

B L Y T H E R I P P O N

BENCHD



CHAPTER 1

The sound technician clipped a wireless microphone onto Victoria's lapel, then stood back and inspected its placement. He inched it up before moving away to make room for the makeup artist, who applied more powder to Victoria's forehead, scrutinized her face, and walked off.

Surrounded by camera people and sound engineers bustling back and forth, Victoria nevertheless felt alone in the studio. She ignored the slight tremble in her fingers as she sat in the interview chair and wiped her hands on her suit skirt. Add this one to the many surreal moments in her life since her appointment as a justice—all these people were there because of her, but none of them were there *for* her.

When she'd seen the photo on the popular blog *I Fought the Law*—a picture of her and Genevieve a breath away from kissing—she'd joked about it, impressed with her own blasé response. That, however, was in the privacy of her own kitchen, before the major media outlets picked up the story. Less than two hours later, it flooded the news cycle: Supreme Court Justice Victoria Willoughby, in an undeniably intimate moment with LGBTQ rights advocate Genevieve Fornier, who recently convinced Willoughby and her colleagues to expand marriage rights for the LGBTQ community.

Now that picture seemed to be everywhere. She'd told herself in her kitchen that day that she was prepared for the media firestorm

and potential fallout. Her bravado failed her now, as she prepared to discuss it on camera for the first time since the story broke.

At first, she'd been vaguely grateful for the photo's timing. The Court was at the end of its session, and her first impulse had been to hop a plane to England. She was overdue to visit her father, after all.

Genevieve had said that "visit" sounded an awful lot like "run away."

Victoria pointed out that the two didn't even alliterate.

Since then, she'd been inundated with a steady stream of invitations to appear on news programs and pundit-led talk shows. Bill O'Reilly had, unsurprisingly, called for her to resign and, more importantly, answer for her lifestyle on *The O'Reilly Factor*. A few Republicans in the House had echoed his call for her to step down, although they framed their concerns less sensationally. She'd respectfully declined them all, and thus far the political fallout had been nothing but bluster.

The media, of course, was a different issue. The reporters were relentless, and now half a dozen cameras were pointed at her.

"You need to do *They've Got Issues*," Genevieve had insisted when she heard about the invitation. "It's the most respected, non-biased of the Sunday morning news shows."

So now, one month later, she was on the set waiting to be interviewed about, among other things, her private life.

The sound tech returned to her chair. "Justice Willoughby, we're almost ready. We need to test your microphone. Please say something. Anything other than 'testing one-two-three.'"

"Testing four-five-six," Victoria said.

He rolled his eyes and walked away mumbling, "Levels are good."

She studied her hands for a moment, fascinated by the tremors in her fingers, and focused on taking deep, calming breaths. After a moment, the show's host, Vishal Patel, quietly sat down in the plush armchair opposite Victoria. He regarded her with a calm smile, and she studied him. He was strikingly handsome, like most talk show hosts, with jet-black hair that had been expertly coiffed. She hoped the spark in his deep brown eyes indicated excitement at interviewing her, rather than anything more opportunistic.

"Do you need anything, Justice Willoughby? Water, or anything else to drink, or..." He waved his hand in the vague direction of offstage.

She briefly considered making a joke about liquid courage, but the potential headlines that might create stopped her. "I'm fine, thanks."

He was taller than she expected, and his smile more genuine. The filter of television didn't do him any favors.

"I apologize that we weren't able to send out a list of questions in advance of the interview. Journalistic integrity, you understand."

"Of course," Victoria said.

"Just remember: I'm not the enemy."

Victoria contemplated that. She was a confirmed justice with a lifetime appointment; even if he were an enemy, there wasn't much he could do to hurt her. But that thought felt way too rational when set against the torrent of emotions churning in her gut.

"I've never given an interview like this before," she confessed.

"Ignore the camera, and imagine that you and I are having coffee together, getting to know one another."

It was a nice idea in theory, but the irritating tug of the microphone pack on her suit didn't leave much room for imaginary scenarios. She licked her lips and said, "In that case, Earl Grey sounds great."

Patel nodded and waved over an assistant, who took her order. As they waited for the tea, the sound tech returned and fussed with Patel's microphone. After confirming something via his headset, he announced, "On in three," and disappeared again.

The makeup artist returned and fussed with Patel's foundation. He fidgeted slightly and winced when the brush swiped under his nose. As the makeup tech left, Patel sneezed and rolled his eyes. At least she wasn't the only one irritated by all the trappings that accompanied on-screen appearances.

"On in one," boomed a voice through the sound system just as an assistant placed the Earl Grey on a coaster on the table between her and Patel.

Victoria licked her lips and blinked a few times. Her contacts had been bugging her recently, and she hoped they wouldn't dry out during the next half hour. She would have preferred to wear her glasses, but everyone, including her brother Will and her secretary Lynn, told her they would create a glare.

"Thirty seconds," came through the sound system. Patel massaged his jaw and cracked his neck to the right before rubbing his hands together like an evil mastermind. Despite his reassurances to the contrary, all he needed was a hairless cat to complete the appearance of a creepy adversary.

Not the enemy.

For the first time in her life, Victoria wished she were one of those politicians who had handlers and press secretaries and speechwriters. At the very least, she should have reached out to Alistair and asked for help perfecting her talking points. He was charming and whimsical, and given that he'd been on the Court since before sliced bread, probably had insights she hadn't considered.

The show's jingle was startlingly loud as it blared through the sound system. She plastered on a smile and looked right at the camera.

