

"If anyone asks, just tell them that it's all been blown out of proportion," Josh Lyman said with a hint of queasiness in his voice, as he and Donna marched out of McGary's corner office and made a beeline down the hall.

"Is that the official stance?" she asked from his left, keeping pace with a frantic staccato rhythm of her hard-soled shoes.

"We don't have an official stance yet," he replied with a grimace. "But it's all over the news and these vultures want to tear us apart."

"We're not dead yet," offered Donna.

"What?"

"Scavengers. Vultures are scavengers. They'd only be tearing us apart if we were dead."

"Or dying," he agreed.

Ahead, Sam Seaborn rounded the corner and nearly ran into them outside the Oval Office. He was holding some papers and looked as if he'd been running all morning. "Josh!" he began as he stopped in his tracks.

"Sam, I'm just heading to see your boss. Is Toby in his office?"

"He is," Seaborn breathed as he changed directions and fell in step beside Lyman, handing him a piece of White House stationery, "but he sent me to find you. We need an official statement from the president regarding this incident with McGary."

"Yeah, you and ninety-seven other people this morning," Lyman moaned as he skimmed the document. "DC police already made a statement, and there's not much else we can say."

"People are going to want to know if McGary's getting canned over this," Sam pleaded. "You've gotta give me something."

"The President isn't going to say a thing until he talks to Leo," replied Lyman, handing the paper back.

Donna chimed in with, "I'm sure it's all just been blown out of proportion."

"Exactly," smiled Lyman. "Can we stall the press?"

"Briefing room is already packed," Seaborn complained.

"Well they can wait until after Bartlett talks to Leo. Donna, run back to the Lobby and let me know as soon as he gets here."

"Yuhkay," she quipped, then took a left through a door that led past the Roosevelt Room and into the lobby.

"You know this isn't good," Seaborn said as they neared Ziegler's office at the end of the hall, "The President's approval rating is hovering at 28% and a scandal like this could completely discredit him."

"Nine-point-two percent of men in this country are diagnosed alcoholics, you know. This sort of thing happens."

"It doesn't happen in this administration, Josh. We need to diffuse it."

"He punched a guy in the face, Sam. Everyone knows Leo is a firecracker, that's why he's good at his job, so can't we just use this to confirm that the President's right hand man is someone to be reckoned with? We should send a strong message."

"That's all well and good, but only if McGary's not getting canned."

They arrived at the office at the end of the hall to find Ziegler and CJ hovering over a computer screen, making frantic changes to the official White House statement.

"Tell me you brought us something from Bartlett," CJ shouted as soon as they stepped through the door. They could hear the clamour of a hundred impatient voices talking at once from the nearby Press Briefing Room.

"He hasn't said anything yet," said Lyman, "and he won't till he talks to Leo."

"Oh for Christ's sake," she replied as she stormed past them and into the hallway. "I'll do it myself."

"CJ!" Lyman shouted after her, as he and Seaborn began to chase her down.

"Sam!" came the voice of Ziegler from behind, who had also followed them into the hall. "Go to the Briefing Room and let them know it'll be a few more minutes."

"Yuhkay," he said as he turned back around and power-walked past Ziegler's office.

"We have to say something, Josh," said Ziegler. "The White House Chief of Staff got drunk and assaulted a guy."

"Yeah we should say something, but not until the President talks to Leo!" he pleaded with them as they approached the Oval Office.

Donna's voice rang from behind them. "Josh! McGary's in the building!" They all stopped and turned to see her running down the hall towards them.

"Yuhkay," said Josh.

"Can I help you folks?" came a voice from the direction they had been heading. They all turned again to see President Bartlett leading Leo McGary, who was now sporting a fresh black eye, into the Oval Office. McGary looked angry and ashamed, his hands in his pockets. He said nothing to his staff, which was unnerving for all of them.

CJ was the first one on it. "Mr. President, we need an official statement for the press."

Bartlett glanced back at McGary, then to CJ and the rest of them. "Tell them to go find some real news."

He then followed McGary into the office and shut the door.

The Oval Office was empty save for the President's aid, Charlie Young, who had entered the room from the side door as soon as the door had slammed shut. "Can you give us a few moments, Charlie?" he said kindly. The young man nodded, then left them alone.

The President sat down on the cream-colored couch at the center of the office and crossed his legs. "Why don't you sit down, Leo?" he offered amiably, gesturing to the chair across from him.

