyed the young bartender. Also not bad. Maybe she could rescue this ultra-dull evening after all.

"A shot of Patron platinum, please."

He nodded and turned to retrieve the recognizable bottle. "Aren't you interested in hearing the candidate speak?"

"Not even a little bit."

"Then why are you here?" he asked with a smirk.

She preferred her bartenders hot and silent, and this one was only fulfilling one of those requirements. "He's a friend of the family, supposedly. And they're all here to support him, so I had

to come, too. But we don't even live in this state and can't vote for him. I don't see the point, honestly."

The crowd burst into applause as the generous shot slid down her grateful throat. The opening act must have finished and the main guy - aka the candidate - would be speaking next. Oh, yay. More political speeches about governing this tiny, inconsequential state.

The huddled bodies separated just enough for her to see the tall, dark-haired man stride across the stage. Her eyes followed his every move as she became aware of three things.

1. He had terrible taste in clothes.

2. She remembered him from old family photos, running circles in their backyard wearing thick glasses and a bright red cape.

3. That swagger communicated something to her body that she would never have expected.

She turned away, slightly disturbed, but couldn't keep her eyes off him. That guy was not her type at all. Unless of course underneath that dull blue suit and nerdy glasses was a wild streak and a back full of tattoos. But the way he owned the stage and captured the crowd was impressive. She ended up listening, rapt, to his thankfully brief speech about his candidacy for Senate. People were excited. She guessed having a young, almost-hot Senator might not be so bad if you were forced to live there.

The applause continued long after he'd walked off the stage. Maybe he was even making his way around the crowd. She couldn't tell. And didn't care.

Jenna considered the bartender, the tequila, and the possibilities for each, deciding after some time that neither might be a good idea. She'd need to find the rest of her family at some point. Almost certainly, there would be some other event right after this one. More dull speeches, fake smiles, and pot-bellied men. Hopefully, the high quality booze would continue, as well.

A run to the bathroom might work before the crowd's attention moved off the stage. She spun around and bumped into the center of a broad chest. Boring blue filled her vision. It

was him.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't know you were right behind me."

A squint followed one of the goofiest smiles she'd ever seen. All loopy and happy, with no smolder whatsoever. "Jenna King, right? Wow, you look so much like your mom. And your Aunt Olivia. It's uncanny."

Right. Olivia Winston was her aunt and his best friend's mom. Resident bitch of Virginia, far as Jenna could tell. She ran her hand over the mass of hair currently contained in a low bun. The only similarity she had with those two women was the platinum blonde hair no one ever believed was real.

"I'm Connor Barrett. Thanks so much for coming. Your family has been amazingly supportive."

"Hey." She returned his handshake. "Oh, and congratulations on the... running for office."

He laughed. "Thanks. What are you drinking?"

"Oh, you did well with the bar selection. Patron platinum. Yumm. Way to schmooze the voters."

He put up two fingers for the bartender who was standing at attention, and had finally figured out how to keep his mouth shut.

Two overfull shot glasses appeared on the bar.

He tipped his head toward her. "Cheers."

It hadn't even been minutes since her last shot, but the new one went down oh, so smoothly. She licked a drop of tequila from her top lip and grinned.

He threw his down and instead of the flinch and gag she expected, he smiled right back at her. "Only the best for my supporters."

That look was so hard to decipher. And it was impossible to see his eyes behind those thick, dark frames. "I think we met when we were kids. I don't really remember it, though."

"Me neither. But I remember your brother."

Of course. Her superstar brother. "Yeah, Jackson's pretty memorable. I was really little and probably inconsequential."

"I can't imagine that ever being true, but I'm glad to meet you again."

Jenna shifted her weight from one foot to the other, remembering about her interrupted trip to the bathroom. He wasn't speaking. Or moving out of her way.

"So, tell me something about yourself. What do you do?"

She looked around at the line forming behind him. Wow, what an orderly group of people, patiently waiting their turn to talk to the man of the day. "I'm a schoolteacher. Middle school history."

"Tell me about middle school history. I'm kind of a history buff myself."

The warm tingle of alcohol entering her bloodstream sent warmth to her cheeks. At least, she thought it was the alcohol. "You know, I really thought it was going to work. I thought, if I get them young enough, if I show them the lessons we've learned, over and over, then maybe they would think differently. Act differently. I was top of my class in school – sociology and political science double major. I know stuff that can help them make a difference in the world. Make better choices. Understand the patterns and cycles that are consistent and predictable."

