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When he was ten years old, Miles McAlister meticulously and very thoughtfully planned out the remainder of his life. Sitting in the tree house his father had built for him and his four siblings, Miles had put pen to paper and scratched out his future as he saw it: Eagle scout, All-state track star, high school valedictorian, Duke University, Rhodes Scholar, law school, politics, and, most importantly, President of the United States. Twenty-three years later, he's revised that list a time or two to include a few things a fifth grader might not have envisioned—like losing his virginity at the national high school debate conference or delaying law school while he backpacked through Europe with his girlfriend. But overall, he was well on his way to executing his carefully mapped out existence nearly verbatim.

Until life had thrown him a curveball. More than one, actually.

His two brothers and two sisters—as well as the majority of the people in his hometown of Chances Inlet, North Carolina—hadn't dubbed him 'The Ambitious McAlister' without good reason, however. Miles was determined that nothing was going to interfere with the goals he'd set all those years ago. And that's how he found himself on the expansive wrap-around porch of his mother's popular bed and breakfast stoically enduring the June heat. With its railings draped in red, white, and blue bunting, a dewy pitcher of lemonade on the wicker side table, and his brother's golden retriever snoring at his feet, the Tide Me Over Inn afforded Miles the perfect backdrop for wrestling back control of what he perceived to be his destiny.

The inn had been his mother's pride and joy for four years now. She and Miles's father had painstakingly restored the 1894 Victorian to all its original splendor, turning it into one of the premiere B and B's on the Atlantic coast. Situated among lush gardens and centuries old trees, the sprawling twenty-room home was also walking distance to the ocean and the historical town of Chances Inlet. The B and B's picturesque location, along with a bevy of championship

golf courses in the area, guaranteed that The Tide Me Over Inn's guest rooms were booked nearly year-round. Today being no exception. A crowd milled about on the verandah scrutinizing Miles's every move.

The late day breeze blowing inland off the ocean felt refreshing amidst the wilting humidity so typical of the coast. Miles resisted the urge to tug at his shirt collar as the wind gently lifted the skirt of the woman seated in front of him. Rather than fix her hemline, though, she shifted her long legs suggestively, affording him an unobstructed view of a nicely toned thigh, her skin shimmering with perspiration. The smile she gave him lacked even a trace of innocence, however; instead it was outright daring. But then, she wasn't the one with the television cameras trained on her.

"Just a few more questions, Miles. They'll be painless. I promise." Tanya Sheppard, a blue-eyed, blonde former beauty queen who masqueraded as the political reporter from one of Raleigh's affiliate stations, was clearly enjoying her position of dominance in their interview. Miles was sure her antagonistic demeanor was payback for him ignoring the hotel keycard she'd slipped into his tuxedo pocket during last year's Governor's Ball. But he refused to let her rile him up.

Pushing out a breath, he forced himself to relax against the old-fashioned glider he sat in. The guests always raved that the damn things were so comfortable, but to Miles the chair felt like he was contorting his six-foot-one, muscular body into the shape of a paper clip. His dress shirt stuck to his back where it was pressed up against the metal chair. He ignored the discomfort, though, bracing himself for whatever questions Tanya decided to throw at him next. They both knew she had been lobbing softballs for the past fifteen minutes.

His campaign for a vacated U. S. congressional seat certainly wasn't sexy enough to warrant the seven minute segment on the affiliate's weekly political show. Especially since he was running unopposed in a district located in the county where he'd grown up and where his family was still very much a presence. If Miles was reading the situation correctly, Tanya was here for a bigger sound bite. She wanted revenge with all the trimmings. And that meant discussing the sins of Miles's deceased father.

"How can you expect voters to trust you?" Tanya went right for the most salacious sound bite. "You've repeatedly stated that you weren't aware of your father's efforts to defraud the bank that financed the three million dollar loan for this very inn. Even if you didn't know firsthand of your father's thievery, why shouldn't voters assume that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, so to speak?"

The ice inside the pitcher of lemonade popped, startling the dog at his feet. Brushing a reassuring hand over its head, Miles drew in his own calming breath before launching into the speech he'd been rehearsing in front of the mirror since the mess with his father had been made public the week before. He needed to get ahead of this issue before it compromised his entire campaign.