"Mr. President," McGary said, not taking the seat, "I must tender my resignation, sir."

The President nodded to himself for a moment, then said, "Why don't you sit down?"

McGary glanced at the chair, then back to Bartlett, then sat down. He repeated, "I have to resign."

"You're sure?" Bartlett asked casually, as if they were discussing something as innocuous as what he had decided to eat for lunch.

"Yes, Mr. President."

Bartlett seemed to consider this, then he uncrossed his legs and leaned forward in his seat, resting his elbows on his knees. "You know, this reminds me of a story."

McGary suddenly stood and said, "Sir, I don't want to waste your time. I'm sorry for the trouble I've caused." But Bartlett just waved his hand and shook his head, indicating that he should retake his seat. McGary hesitated, but sat once again.

"Back in New Hampshire," the President began, "We had this young assistant professor at the university by the name of Harry Sherman. Taught the 100-level biology classes. Very friendly. Knew everybody. Amazingly intelligent. All that.

"Well, after he had been teaching for about nine months, we started noticing some things had gone missing around campus. Nothing big; some microscopes and the like from the science building and a couple of very old books from the library. A few personal items also took flight, as it were. Specifically, an old wristwatch of my father's had been taken from the front seat of my car. I never used to lock it back then.

"Well, of course losing the watch was a grievous offense to me, and I, like many of the professors at the University demanded something be done. The culprit must be found! And then the police tracked down those antique books and found out that they were sold to a bookstore in Durham by none other than our good friend Harry. He was confronted and it came out that he had stolen everything, including my father's watch.

"I felt betrayed. Here was a bright young man with a great career ahead of him, whom I had spoken to almost every day for the past nine months, and he had stolen from me. How could such a man turn out to be a criminal? And the worst part of it all was that the President of the University at the time, Hal Steinbeck, refused to press charges. I was outraged. I marched into Hal's office and gave him a piece of my mind. I told him that Harry should be dismissed immediately and anything less than jail time would be insufficient punishment.

"Well, Hal listened patiently to my tirade, reached into his desk drawer, and pulled out my father's watch! I was stunned. I thought I'd never see it again. He hands it to me and tells me something that I'm never gonna forget. He says, 'Jed, let's not go turning on each other just yet.'

"He then goes on to tell me that Harry had returned everything and that he had been diagnosed with kleptomania, a compulsive disorder that made him steal. I actually laughed at this. 'Theft is theft,' I told him, but Hal didn't agree. You know what he did? He told Harry that if he wanted to keep his job, he'd have to find treatment. Therapy. Drugs. Whatever he could do to get his problem under control. And he was absolutely right. Things stopped disappearing, and Harry kept teaching and going to therapy twice a week. Any time the compulsion got the better of him and he took something, he'd bring it back the next day.

"I learned something then, Leo: punishment is in the mind. Harry was a smart young man, so when he was caught and given a second chance, I think he felt appropriately ashamed and perhaps a bit more determined to do better. Would losing his job and spending a few weeks in jail have taught him that? I really doubt it. But we as a people are programmed to equate crimes with justice, isn't that right? Isn't that why you're here, Leo? You committed a crime, and you think you know the appropriate punishment, right?"

McGary stared at the big oval rug at the center of the room for a moment, before meeting Bartlett's penetrating gaze. "No offense, Mr. President, but it's a matter of degrees. Theft is one thing. Assault is entirely different."

"You didn't kill anyone, Leo. You punched a guy in the face, and from everything I've heard about that page, he probably deserved it. I'm more concerned with the problem behind the punch, to be completely honest with you."

McGary looked away at that and said, "You're going to suggest therapy? AA meetings?"

Bartlett nodded.

"You don't think that's going to discredit you and your administration, having a violent alcoholic as your chief of staff?"

"The damage has already been done, Leo," The President replied, rising to his feet. "Let's not go turning on each other just yet."

The President opened the door to find Lyman, CJ, Ziegler, Seaborn, Donna, and Charlie, all crowded together in the hallway. They froze, making guilty eye-contact with Bartlett as if they had all been caught with their hands in the cookie jar. He looked around at all of them for a moment, then smiled and stepped aside, letting McGary through. Everyone backed up a step, making room for the man in the crowded hallway.

Then McGary broke the silence. "What the hell are you all doing gawking? Get back to work!"

And with that, they all scattered.

THE END.