"Today on *They've Got Issues*, my guest is Associate Justice Victoria Willoughby, who will talk about her first two years on the United States Supreme Court, the decisions she's authored, and the now-infamous picture of her with the president of Her Equal Rights, Genevieve Fornier."

A large screen behind the cameras showed the broadcast going out to the public. It cut to the photo in question: She stood inches away from Genevieve, staring at her lips. At least it was a flattering—even sexy—image. The combination of desire and love in Genevieve's eyes took Victoria's breath away.

The camera cut back to Patel and his cheesy grin.

"Justice Willoughby, thanks for being here with us."

"Thank you for having me, Mr. Patel."

"Vishal, please."

She nodded.

"You've been a justice on the Supreme Court for two terms now. What's that been like for you?"

It was predictable, really, for him to lob her a few softball questions before launching a well-aimed fastball. The key for her was not to let her guard down. She took a deep breath and tried to look breezy.

"It's been a whirlwind, Vishal. My confirmation, if you remember, was completed immediately before the October conference of the justices two years ago, so I really hit the ground running."

Vishal leaned forward and asked in an exaggerated stage whisper, "What are those conferences like?"

“Confidential,” she said.

He offered a good-natured laugh. “Surely you can give us some more information than that.”

“The October conference—like all the conferences throughout our term—is a private gathering. Even the justices’ clerks are not invited. It’s the first formal event of the new term, and we are exceedingly professional. We discuss the cases that have been appealed to the Court, and we vote whether to hear them. Those conferences continue every Friday that we are in session.”

God, even she was bored with her answer. But then, her goal with this interview was to come across as decidedly boring; she’d had her fill of media attention while the Court was considering the first gay marriage case. Life was easier without reporters harassing her in the grocery store and stalking her at the gym.

Perhaps in response to her answer’s entertainment level, Patel moved on at a brisk pace. “In your first year on the bench, the Court voted 6-3 to grant federal recognition of gay marriage in *Samuels v United States*. And in your second year, the Court made gay marriage legal in every state. That case was decided on a closer margin, with the chief justice switching sides to vote against marriage rights. What was all this like for you as the first lesbian justice?”

There was something about the word *lesbian* that was always a little jarring to her. Genevieve would argue that it was internalized homophobia, but for Victoria, it was a matter of simple linguistics. *Lesbian* just didn’t roll off the tongue—anyone’s tongue. Even Patel seemed to hit the word a shade harder than perhaps he intended.

She cleared her throat. “Both cases certainly felt personal to me, although honestly, most human rights cases feel personal. In both of these cases, there was obviously a moral—and more importantly

for me as a jurist—a *legal* wrong that my colleagues and I had an opportunity to rectify. And both cases were great victories. Yes, I happen to be gay, but there is a profound truth in Dr. King’s words, ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ Our decisions in these cases corrected an injustice for a minority group of citizens.”

She left out any mention of how personally upsetting it was for her when Kellen switched sides with some half-cocked argument about states’ rights.

“It’s no secret that because of your vote in the *Samuels* case, you were targeted by a radical, neo-Nazi group called Marriage’s Sacred Protector and assaulted in your own house. If you had known what would happen, would you have changed your vote?”

The question surprised her. Rather than digging into the sordid details of her assault or asking her why she didn’t recuse herself from the case, Patel had given her a more nuanced question—one that offered her the opportunity to reinforce her image as a jurist with integrity.

Not the enemy.

“Absolutely not, Vishal, and the other justices agree. We aren’t doing our jobs if we let fringe political or religious viewpoints dictate our votes. It’s rare that cases come with personal ramifications the way this one did, but we consider cases based on the Constitution and our consciences.”

“That sounds, I don’t know, noble?”

“Executing the office to which I’ve been confirmed isn’t noble. I’m simply doing my job, the way most Americans do every day.”

Questions and answers continued in this more or less easy way, touching on her current book project and her interest in cooking, until Vishal paused, and Victoria knew what was coming.

“Madam Justice, a month ago, a blog called I Fought the Law posted a picture of you with Genevieve Fornier. The picture looks intimate. Now, I know a lot of our viewers want to hear juicy details about the nature of your relationship. But this isn’t *Access Hollywood*; this is a program dedicated to US politics and government. So what I’m most interested in is this: if you and Ms. Fornier continue to have a close personal relationship, how will that relationship affect her participation in HER’s legal cases, should they be argued before the Supreme Court?”

The baseball-sized knot in her stomach ballooned until it filled her whole abdomen and worked its way up her chest and into her throat. The answer to that question was far bigger than any sound bite she could offer Vishal.

“It’s a little premature for me to offer you any kind of truthful answer,” Victoria fumbled haltingly. She and Genevieve had danced around this difficult conversation for about a year now but hadn’t exactly engaged in any meaningful discussion about the effect their romance would have on their professional lives. “I suppose we’ll just take things on a case-by-case basis.”

Grinning, Patel bumped his knee against hers. “Pun intended, I assume.”

She groaned. “Totally inadvertent, I assure you.”

“Happens to the best of us,” he said. “Justice Willoughby, it was a real pleasure to chat with you. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule.”

She shook his hand warmly. “I’ve enjoyed talking with you, Vishal.”

The jingle blared again before someone announced through the sound system, “We’re off.”

As she unclasped the microphone from her lapel, her fingers steady now, Vishal said, “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

In spite of herself, she agreed. “I appreciate your...” She wasn’t sure how to finish. *Only minimally invading my privacy?*

“Well, I’m quite a fan, you know.”