Had he moved even closer to her? It felt like all she could see was blue.

A small smile tipped the corners of his mouth up. "I'm getting that it's not quite working out that way."

"Well, the first problem is that I'm working in an elite private school. I'm basically a servant to the tyrannical parents and their little despots-in-training. I have absolutely no power, no influence, no impact."

"That sounds pretty shitty."

The tequila was loosening her inhibitions and her lips. "Yeah. I really wanted to make a difference. Bring forth a new way of leading people, of being benevolent stewards of our communities, maybe of this country."

"Why not go into politics yourself?"

"It's not for me. I'm not interested in dealing with what a woman like me would have to put up with just to be heard. I think politics used to be the meeting ground for grand ideas and high ideals. Now it's the last stop for the greedy, power-hungry,

and ignorant.”

She didn’t understand the shocked look on his face at first. Then it dawned on her that she was attending a political rally. *His political rally.*

Her hand flew up to cover her mouth. Too bad all that nonsense had already slipped out. “Holy shit! I’m so sorry.”

He burst out laughing. “Jenna King, you are the most interesting person I’ve encountered in this whole room. No one talks like that anymore, which I think is part of the problem. We’re not addressing the reality of the matter. We’re just tap-dancing around all of it.”

Relief returned in the form of a deep breath. She had to learn how to hold her tongue at some point. Maybe less tequila, too. “I meant no offense. Maybe you’re the exception.”

“I want to be.”

Something about how he said that made her believe him. Wow. This guy knew something about wielding power.

He tipped his head toward her, those whisky-brown eyes finally coming into view. “I’ve got a funny proposition.”

She grimaced.

He grinned. “No, not like that. Come work with me. I’m putting together my team and someone like you would make a great addition. I want the truth, as blunt and inappropriate as it may be. I haven’t yet met someone I trusted to give it to me.”

Well, that was exciting. “I don’t live here, Connor. I live in California.”

“Doesn’t matter. Come here for the next ten months, assuming I make it through the primaries. Then you can go back to your bratty students in California.”

He touched her arm, which would normally have sent off alarms, but there was nothing sexual or predatory about it. Interesting.

“I have to tell you, Connor, that’s one of the most intriguing propositions I’ve gotten in a long time. You seem like a good guy. I know my family thinks so. But I can’t leave my life, move across the country, and learn everything about political campaigns. Thanks, but no.”

Besides politics is boring.

Someone tapped Connor on the shoulder. Before turning to acknowledge Mrs. Tappy Hands, he looked Jenna in the eye. Yeah, those big brown eyes were something. "Thanks for chatting with me, Jenna."

The couple behind him beamed as he gave them his attention. "Hello. I so appreciate your support."

Jenna slipped past them and made her way toward the bathroom, running into her best friend and soon to be sister-in-law on the way.

"Jenna! Where've you been? We thought maybe you snuck out and headed out to a biker bar." Camille's typical composure had left the building.

"I wish. No, I was chatting up the candidate, if you must know."

"Really? I am actually surprised. But he was so inspiring. I almost wish I lived here, because he'd definitely have my vote." Camille stared up, all dreamy eyes.

Geez. Jenna knew it wasn't the hots. Camille had had it bad for Jenna's brother Jackson forever. And they'd just gotten engaged. So, that look on her face was, like, inspiration, or something. Weird. "Hmmm. So, what's next?"

"We're going back to the house. For a VIP party."

Camille had been hanging out with Connor's sister, Ramona, for a few months. Jenna knew her too, but not as well. Cool chick. But their family was straight out of a TV drama about the old South. The Barretts were some kind of old school political dynasty, apparently. Hopefully, more stately mansion than plantation. Either way, the supposed party sounded like a definite snooze-fest.

Jenna pretended to yawn. "Yeah. Soooo exciting."

Her best friend jabbed her in the ribs. "Can you stop being such a pain? I'm sure it won't last long, then you can make your way to the seediest, smelliest bar, and go find some burly, leather-clad dude to grind up on."

Jenna threaded her arm through Camille's and pulled her

toward the bathroom. "Now, you're talking."