"*Thievery* is a bit misleading, Tanya." He held up a hand when she began to speak, shushing her before looking directly into the camera lens. "McAlister Construction and Engineering is a privately owned company. If my father moved funds from one account to another, he was misappropriating his *own* money. I don't know what dictionary you use, Tanya, but that's not thievery in my book."

Tanya bristled, uncrossing her thighs and sitting up a little straighter. "There's no *if* about it, Miles. The bank examiner had an airtight case against your father."

And the stress from staying one step ahead of the bank examiner most likely brought on the heart attack that killed Dad.

Miles had to work to unclench his hands and appear relaxed. Donald McAlister had been a larger than life role model— a dedicated family man who was also a semi-pro athlete, an engineer, a small business owner, and a fixture in the community. Apparently, he'd been so devoted to his wife that he'd bought and refurbished the inn for her while playing fast and loose with the books. Miles had no doubt his father would have made good on the loan if the economy hadn't taken a nosedive right when the balloon payment was due. The enormous weight of the financial burden, along with his attempts to conceal it from his wife and children, certainly put Donald McAlister into an early grave.

The emptiness Miles felt in his chest was still raw. All those years ago when he had carefully crafted his life's roadmap, Miles had never taken into account achieving the goals without his father by his side. It was yet another indication of the short-sightedness of a ten-year-old.

Swallowing around the lump in his throat, Miles launched into the rest of his stump speech. "The fact of the matter is this, Tanya, my father isn't campaigning for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. *I am*. He died tragically before any of this could get resolved. But I do know this..." Miles looked into the camera lens again. "Whatever my father did, it was out of love for his family. Times have been tough financially for many of us these past several years. Washington has forgotten about small business and the middle class who are living paycheck to paycheck. When I take my seat in Congress, I plan to be the voice for those people. The same people who would do whatever it takes to ensure their family is provided for and that their dreams can become reality. Just as my father did for his own family."

Tanya covered up an indelicate snort before it could be picked up by the microphone. “And the Governor? He obviously wasn’t too comfortable with having the stigma that now surrounds you tainting his own re-election bid. Isn’t it true that rather than keep you as his chief counsel, he put you on leave without pay?”

It was a chore for Miles to appear unfazed by Tanya’s goading question despite the anger that was fueling up inside of him, but he miraculously kept his composure. “Governor Rossi’s statement was pretty clear on the matter, Tanya. *I* requested the leave of absence. Not the other way around. The leave is so that I can deal with a family emergency here in Chances Inlet. The issue involving my father had nothing to do with it.”

At least not in the way she was implying.

She made a show of rustling her notes on her lap. “Of course. Your mother.” Tanya brilliantly modulated her voice to sound softer, more serene. Too bad the viewers couldn’t see the hard lines still bracketing her mouth. “How is she doing?”

Patricia McAlister had been struck by a hit and run driver while riding her bicycle through town ten days earlier. She’d fractured her hip and sustained a concussion along with other minor injuries. But the larger trauma was to her psyche after the secret of Donald McAlister’s creative accounting had been revealed on national television.

“She’s wonderful.” Miles chose to categorize his statement not as a lie, exactly, but more as maintaining his mother’s privacy. It was partially the truth, anyway. Her hip would fully heal. “But it’s the summer tourist season, the busiest time of the year in Chances Inlet and until she’s back on her feet, she’ll need help running the inn. Since my campaign headquarters is located here in town, it made sense to my family that I be the one to move into the B and B and help her out.”

Again, a partial truth. His younger brother Ryan was a professional baseball player whose contract barely allowed for him to visit their injured mother much less take three months off during the season. Their youngest sibling, Elle had two months left in her Peace Corps service. Kate, the oldest of the five McAlister children, was spending the summer in Chances Inlet. But she and her husband, Alden, were both physicians who operated the beach town's seasonal urgent care clinic. The clinic's hours left them little time to help nurse his mother much less help with the day-to-day operations of the inn. And then there was, Gavin.

Miles covertly glanced past the cameras and scanned the sea of townspeople assembled on the inn's sprawling lawn. With their niece perched on his shoulders, his brother was easy to spot standing near the towering black walnut where their tree house sat high in its branches. Judging from the deep creases forming in his forehead, Gavin didn't like Tanya's line of questioning any more than Miles did. Guilt, mixed with anger, churned in Miles's gut.