“Fan?” Victoria asked. Evidently that’s what happened when your personal life was the stuff of tabloids: people rooted for you—or against you.

“Well, yes. Of you and Ms. Fornier. A lot of our interview questions came from brainstorming sessions with the network, but that last question was one hundred percent mine. I’m delighted for the two of you, but I’m also a little concerned that the gay rights community will be sacrificing one of its most effective advocates if Ms. Fornier can’t argue at the Supreme Court anymore.”

The whole event had been surreal. She shook his hand and mumbled some platitude about how lovely it was to meet him.

As Victoria drove home that night, she replayed his final interview question over and over again. The more she considered it, the further she seemed from a satisfactory response.

CHAPTER 2

It had been a long day for Genevieve, filled with administrative red tape and very little substantive legal work. When she'd first considered HER's offer to become the organization's next president, her friends had warned her about this—that she would excel in administration but also dislike it.

At the time, she had shrugged them off, saying, "I'll delegate the boring stuff."

Admittedly, she was also known for being overly optimistic.

She was rubbing her temples at her desk when Frank entered her office with a bottle of Pellegrino and two Advil. He deposited them next to the binder she'd been slogging through and gently slid it from her hands before closing it.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your migraine," he said, "but I thought you might like to know that Nic Ford is stepping down as executive director of NCLR."

It made fuzzy spots float around her eyes to look up so quickly, but she couldn't help it. "Are you kidding?" *Why didn't she tell me herself?*

"They just sent around an e-mail blast," he confirmed.

Genevieve nodded, which made her wince, and she was grateful he closed the door quietly. Migraines brought out the worst in her—it was silly and selfish that her first response was to wonder why Nic hadn't told her personally. Then again, in the past few

months, the two of them had had little communication. Genevieve had been wrapped up in the throes of a now very public relationship with a sitting Supreme Court justice. And in addition to overseeing all of HER's operations, the two cases she had spent the last year arguing hadn't helped.

She sighed. Traveling non-stop between Nevada and Louisiana over the last year had made her social life pretty much non-existent.

Even picking up the phone made her dizzy, never mind holding the receiver to her ear. She swallowed the Advil before pushing the button for Frank. "Please call Nic for me," she murmured. He'd probably be surprised she was asking him to place a call for her, but there was currently a jackhammer pounding behind her eyes.

A few seconds later, Frank clicked back to her line. "She's not in the office, but I've got her on her cell. Line two."

She clicked over but never got a chance to say hello.

"I know, I know. I should have called and told you, but seriously, Genevieve, you of all people ought to understand. I met this woman, she's amazing, and she's got this chateau in the south of France. After spending two weeks there, I just realized I need a break. I'm fifty-eight years old, I've been executive director of NCLR for a decade, and I'm tired. I didn't know how tired I was until she showed me."

Genevieve took in a careful breath to say something, fuzzy spots swimming across her vision, but Nic barreled on anyway.

"I'm not retiring—I'm going to take a year off, and then I'll return to appellate work somewhere else—but I'm just so *over* bureaucracy and managing personalities and soothing egos. I want to go back to litigating. It's going to be great. So you can say 'congratulations' and be happy for me, okay?"

Genevieve was pretty sure Nicolette Ford had never spoken so many words so quickly in her life. Headache be damned—she laughed. “Congratulations. I’m happy for you.”

“I have no idea who they’ll replace me with, and frankly, I’m glad. The board can do their own search, and hopefully, I’ll read about who they pick in the papers while I’m wearing a bathrobe on the balcony of my new chateau, drinking wine and eating cheese.”

“She must be some woman.”

“I’ve never met anyone like her.”

A twinge of jealousy tickled at the back of Genevieve’s neck: The minor crush Nic had on her when they worked together on the *Samuels* case had never sounded like this. Was this how she herself sounded when she talked about Tori?

“I certainly hope I get invited to the wedding.”

“Will you bring Victoria Willoughby?” Nic asked.

The ensuing pause was awkward and heavy, and Genevieve tried not to sigh.

“Sorry, touchy subject? You’d think a woman who just admitted on national television that she’s dating you would be willing to, you know, actually date you.”

“So, when do I get to meet this woman?” So much for a smooth change of topic, but with the migraine, it was the best she could do.

Nic graciously rolled with it. “Come to France.”

“We’ve got a full agenda this fall,” Genevieve said.

“Good luck with that.”

“Good luck in France.”

Nic laughed, and Genevieve realized it was a sound she hadn’t often heard from her.

“Don’t be a stranger, Genevieve.”

As they hung up, Genevieve reflected that working together on intense, high-profile, Supreme Court cases was a bit like summer camp: it seemed to create inextricable bonds between people.

Driving in her current state was out of the question, so she left her car at the office and took a cab to Tori's. She was looking forward to the quiet of her girlfriend's house. Maybe she'd be able to entice Tori into giving her a massage.

She rested her head on the back of the cab's seat and closed her eyes. Who would they find to replace Nic? She had been very old guard in a lot of ways. Genevieve wasn't even a full decade younger—did that make Genevieve old guard now too? The thought made her head spin even more.

The cab pulled up to Tori's house, and she managed to pay the driver, despite the numbers swimming on the bills in her hand. She trudged up to the door, fit her key into the lock, and was instantly comforted by the soft smell of lemongrass and the muted palette of Tori's living room.

The absence of classical music coming from the iPod dock indicated that Genevieve was alone in the house. She nudged off her pumps and left them by the door before heading into the kitchen and running a washcloth under cold water. The walk back to the couch took forever, but she gingerly eased down on it and put the compress over her eyes.

