

It's Always Family

Brayden Allen's alarm buzzed at 5:30 on the first Tuesday after the first Monday of November, 2048. He had been dreaming of taking the oath of office on the Capitol steps, and snapped alert, nervously excited that the road to the White House was finally here. Twenty-three days until the Thanksgiving voting confirmed the pols' and polls predictions.

His second thought was to avoid disturbing Bunny. Marrying a light sleeper had cost him his morning routing, including loss of the use of the master bathroom. She was more than worth it, not least for having brought him Morgan.

One of the downsides of a calling to politics was the dearth of women prepared for the dedication it took. Kim had known his plans when they met, had sworn she'd be happy to play her part supporting his career. She did all the ceremonial duties for the first few years, then decided she didn't want children until his schedule relaxed enough for him to be a real presence in the house.

That pin in the balloon of their relationship leaked enough to send them into the slow death spiral that bottomed out when she left to find the husband she wanted. By that point, all he mourned was their never-conceived children.

Morgan might be Bunny's, but she was as close to fatherhood as he would come in this life. In a way, it was better. The two women had been on their own long enough to be delighted with whatever he contributed. None of Kim's carping about his work load, no dark hints about what he was doing to the two of them by being so invested in serving his country. Bunny and Morgan understood that when Congress was busy, he might only make it back to Helena one weekend out of three. They were happy to see him whenever he could make it back.

A ready-made family, minus the guilt or criticism, more than made up for the loss of his bathroom, but he still needed a bathroom. There was a spacious one near Morgan's room, which he used at night, when her sleep-cycle was at a point that his bedtime ablutions didn't wake her.

Mornings were a different story. He sighed and tiptoed down the stairs, careful to avoid the creaks on the fourth, seventh and ninth. Safely on the carpeted hallway, he padded to the half-bath off the dining room, where he stashed soap, toothbrush, toothpaste, and mouthwash.

The door slid shut behind him, and he said, "Vid-screen, news."

There wouldn't have been any major developments in the five hours since he last watched. Not in Montana. But Ted Crompton had insisted he catch the headlines before leaving for his run. Actually, his chief aide and campaign manager had agitated for him to skip his morning ritual, to be available to deal with what came their way.

Brayden had objected. His mornings were a time to clear his head, not clutter it with more information. Putting it in language Crompton could hear, he'd said the run was probably also a better political move. Projecting vigorous and energetic good health in the Montana air was a more valuable optic for the Kickoff Day than what they'd gain by his knowing each piece of news as it broke.

A good compromise leaves both sides unhappy. Annoying as Brayden found the intrusion of silly stories about Election Week frenzies and festivities on his brushing, rinsing, and spitting, it was no worse than the frantic anxiety Ted would feel the next hour, sure that some major story would hit while his boss was running a mountain.

Calling would cost twenty minutes. Brayden messaged him instead, coating a dig in the pretense of being in touch: "Seems like nothing important. On my way, anything pressing?"

His texting back instead of calling was the aide's tacit apology for having made a fuss. "Guess not. Be friendly out there—you never know whom you'll see in higher selection rooms."

Brayden smiled at Crompson's refusal to accept that half a lifetime in politics might have taught his boss something about how to treat people. He bent down to redo the laces on his right shoe, which he knew would still come undone at the most inconvenient time. Out the door, he fell into the fast-walk rhythm of his warm up. Three steps out, he remembered the screen door and raced back to grab it before it slammed and woke his girls.

On the checklist always buzzing around his mind, he crossed off placating his staff and leaving the house without bothering Bunny or Morgan. Next up was seeing how far along Grizzly Gulch Drive he made it before he had to call it a halfway point. The second part of his deal with Crompson had been his solemn promise to be at the Lewis and Clark Library by 7:45, when the early birds began lining up for selection rooms.

His handheld read 5:50. He could shower and change in ten minutes if he didn't channel-surf, twenty at breakfast were Bunny and Morgan's minimum for feeling he was paying them the proper attention, ten to walk to the library, and a fifteen minute safety cushion. An hour to run.

Fast-walking again, he set his eyes on Mount Helena. With any luck, he would make it far enough out of town and high enough up to pause for a moment, absorb the kind of view that would be his calming place all day, his mental refuge from the irritations of dealing with voters.