Gavin had single-handedly carried his father's secret for the two years since Donald's death, mollifying the bank examiner with the charm that had everyone in Chances Inlet eating out of the palm of his hand. The middle of the McAlister children, Gavin was a natural peacemaker. He'd devised a plan to pay off the debt and preserve their late father's name with no one in the community—or the family—being the wiser. Miles had to concede that it was a pretty damn good plan given the situation. Too bad Gavin had failed to grasp that people always stab you in the back. *Always*. The past eight years working in politics had taught Miles that.

What peevd Miles the most was that his brother had never thought to confide in him. Born sixteen months apart, they'd grown up in the small town practically in each other's pocket, playing on the same teams, sharing the same bedroom, the same circle of friends. Yet, when push came to shove, Gavin hadn't trusted his older brother to help shoulder the burden their

father left behind. To help guard the family name and its legacy. He'd made some lame excuse that he'd kept Miles in the dark to protect his political future, but it felt to Miles as though his brother believed he was so blinded by ambition that he couldn't pull his own weight during a family crisis. And that stung. A lot. So, while his mother had still been in the hospital, he'd taken control of the situation and appointed himself in charge of operating the inn until she was fully recovered. Miles sat taller in his chair. He would take the lead in preserving the McAlister name now.

He refocused his gaze on Tanya. "While I'm in town, I'll have ample time to meet with constituents and take their pulse about which issues are most important to them."

A murmur of approval rose from the crowd and Miles allowed himself to relax slightly. He could do this. Considering the circumstances that brought him back to Chances Inlet, the situation really had worked to his benefit. Not only that, but it afforded him the opportunity to keep an eye on the cast of characters his mother continued to shelter within the walls of the B and B, particularly the stealthy woman his mother had been harboring for the past several months.

Lori—if that was even her name—worked as the inn's maid and cook. While Miles couldn't find fault with her efforts, she was hiding something; he was sure of it. Especially if the smoking hot body she was concealing under her baggy clothes and her shield of artificially dark hair was any indication.

Shifting slightly in the glider, Miles tried to block out the image of a very wet, very naked Lori all soaped up in one of the inn's luxurious two-person showers. Her body was built for a magazine centerfold, full and curvy in all the right places and very definitely x-rated. It was no wonder she kept it under wraps with castoffs from the Goodwill store. He bit back a

groan before his microphone could pick it up. Embarrassment and lust joined the anger that swirled in his gut.

The embarrassment was due to the fact that he'd lingered a moment—*okay, maybe two*—longer than he should have while he surreptitiously admired the view that day when he had unwittingly walked in upon a strange woman showering in a supposedly unoccupied room. Not that anyone would blame him for remaining a few minutes longer than he should have. He was a red-blooded guy and the shower show was one that would have brought a dead man back to life.

The anger Miles felt was fueled by the lust that burned through him then and every freaking time he'd laid his eyes on Lori in the four months since. Miles hated the way his body lit up around a woman who was a mystery—a stranger who was very clearly hiding out under his mother's roof. He worried about what she might be running from and how it could impact his mother, whose heart of gold might not be able to weather another betrayal. Lori was definitely a distraction the McAlister family couldn't afford right now. And yet, she mesmerized him with the things he wanted to do with her. Miles hadn't felt such an intense attraction to a woman since—

“Miles?” Tanya was eyeing him curiously.

He blinked to refocus. *Damn, damn, damn.* Had he missed a question while he was fantasizing about his mother's maid?

Surreptitiously glancing past the television camera again, Miles's eyes landed on the anxious face of Bernice Reed. The elderly woman had managed McAlister C&E for decades and now worked as the office manager of his campaign headquarters. As usual, she was outfitted like a neon sign, today dressed head to toe in bright pink with an oversized necklace to match. She was staring at him through rhinestone studded glasses, wide-eyed with her hand to her chest

and, knowing her, a “bless his heart” on her tongue. Beside her was Cassidy Burroughs, the teenager who operated the Patty Wagon, his mother’s seasonal ice cream truck. Cassidy was holding her cell phone aloft, shooting video of the scene while wearing an expression on her face that clearly said “What the heck?”

“I’m sorry, Tanya.” Miles quickly returned his gaze to his other tormentor. “I was distracted thinking of my mother there for a moment.” *Jesus, next I’ll be invoking apple pie and baseball.* His answer sounded evasive to even his own ears. He needed wrap up this sparring match with Tanya before he spouted of any more political platitudes.