When she woke up, still on the couch in the exact same position, Tori was gently massaging her temples, and soft, cascading tinkles of Debussy sounded like raindrops washing away her pain.

"Frank called and told me you were sick. I picked up some soup, and there's a kettle on for tea."

"You're beautiful," Genevieve mumbled.

"You can't even see me with that towel over your eyes."

“Don’t need to. I remember. Plus, maybe I was talking about the parts of you I don’t need my eyes to see.”

She could feel Tori’s laughter through the slight shaking of the couch cushion. “You’re a nut.”

“Oh, that’s fair. You’re beautiful, and I’m a nut.”

Tori kissed her neck softly and murmured, “Nothing in life is fair. Can I get you some soup?”

“Hm. What time is it?”

“After nine.”

“Can we just go to bed?”

She could almost see Victoria roll her eyes. “You have to eat a little something. I’ll heat up the soup while you gather your strength for the long walk to the kitchen.”

Victoria didn’t exactly spoon-feed her, but she might as well have. Once Genevieve had consumed enough calories to satisfy her, they headed upstairs, where Tori slipped pajamas on her and tucked her into bed.

As she drifted off to sleep, it occurred to her that she had become awfully dependent on her new—old?—girlfriend.



Genevieve woke up to bright sunlight streaming in from the curtains, the clanking sounds of dishes and utensils, and the smell of toast.

With a long stretch, she luxuriated in her complete lack of headache and the gentle caress of Tori’s sheets. It took great strength of character for her to get out of Tori’s bed, which was infinitely more comfortable than her own back at the townhouse. She brushed her teeth and hopped down the stairs, humming as she descended, and headed into the kitchen.

“You’re in a good mood.” Tori kissed her lightly before turning back to the omelet she was making in a ridiculously shiny copper pan. “Migraine gone?”

“Mm-hm.” Genevieve started coffee and put on a kettle for Tori’s tea. While the omelet finished cooking, she set the table, and they bustled around the kitchen in a quiet routine that felt so normal she wondered why they didn’t do this every day.

When they settled at the table with their food and hot beverages, Genevieve sipped her coffee and pondered the view through the sliding glass door into Tori’s backyard. “I’ve been thinking,” she said.

“Maybe that explains the migraine?”

“You’re not half as funny as you think you are.” Genevieve gave her a dirty look.

“That’s only because you never understand my jokes,” Tori said.

“Did you want to know what I’ve been thinking about, or would you rather just be a smart-ass?”

“Well, those aren’t mutually exclusive. But yes, dear. Please, share.”

Genevieve shook her head and smiled. God, nothing could be easy with Tori, could it?

“We’ve been together for over a year now, and honestly, we’ve barely seen each other. We get some weekends together here and there, and there was that trip to Europe. But with my travel schedule, I’m out of town more than I’m here, and your work keeps you so busy—”

“I know. But I’m not sure how to make things different.”

Two hands wrapped around her coffee mug, Genevieve leaned forward. “Well, I have an idea. I don’t want to travel this much anyway. I’m a good spokesperson for HER, but there are a lot of people better than me at raising money, which is half of what I

travel for. I've been going over the numbers with my assistant, and I think HER can—and needs to—hire an executive director.”

“But isn't that what you do?”

“HER has an odd employment structure—most organizations like us have an executive director instead of a president. HER's never had an ED, though. So, my idea is that I stay on as president and continue to shape the organization in terms of our identity, the cases we take, the way we staff them, that kind of thing.”

“So, no more media blitzes?”

“Oh, I'm sure I'll continue to give interviews, and as the public face of the organization, I'll have to do *some* of the galas still. I do really love everything HER stands for, and representing it still gives me a thrill. But an ED could take point on all the glad-handing and the traveling for smaller-scale fundraisers. It would be better for HER in the long term, I think.

“And,” she took Tori's hand, “it would mean I'm in DC a lot more. I could see my girlfriend every weekend, instead of once a month.”

“And this would free you up to argue more cases?”

“That's what I'm hoping. I miss the excitement of litigation. It's almost impossible to fundraise, run the organization, and take point on cases.”

“Wow,” Tori said, putting her fork down and coughing a little. “More cases. That sounds...really great for you.”

“Good. Because I've already started talking to the board about it, and they have ways to streamline this process. They think we can have someone in place in four to six weeks. So, pretty soon, you're going to be stuck with me.”

Tori laced her fingers through Genevieve's. “However this new plan changes things, well, if it means more time with you, then I'm happy.” Her smile made Genevieve's stomach flutter.

“Are you sure me being around more will make you happy?” Genevieve traced circles on Tori’s palm, a smile curling her lips. “I’ve heard I have the ability to drive you absolutely crazy. To make you scream in frustration. To make you clench your pillow at night.”

Tori drew her finger up Genevieve’s arm and across her collarbone. “Only at night? If I recall, none of those things happened last night.”

Genevieve stood and pulled Tori to her, and her skin tingled as their mouths met. “Oh, I can make you scream right now.”

Her lips hovered a breath away from Tori’s neck. As she ran her tongue lightly over Tori’s throat, Tori gasped and pulled her hips closer. Genevieve eased a hand between their chests and pushed Tori gently. “Upstairs. Now.”

Before they made it through the bedroom door, Tori had turned around and slid her hand into Genevieve’s hair, pulling their mouths together again. Genevieve was so focused on the velvety softness of Tori’s tongue that she had no idea how they’d made it into the bed, but she loved the way Tori looked on top of her. As Tori’s hand possessively ran up and down the length of her body, Genevieve’s stomach fluttered.

