

Chapter 1

The men on the stage rehearsing, the coach and his recalcitrant student, were boring Nadine Cowherd. Her fingers flew over the screen as she texted as a distraction. "I wonder if Ginger Rogers would have been able to text like this," Nadine asked herself, thumbs flying over the smart phone screen. She liked to imagine her digits as legs, graceful legs like those of a dancer tapping confidently across a stage, not moonwalking or strutting or, for God's sake, rolling around or thrusting or cocking themselves at weird angles like her high school modern dance instructor encouraged. Nadine had wanted to learn grace and elegance in that class, but that cow of a teacher had spoken only of incomprehensible things like inversion and minimization and clarity of line. In Nadine's mind, Ginger Rogers would have laughed out loud at such crap. A tough Texas girl like herself, Ginger Rogers would have told that teacher to go fuck a mule, all the while gliding as gracefully as Fred Astaire around the dance floor, but backwards and in high heels. At least that's what another tough Texas girl, former governor Ann Richards, once said.

Now Nadine softly tapped the screen in rhythm to the rendition of *Dancing Cheek to Cheek* playing in her head. "IDK y I even have to b here," she typed. With an exasperated sigh she reread her message and hit send. Her eyes strayed to the top of the screen. Darn, it's almost four already, she thought, shifting irritably in her seat. She dug around in her purse for a piece of gum before remembering she had chewed the last one in the pack an hour ago. She glanced back at the phone screen – no reply yet from Brianna. Then Nadine yelled out, "Fred, how much longer is this gonna take?"

Fred Halsey spun around to face her from his front row seat. His ostrich leather boots thunked against the tile floor as he did so, the sound echoing throughout the almost empty auditorium. He straightened his hundred-dollar tie and said, "Honey, we're almost through. Jack's just gotta get this last bit down."

Nadine smiled sweetly at the older man. She had told him only yesterday that he must have been quite handsome before his face wrinkled up so much, a comment that elicited amused gasps from other guests at the fundraiser. "But it's true, y'all," she had protested. "Wrinkles don't make anyone look good. Not even Brad Pitt. That's why I'll use Botox when I get old like that."

Fred faced forward again to look at the solitary man onstage. Nadine's husband, Texas Attorney General Jack Cowherd, impatiently rapped the lectern before him with one hand like an unhappy child staring at a plateful of broccoli. "Go ahead, Jack," Fred said, "let's hear it again."

Jack cleared his throat and put on the commanding visage he had practiced in the mirror while getting dressed this morning. In a voice godly enough for a Baptist preacher he said, "In response to my opponent's statement, allow me to make one thing clear." He paused. "Damn it, Fred, I can't say this. What am I gonna do, declare war on the United States?"

Fred sighed. "Jack, trust me, I'm your campaign manager. No, you're not gonna declare war on the United States. But if you want to become governor of Texas you've got to convince all the gun-toting, truck-driving, Patriot Party wingnuts out there that you just might. Because if they don't vote for you, you might as well plan on getting your ass kicked."

Jack cut his eyes to the other woman in the room, his chief of staff Tasha Longoria. "What do you think?" he asked.

Jack and Tasha had been friends since grade school. Her good looks might have made Nadine nervous, save for the faint wrinkles creeping in at the sides of her mouth and eyes. Ten

years younger than her husband's chief of staff, Nadine prided herself on her smooth skin and glistening blond hair. She wondered why Tasha did nothing about her gray streaks, but secretly rejoiced at their presence. Now she looked up from her phone in anticipation of Tasha's answer.

"I agree with you, Jack," said Tasha. "Yes, you need the secessionist vote, but that doesn't mean you have to make promises you can't keep."

"You're not promising anything," snapped Fred. "You're standing up to Washington. It makes you sound tough."

Jack shifted his gaze to Nadine. "Nadine?"

As if in reply the phone in Nadine's hand dinged softly. Forcing her eyes away from the screen she said, "Jack, honey, you've got to do it. I already paid for the gown I'm wearing to the inaugural ball. Losers don't have balls, Jack. Winners have balls."

Fred laughed. "Damn straight, Mrs. Cowherd."

"Oh, please, grow up," said Tasha with a snort.

"What'd I say?" asked Nadine.

Fred smiled at her. "The right thing, sweetheart."

Tasha rolled her eyes. "What is this, a high school locker room?"

"Tasha, I don't know, maybe Fred's right," said Jack. "If I want to win this thing I've got to say things I don't necessarily mean."

"That's called lying, Jack."

"That's called winning," said Fred.

Resignation crossed Jack's face. He looked at Fred. "Feed me the question again."

Fred adjusted his reading glasses and held up the notes in his hand. "Mr. Cowherd, your opponent has claimed that federal law supersedes state law on this issue. What is your response?"

In an instant Jack was the stern Baptist preacher again. With perfectly coifed, thick black hair, square jaw, muscular physique, and rugged good looks, Jack perfectly fit the image of a man born to lead. "Let me make one thing perfectly clear," he said in a commanding voice, "if those Washington politicians think they know better than us Texans what's best for our own state, well, we might just have to remember the Alamo all over again."

"Perfect!" cried Fred.

"For the crazies," said Tasha.

"The crazies who vote!"

Nadine reread the message on her phone. "What r u wearing 2nite?" it said. She shoved the device into her purse and asked, "Are we done yet? I've got a hair appointment."

"Go on, sweetheart," Fred cooed. "We want to keep you looking your best."

Rising from her seat, Nadine glanced hurriedly at her husband. "Jack, I'm going to Charlie Clutterbuck's reception tonight. Are you sure you don't want to come?"

"Not if my life depended on it."

"Oh, come on, Jack. We never do anything fun together anymore."

The last thing Jack wanted to do after a grueling day of debate preparation was to stand around in a hotel ballroom making chitchat with strangers, or, worse yet, fellow politicians. Why Nadine enjoyed these things so much he had no idea. "I need to work on my speech," he said, attempting to convey exhaustion.

Nadine frowned. "Well, I'll be home late. Don't wait up." She blew him a kiss and left.

Fred quickly rolled up his notes and stood. He smacked the rolled paper against a thigh and said, "Great work, Jack. We'll go over it again tomorrow before the debate." He followed Nadine out the door.

Tasha slowly rose and waited for Jack to descend from the stage. As he walked past her toward the exit she reached out and plucked his sleeve. "Jack, you've known me since fourth grade so you know you can trust me. You can't use that line. Foreman will call you a traitor."

"Foreman will call me a lesbian ax murderer before this is over."

"But, Jack—"

"You're a good friend, Tasha. And a great chief of staff."

"Thanks."

"But that horse has left the corral. The line stays."

She scowled. "Yes, sir. If you're not going to listen to me, I might as well go home to my kids. They don't listen, either."

"Don't pout. I'm gonna get you a better job soon."

"I'm fine with the current one."

"Yeah, chief of staff to the state attorney general isn't a bad gig. But soon you'll be working in the governor's office."

"If they don't arrest you for treason."

"They can't arrest a man for political speech. Hell, there's bullshit all over the campaign trail. Now go home and spend some time with your kids."

"Yes, sir." She turned to go.

"One more thing," said Jack.

"What?"

"Let's get that line on the website."

Now that you've read the first chapter, I'd love to hear your thoughts!

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