He looked up to find that Tanya’s wide smile had a nasty edge to it. Miles resisted the urge to cross his legs and shield the family jewels. Instead he forced himself to remain relaxed. He was a professional and as such had prepared for anything she could throw at him.

Or so he thought.

“I asked you whether you and your opponent will be debating one another this summer.”

Miles could hear the Atlantic Ocean slamming against the sand across the street, the whirring of the ceiling fans above their heads and even the gentle hum of the LED lights shining on either side of his face, so he knew he wasn’t dreaming. He peered over Tanya’s right shoulder at Coy Scofield III, the young flunkie the party had dumped on him as a campaign manager. Coy was twenty-five with the political expertise of a gnat, but that hadn’t mattered.

Until now.

The kid was talking a mile a minute into the cell phone glued to his ear, his cheeks flushed with what Miles could only assume was excitement. Coy had been very vocal that he wasn’t thrilled to be stuck in a campaign where there wouldn’t actually be a contest. He wanted the thrill of the chase. The kid was frustrated that the opposing party’s candidate had withdrawn

after being arrested for alleged racketeering violations just days after this spring's primary.

Miles carefully pushed the words past his lips so that the audio wouldn't capture the hint of anxiety in his voice.

"From what I understand, Brian Kendrick is having a tougher battle with the Treasury Department to worry about debating me. That's why he's no longer running."

"Oh, you haven't heard?" Tanya was practically bouncing in her seat. "Well, I guess that's understandable with your *family crisis* and all. But the opposing party is putting forth another candidate."

"They can't." Miles mentally reviewed the campaign laws. There wasn't a provision. He'd checked. So had the governor and everyone else in the party. The only way they could replace a candidate who'd been put on the ballot via a primary election was if the candidate was ill and could no longer serve the term of the office. The only illness Kendrick had was that of a terminal dumbass and the opposing party was out of luck on that loophole.

Tanya leaned back, seductively crossing her legs again as if to say *check-mate*. There was no mistaking the malice in her grin now. She was obviously enjoying the reaction her bombshell had gotten out of Miles. "Technically the party can't add a name to the November ballot. But the voters can."

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

A write-in campaign. There'd been talk of one during the initial days after Kendrick's arrest, but the pollsters had assured the governor and the national party big wigs that Miles's reputation was sterling enough the opposition wouldn't risk funding another candidate. Instead, they'd spend their time and money on a race that wasn't a shoo-in. Apparently, with all the talk

surrounding his late father these past few weeks, some of the shine had worn off Miles's reputation.

"It's funny how these things work, isn't it?" Tanya seemed to be the only one on the verandah who saw the humor in the situation.

Determined not to let her—or any of her viewers—see him sweat, Miles leaned back in the stupid glider and tried his best to look unfazed. "Well, it's a lot better for the constituents to have more than one candidate. A two party race offers voters greater opportunities to weigh the issues and make sure their interests will be best represented." Miles was pretty sure he'd read that in a political science textbook somewhere, but at this point he just didn't care. He needed to regurgitate enough bullshit to get him through this train wreck of an interview with his shirt still on his back. "Since you have the inside scoop today, Tanya, do you mind telling me who my opponent will be?"

"Of course. We're headed to Shallotte from here for the big announcement. You'll be facing off against Faye Rich."

"Faye Rich as in The GTO Grandma?" Cassidy blurted out from behind the camera and Miles hoped her words and his wince hadn't been caught on tape. The murmur from the lawn rose like a tidal wave as the crowd processed Tanya's bombshell.

Faye Rich was exactly what her name implied: rich as Croesus. She'd inherited a string of car dealerships from her father and married into more. Her commercials were legendary for their low budget, smaltzy, down-home humor. Not to mention Faye had appeared in all of them since she was three years old. Now somewhere in her mid-sixties, she still was the voice behind Rich Automotive, occasionally even dressed as the Easter Bunny, the Tobacco Queen or Uncle

ALL THEY EVERY WANTED

Sam. She made it a point to appear at events in her supped up GTO. Her voter recognition would be off the charts. And then there was the fact her name would be easy to write in.

And just like that, Miles's life plan was broadsided by another curveball.