“You do know this is my bedroom, right? My bedroom, my rules, Genevieve.”

The way her name rolled off Tori’s tongue made Genevieve shudder.

“God, you’re sexy, trembling beneath me.” Tori’s hand eased between the fabric of Genevieve’s shirt and her overheated skin. As she lifted the shirt up and over her head, Genevieve surged upward with it. “Now who’s going to be moaning in frustration,” Tori whispered, her mouth just out of reach of Genevieve’s skin. “If you’re a good guest, I might just give you what you want.”

To hell with always being the leader of their bedroom activities. By that afternoon, Genevieve decided that she thoroughly enjoyed this role reversal.



It took exactly a month for Genevieve to solidify the hiring of a charming and very experienced executive director named Chuck Green; she immediately tasked him with handling the gala that weekend in Cincinnati. And it was none too soon. She was dying for a break after having traveled to four different cities in three weeks, including a stop in LA for the premiere of a documentary about the *Samuels* case she had won at the Supreme Court. For the first time in months, she called Tori on a Friday afternoon and said, “Hey, can we swim tonight?”

“God, that sounds amazing. I’ve missed you,” Tori said, her voice like warm sunshine spreading through Genevieve.

“For real. Don’t know why these past few weeks have felt so hard, but I can’t wait to see you.”

“It’s that thing about the race being hardest right before the finish line, right? I think knowing that your schedule was going to lighten after this last bout of travel probably made it that much harder to wait.”

Genevieve exhaled a breath she felt as if she’d she’d been holding for weeks. “See, that’s why I love you. You always make me feel better.”

“And here I thought you loved me for my cooking skills.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. Those don’t hurt.”

“Mm,” Tori said, and Genevieve could hear the smile in her voice. “I’ll see you soon.”

It was such a novelty to meet as they used to, outside their personal changing rooms at the most exclusive gym in DC, their

names engraved on their respective doors. They smiled at each other and walked hand in hand to the pool. It was certainly hard to feel as though they were making some kind of statement by holding hands when no one saw them. But still, on the off chance that they encountered someone on their way to the pool, well, they were officially out. And Genevieve swelled with pride as she squeezed Tori's hand.

They swam their usual fifty laps, and when Genevieve pulled herself out of the pool, she basked in the view of Tori, flushed and breathless and dripping wet.

"God, you look good." She stepped toward her, wiping her hand across Tori's chest and collecting water droplets. Tori's face grew even redder, and her eyes fluttered.

"You know," Genevieve said, "we've never taken full advantage of those private dressing rooms."

But Tori's features changed from turned on to something that might have been panic before settling on slightly annoyed.

"You and your ideas," she said, and she might have been trying to sound playful, but what Genevieve took from it was exasperation. "I'll see you at home for dinner?"

Home. Genevieve thought about asking "yours or mine?" but she already knew the answer. They never went to her house, no matter how hard she tried to manipulate the situation so that it would make more sense to go downtown instead of the suburbs. Honestly, when she wasn't suffering from a horrendous migraine, Tori's house was one of the least inviting "homes" she'd ever been in—it looked magazine ready at all times and not at all like a place where someone could actually live. Not that she had much ground to stand on, considering her own home had a distinctly neglected feel to it and that there were still boxes here and there. As she stood

there in front of Tori's impatient expression, Genevieve vowed to warm the place up, now that she was going to be in town more.

"How about we do my house instead?" she suggested anyway, knowing as she said it that Tori would never go for it.

Tori's towel stilled in the process of drying her hair. "Do you have food there?"

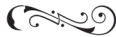
Right, well, the first step in actually moving into the house that had been her permanent address for a year now would probably be stocking the bare fridge.

"I have phone numbers for some great takeout places. And we could always stop at the store on the way home and pick some things up."

"I already have everything for soup and salad back at home." Tori seemed to catch herself. "My home. Let's just go there."

Genevieve nodded. Before she could say anything about the two of them maybe having dinner at her townhouse the following night, Tori turned and walked into the locker room.

Well, that went well. She realized she was going to have to try harder to break Tori's routines. But as she trailed after, admiring Tori's legs, it was hard to feel too frustrated in their domestic life.



One week later, and it was *déjà vu*—the swimming, Genevieve flirting, and Tori shutting her down when Genevieve suggested they spend the night at her place instead of Tori's. This time her excuse was that she'd spent the day worried that she'd left her garage door open, and could they please hurry home to close it.

It was, of course, closed when they arrived.

Regardless, they ate dinner together, and then Tori chose another way to drive her crazy. Genevieve's sleep that night was filled with

sex dreams, and they fooled around again in the morning before Genevieve reluctantly told Tori that she had to go to the office.

“On a Saturday?” Tori asked before shaking her head. “That’s fine. I have some writing I’d like to get done anyway.”

By the time Genevieve’s legs worked enough for her to stand, Tori was partway through her shower and had finished shampooing her hair. Genevieve joined her, brushing her body against Tori’s back and sliding her arms around Tori’s stomach. She dropped featherlight kisses on her ear, and it brought flutters to her abdomen.

“I had fun this morning,” she said. “You know, I don’t have to be at the office just yet. We could—”

“Could you hand me the conditioner?”

So this was going to be a purely functional shower. Genevieve closed her eyes and willed the ache between her legs to dissipate.

When she looked at Tori, her girlfriend seemed determined to avoid her eyes. She passed over the conditioner and stepped around Tori to get her hair wet.