He counted off steps, shifted into a slow jog, turning right at the picket fence and loping down the block. His breaths quickened with the pace, and a first bead of sweat formed under the luxurious hair his critics considered his chief asset.

He went all the way to a thousand, resisting the urge to run. Days he sped up too soon, he limped home exhausted instead of exhilarated. It was bad enough in Washington, where

people knew to judge him by the favors he had done or could do for them, not his athletic prowess. In Helena, a bad run could be a fatal error. Politically, anyway.

He reached his number and kicked into higher gear. Maybe twenty steps later, he felt his body flinch before his mind decoded the sound waves hitting his ears. “My lord, if it isn’t Brayden Allen! Come on over and say hello, son!”

It was a command, no matter how politely delivered. Eighty seven year old Helga Snorgensen had, as she told anyone who would listen, “watched over this neighborhood and this city for the last sixty-two years, since my Bjorn brought us here.” She’d dispensed cookies and free babysitting since her children had moved away, longer than he’d been alive, probably. She knew and loved everyone, and vice versa.

Worse, they all treasured her political opinions. She or one of her acolytes would be among the ten people in the Friday room that would send him to Congress, making this not the day to get on her bad side. No day was, because she had the memory of an elephant, but especially not Kickoff Day.

Her sensitivity to body language was the best he’d ever seen, and he lived and worked with people who built their careers on their ability to read others. She’d have noticed his first reaction to her voice, and he wasn’t actor enough to pretend he’d been startled, not frustrated. From this moment until she dismissed him, he had to feel truly thankful for the opportunity to spend a moment with the regional matriarch, grateful for her friendship and her interest in him.

Don’t overdo it, he warned himself, she’ll sense that a mile away. “Mrs. Snorgensen, sorry, I didn’t realize it was you at first. How are you? Out early to work on your irises? The peonies over there look wonderful!”

It was a peace offering, which she accepted. “How nice of you to remember they’re not roses, like you thought last time, Brayden! Good to know Washington hasn’t made you forget us little people!”

He forced his laugh to sound unforced. “How could I, Mrs. Snorgensen? We’re only as good as the citizens we represent, you know!”

She smiled as she fingered a flower, clippers hanging over it, judging whether its time had come to grace her kitchen table. She shook her head, and dropped it, sparing it for another day. “Good to hear, Brayden. Wouldn’t want to worry about the rumors I’ve been hearing.”

“Rumors?”

She looked him in the eye, raised her eyebrows, and patted his hand. “It’s nothing, I’m sure. You know what a small town Helena can be. Thank you for spending a moment with an old woman, don’t let me keep you from your run. Anyone asks me, I’ll say you’re the same hometown boy who’s always made us proud!”

She’d taken a bit of time off his run, but the feeling that she had been implying something he hadn’t caught took away much of his energy. He slogged through the rest of the way, and walked back into the house at 6:50, without the boost he’d wanted.

He popped his head into the kitchen to say hello. He wasn’t allowed in until he’d showered, shaved, and deodorized. They loved him all put together, they said, and saw no reason to be subjected to the sweaty caveman he was before he did that.

Ten vid-free minutes later, he rejoined them, Bunny smiling as she put a plate of waffles at his seat. She poured the juice, leaned over to smell his hair, smiling in satisfaction that he’d used the shampoo she’d bought him, and said, “Ummm, who smells so nice?”

If not for his schedule, and Morgan's being off for the national holiday, he'd have thought she was revving their engines. But she was just relishing an aroma she enjoyed.

Morgan said, "Kids at school say Papa Brayden's going to be President. Is that true?"

He looked to Bunny. The nine year old had shown her first interest in politics barely a month before, and he was still unclear as to how her mother wanted it handled.

She said, "Sweetheart, one of the reasons we passed the Thirtieth Amendment was that we liked how much harder it makes it to predict who's going to win what. We love Papa Brayden, but part of the excitement is how many surprises come along the way, from small decisions all over the country, that can't be changed by money or advertising or anything like that. Papa Brayden will work his way up the selection rooms, like everyone else. He made it to the Leadership of Congress last election, we'll keep our fingers crossed this time."