They didn’t say much as they dried off and dressed. Tori was pulling her hair into a smooth ponytail when Genevieve dared to interrupt the silence. “What’s on your mind?”

Tori looked startled and actually tossed her head as if to dispel her thoughts. “Voting rights.”

Torn between rolling her eyes and laughing, Genevieve put her hand on Tori’s shoulder. “Tori, what percentage of your day is spent thinking about work?”

At least she looked a little guilty. “A lot,” she admitted. “Sometimes I try to turn it off and... Well, I think about work a lot.”

Genevieve nodded, grateful she didn’t have that problem. “I have some meditation techniques for drawing mental boundaries

with work. I can help you, if you'd like." Genevieve couldn't imagine thinking about work right then—especially when Tori was naked in the shower and the tasks waiting for her at the office weren't exciting legal questions but dull administrative tasks.

It briefly occurred to her that maybe if she were hotter, or Tori wanted her more, she'd be the one shutting down Tori's work thoughts. But maybe nothing she—or anyone else—could do would successfully stop Tori from spinning out on work sometimes. Neither scenario was especially uplifting.

"Thanks—I'll think about that. I've never tried meditation."

Genevieve took her hand, enjoying the feel of their fingers entwining. "Well. Good luck with voting rights. We need 'em. Fight the good fight, baby. "

She kissed Tori on the cheek, and Tori murmured something back, but she was clearly miles away already.

In her car, halfway down Tori's driveway, it hit her that she'd forgotten, again, to ask Tori about dining at her townhouse that night. Damn. Well, she'd call once she got to the office.

The lobby of her building was empty, save for the security guard, and after flashing her ID in front of the elevator sensor and punching in the top floor where HER's offices were housed, she rode the elevator alone, which never happened during the week. The motion detector lights on her floor clicked on one by one as she walked past the empty cubicles to her office.

She only had one coat sleeve off when her desk phone rang. Before she'd even sat down, Frank was giving her the latest on their staff-restructuring initiative and HR's report on the new benefits package. He was briefing her on the upcoming board meeting when her cell phone rang—Chuck, the new executive director, probably wanting to give her a rundown of the fundraiser in Sonoma the

night before. She quickly wrapped up the call with Frank and clicked *accept* on her cell.

Like Frank, Chuck wasted no time with pleasantries.

“Genevieve, glad I caught you. Listen, sorry to say, but the numbers from the fundraiser weren’t what they had hoped.”

“Well, that happens—and sometimes, we exceed expectations.”

“Can’t wait for that to happen,” Chuck said. “Anyway, so, three wineries had competed for who got the beverage contract for the event, and I guess things had become nasty, and the local woman who organized the event for us gave contracts to all of them.”

“Oh yeah, I remember Elaine. She’s sweet. Total pushover, though,” Genevieve said.

“Right, well, good to know. Next time I’ll work more closely with her. But so, the different wineries’ staff members kept trying to one-up each other, and poured aggressively. Is that a thing?”

“Great. So, in addition to the event costing a fortune, all the guests got wasted in the first hour and were too drunk to open their pocket books.”

“Ah, so. Not the first time this has happened?” Chuck sounded breathless, and Genevieve remembered feeling that way practically every day when she first started at HER.

“No, and I’m sure it won’t be the last. Listen, Chuck, you can’t solve every problem, and you can’t be everywhere at once, as much as you’d probably like to. We’re glad to have you on board, and we have every confidence that you’re going to be great in this job. You already are.”

He took a deep breath. “Thanks for that, Genevieve, but I promise you, as soon as I get the lay of the land, our financials will look very different,” he assured her. “This isn’t my first rodeo—just my first one here.”

By the time she'd hung up with him, had replied to all pressing e-mails, and had taken care of other mundane tasks, it was almost five o'clock and hints of a headache lurked behind her eyes.

She dialed Tori and rubbed her temples while the phone rang.

"Genevieve, hi! I just finished up. Well, I hope I have. I don't know." Tori paused. "No, I *do* know—I'm going to stop here, regardless."

Genevieve smiled and shook her head. "Tori, do you need me for this conversation?"

She laughed lightly, a reminder of how happy her job really made her. "Sorry," she said, the sound of her laptop closing audible in the background. "I'm good. How was your day?"

"Fine, I suppose." She'd only gotten through half of the items on her list for the day and was completely drained. Strange that she used to work fourteen hours in a single day, pouring over briefs or depositions, and felt more invigorated than this. She missed the thrill of litigation.

"You sound tired," Tori said, and the distinct sound of a cork popping out of a bottle came through the phone. "Come over—I'll have some pinot decanted for you."

Shit—beaten to the punch again. "I don't suppose you want to recork that? I was hoping we could do my place tonight. I even went to the grocery store." Okay, that wasn't exactly true, but she could easily stop on her way home.

"Oh, I've had chicken tikka masala in the slow cooker since you left. It smells divine."

Of course it did. Damn Tori for being an amazing cook. She'd never lure her away from that house with offers of food; that much was clear. She'd have to try another tactic some other time. There

wasn't a snowball's chance in hell she'd miss Tori's mouthwatering tikka masala.

"On my way, babe," she said.

Despite Tori's slightly uncomfortably laugh whenever Genevieve called her "babe," it somehow brought the first real smile to Genevieve's face all day. Because being shy about terms of endearment was ridiculous, and she was going to convince Tori of that sooner or later.

CHAPTER 3

On the following Monday, Victoria sat in a leather chair in her private chambers and reread her clerks' resumes to assess their strengths and interests. They were an impressive group—that was for sure. But her interviews with them had made it clear that they all lacked the charm of Wallace. Maybe she was sentimentalizing that heady time because it was during the *Samuels* case, or maybe it was simply because he had been one of her first clerks, but Wallace would probably always be her favorite.

She made some notes about which of her clerks would be more suited for tax cases and which would be better equipped for human rights ones.

She set the resumes aside and was contemplating an afternoon cup of tea when Alistair Douglas barged in. “Have you seen this?” he blurted out with a total lack of formality that would have probably annoyed Victoria if it had come from any of her other fellow justices.

He threw a press release down on Victoria's lap and paced to the window.

“Well, hello, Alistair. Good to see you again. How was your summer?” She said it with a smile, hoping to break through his bad mood.

“Irrelevant to today's concerns.” He grunted at the paper in her lap. “The Louisiana Attorney General evidently files his press releases before his actual appeals.”

It was unusual for her to learn about appeals from the media. She slid on her glasses. The headline read:

SEEKING TO PROTECT CHILDREN, LOUISIANA ATTORNEY
GENERAL APPEALS RULING IN ROWLINGS V. LOUISIANA

“A gay adoption case?” She looked up at Alistair after reading the first few lines.

His back to her, staring out the window, he sighed. “Let’s call it a same-sex parentage case—it’s not quite adoption.” He raised an eyebrow at her. “Victoria, how are you not read up on the details of this case by now?”

“I don’t know,” she murmured, somehow embarrassed even though the case hadn’t even been filed yet with the Court. She wasn’t expected to know *every* case that might eventually come their way, was she?

“And people think the gay rights fight ended with marriage equality,” she remarked, deflecting.

“Exactly,” said Alistair, his hands clasped behind his back. “So this gay couple with two children moved from California to Louisiana. And Louisiana won’t recognize the nonbirth mother as a parent.”

“God, what is wrong with people?” Victoria said.

“Lord knows. So when the couple applied for a second-parent adoption, Louisiana denied their application, citing a constitutional amendment that denies recognition of two people of the same gender as legal parents of a child. To pour salt on the wound, the women had foreseen this difficulty and had tried to execute a second-parent adoption in California before they moved. The Sacramento judge they appeared before had denied their request because—and this is the real kicker—they were both already the legal parents of the child.”

“Well, I have to say that, in her position, I would probably feel compelled to do the same,” Victoria said thoughtfully. “A second-parent adoption would be entirely unnecessary.”

“That’s exactly what the judge wrote in her decision.” Alistair’s hands had unloosened themselves, and he was gesturing emphatically. “She said that granting them one would be akin to treating them like second-class citizens, rather than treating them the same way the courts treat a straight couple.”

She shook her head. “It’s like a catch-22. They get a judge who won’t grant their request because she’s basically too liberal.”

“Right. Once they moved, the couple sued the state of Louisiana to declare its ban on same-sex parentage unconstitutional, on equal protection and due process grounds. The district court agreed with them; it ordered Louisiana to recognize existing same-sex parents and struck down its ban on same-sex parents.”

“Well, thank God for judges who understand the Constitution.”

“Indeed. The state of Louisiana was ordered to issue a new birth certificate form, replacing the blanks currently labeled with the gendered *mother* and *father* with *parent one* and *parent two*.” He paused. “Louisiana appealed, of course, but the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the district court’s ruling, and, well, now Archie Dalton’s appealing to the Court, and here we are.”

“So, the two previous decisions are strong,” Victoria reassured him. “That helps if we hear the case. What do we know about Archie Dalton?”

“Whatever we know now, we’ll sure be learning more in the coming months. You know Kellen will want to hear this case. And the rest of them will fall in line,” Alistair turned and studied her.

“Okay,” she said, “so we’ll hear it. From what you’re telling me about it, it sounds like we couldn’t have asked for a stronger case to work with.”

Tori removed her glasses and examined her mentor. His whole body vibrated with agitation.

“Alistair, what am I missing?” she asked softly.

“You don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?”

He laughed bitterly.

“It’s Genevieve’s case.”

In the silence that followed, her breath became loud in her ears, and she grew acutely aware of her own heartbeat.

As Alistair sank into an easy chair opposite her, she continued reading the press release. Only this time, her throat felt tight.

The original complaint was filed by current president of Her Equal Rights, Genevieve Fornier, the legal powerhouse who last year won federal recognition of gay marriage. Fornier, a close personal friend of the plaintiffs, has been quoted as saying that whatever people may think about the religious underpinnings of marriage, no one should ever interfere with two loving parents raising their children.

Fornier has been friends with Crystal Rowlings (nee Sun) since elementary school and officiated the wedding ceremony in which Crystal married Heather Rowlings in Sonoma, California, in July 2008.

The Supreme Court will now decide whether or not to hear arguments in the case. Should they decline, the fifth circuit court decision recognizing Crystal Rowlings as a parent will be upheld, and Louisiana clerks’ offices would begin issuing birth certificates with nongendered parental slots.

Alistair wiped his brow and smiled grimly. “I imagine you two will have a fun, lighthearted discussion about this.”

“I imagine she and I won’t discuss it at all unless the Court decides to hear it.” Victoria chewed her lip and tried to ignore the look of sympathy Alistair gave her.

Well, she’d just have to deal with that later, *if* the Court decided to take the case. Maybe they wouldn’t. She could always dream.

She cleared her throat. “So, how was your summer, Alistair?”

He rolled his eyes at her. “We’re not done here, Victoria.”

“What do you want me to do? Bribe Kellen not to hear the case?”

“That man has everything he could ever want. There’s nothing you could bribe him with.”

She sighed. “There are actual legal questions here. I mean, it might not all be bad. We have the possibility to make same-sex parents’ rights the law of the land.”

Her attempt at optimism fell flat, and she fiddled with her fingers.

He shifted in his chair. “With a conservative Court? We also have the potential to rip families apart. What if Genevieve insists on arguing the case? Are you going to insist on recusing yourself? Or what if she steps down, and some other lawyer has to learn the case from scratch in a hurry? Either way, it jeopardizes the success of even a case this strong.”

Victoria glanced around her private office, taking in the mahogany bookcases, the expensive carpeting, the original Charles Willson Peale painting of George Washington. Her stomach churned. “We perch in these fancy offices and issue directives as though the things that matter to us are who wins which political battles.”

Alistair didn't seem to take it personally. "It's easy when you're a justice to feel like you're in some sort of ivory tower, to forget the *people* that your decisions affect. In this case, I can see that happening with five of our colleagues." He sighed. "It would feel particularly callous for members of the Court to deny parental rights for existing families."

The Court hadn't even decided to hear this case yet, and Victoria already found herself wondering if the walls in her office weren't slowly, inexorably moving closer and closer together.

"What are you going to do about this?" he asked.

Her jaw tightened. Why was *this* something she, in particular, needed to do anything about? Weighing her responses, she looked at him—*really* looked at him—for the first time since he had barged into her office. There was a weariness in his eyes she had never seen before, and he looked pale. "Can I get you some tea, Alistair?"

"Chamomile, if you don't mind."

She brewed them both a cup from the machine in the corner, and they drank in silence for a while.

"What would you like me to do about this?" she asked gently.

He shook his head. "That's up to you. But if the Court decides to hear arguments, you're going to have to fight battles on two fronts. Whatever the fallout is with Genevieve, keep your head in the game here."

With such a conservative Court right now, recusing herself clearly wasn't an option, and the list of reasons she didn't want them to hear this case was growing long.

They spent a long while finishing their tea, each lost in thought, before Alistair excused himself. It was Monday, and she and Genevieve rarely saw each other during the workweek; for once

Victoria was grateful. Maybe by the time they faced each other, she'd know what to say.



Later that afternoon, for the first time since joining the Court, she invited herself into Alistair's office the way he routinely did with hers. With the exception of some of the titles in the bookcases, it was remarkably similar to her own.

She closed the door behind her, and from his place behind his desk, Alistair gestured toward two leather chairs by the window that looked identical to the ones they'd sat on earlier.

"With all the excitement earlier, we haven't had a chance to catch up," she said, getting settled.

Alistair rose heavily from his desk chair. "I have chamomile. Can I return the favor?"

She nodded and watched him walk to the sideboard, taken aback by how much more pronounced his limp was than the last time she'd thought to notice. "I wanted to apologize if I was a bit out of sorts," she said.

"Not at all, my dear. Truth be told, I was too." As the tea brewed, he leaned heavily against the window. "I've been thinking a lot about what's next for me."

The look he gave her, equal parts resignation and despondency, told her volumes, and she blinked in surprise. She understood his frustration with Archie Dalton's appeal in a new light.

"Alistair, you can't. You're too young to retire."

He smiled faintly. "Well, I've missed my window anyway, haven't I?"

"Why would you retire now?"

"Learning your wife has stage four ovarian cancer will change your perspective."

She couldn't stifle a gasp. "Oh, Alistair. I'm so sorry."

He held up his hand, and Victoria understood that he had no desire for her pity. "We found out in June and have been making the most of our time together ever since." His gaze drifted out the window, and Victoria's heart ached for both of them. "I've been on the Court since you were in law school, Victoria. It's time."

Still, the tension lines around his mouth indicated that he was conflicted about the decision. Besides, with the Court about to begin a new session, he wouldn't want to leave a vacancy; he'd want to retire in the early summer so that the Senate could confirm his replacement by the start of October term. And there was another issue at play here: if Marcia died and he had retired, he would have no idea how to fill his time.

Not that this was something Victoria would dream of saying out loud. "Can Genevieve and I bring dinner over this week?"

He nodded, brought over their tea, and sat. "As long as it's not soup. I can't handle more soup."

"I make a delicious jambalaya, if you think her stomach can handle it."

His smile didn't reach his eyes. "That works, if it's not too spicy. We went to New Orleans in July. She wanted to tour the mansions in the Garden District."

"I've never been."

"You two should go. I bet Genevieve would enjoy the jazz."

Victoria nodded, although the idea of traveling together as a couple seemed foreign to her. And not really something she even knew how to imagine. "I suppose she would."

"We don't have plans for Thursday," Alistair said.

"We'll be there at seven." She probably should consult with Genevieve before making plans for her, but if Genevieve had another engagement, Victoria could bring over dinner by herself.

Alistair studied his hands and sighed. Before she could inquire about his wife's treatment, he held up his hand and shook his head. Evidently she wasn't the only one struggling to discuss personal matters.

"Well, I look forward to getting to know Genevieve better. Something tells me her energy will be great for Marcia."

She put her hand briefly on his knee and squeezed before changing the subject. They chatted about the summer tennis circuit for a while, but Alistair's heart clearly wasn't in it. As she left his office, she wished she'd been better at cheering him up. Maybe he was right—this was more Genevieve's territory than hers.

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