That was downplaying his chances a bit too much for him to sit quietly. "Although, Morgan, people who should know do think highly of my chances. I've spent fourteen years in Congress, passed laws that help the people of Helena, of Montana, and the country, and many of our country's top politicians and political observers have endorsed me. That should mean something to people here at home."

The shade that came over Bunny's eyes told him he'd misspoken, but not what he'd done. He raised his eyebrows at her.

She opened her mouth, then shook her head, waved a hand, and said, "Morgan, let's remember what we said when Papa Brayden joined the family," they finished together, "no politics at meals, or it'll be all politics all the time." She smiled at her daughter. "We can talk it out later."

Morgan moved on happily to who was playing with or shunning whom. Bunny caught the three of them up on which neighbors had needed what kind of emergency help the past week, and Brayden contributed the few non-political stories he had.

When he told them about Helga Snorgensen's short-circuiting his run, Bunny frowned. "We said no politics, Brayden."

"That's not, that's an entertaining interaction with a neighbor, like all of yours."

Bunny glanced at Morgan; another of her rules was keeping disagreements out of her daughter's sight. She sighed and said, "Difference is, Bray, I like those people, and am amused by their quirks. You tolerated Helga to avoid her sandbagging you."

Letting comments slide was one of his biggest strengths, key to his steady rise up the ranks. He glanced at his handheld, went to kiss Morgan on the top of her head, Bunny on the cheek. "Sounds like someone wants to discuss something. Need we excuse ourselves to a more private area, or pick this up tonight?"

She looked up at him, a look and a moment he would think back to many times in the months to come. She searched his eyes, shook her head. "No, it's fine. Ted Crompton will have my head if I'm the reason you're late to chitchat with voters. I'll see you once our room's assigned."

He gulped his orange juice, tossing a farewell over his shoulder on his way out.

What could have been a brisk walk down Broadway was instead a series of handshaking stops, smiling for pictures. There were the people he knew by name, whose children and parents he had to ask after. Those he knew by face could be dispensed with a "Hey, how are you? You also didn't pre-certify your rep? All right, see you at the Library!"

The people he didn't know at all took the most time. He had to introduce himself, steeling for the embarrassment of hearing, "But we've met, Congressman, at the Quillington wedding last June, remember?" Either way, he had to ask where they lived, what they did, express his pleasure at meeting them, and file it all away for next time he bumped into them.

It all went smoothly, and he relaxed, chiding himself for letting Crompton worry him. He only had to remember that all would be well, and all would be well, and all manner of things would be well. The phrase had become his mantra, a reminder of what you had to learn to serve the public.

He'd first quoted it at a seminary graduation, his speechwriter throwing in the religious reference to appeal to the crowd. Instead, they'd taken offense at a secular figure, avatar and proponent of a life lived in the rough and tumble of society, invoked Julian of Norwich, a mystic who'd retired from the world before she turned 35.

It taught you to laugh, because you were never going to please everyone. Voters measured you by how much of their personal lives you could bring up when you saw them? Roll with it, even if some of the biggest idiots in Congress, the ones who contributed nothing to the House or the country, were geniuses at that game.

No use crying about it now, he had selection rooms to hurdle. He turned onto South Last Chance Gulch, only to hear, "Brayden Allen, as I live and breathe! Doesn't the Republican nominee have more important things to do than walk among us?"

She could have been a plant, it was so perfect. He gave his thousand-watt smile. "Mrs. Hennessy, good morning! I'm off to Ten-rep selection, like you! Step by step, isn't that what the Amendment taught us?"

Thank God for Bunny, who'd had the good sense to realize how it would play if he pre-certified as Hundred-rep, and jetted around the state all morning.

She'd said, "Won't the locals feel you're taking them for granted?"

The pleased smiles on all the faces within earshot of his answer to Mrs. Hennessy told him to add an item to his checklist, buying Bunny a thank-you gift for her brilliance.

He arrived at 7:52, eight minutes before the doors opened. The people there already were the thrill-seekers or lonely hearts who'd let the computer assign them to a Ten-group. Choice of rooms was a big deal for them, because comfortable or uncomfortable chairs could make the difference in whether they took enough time to figure out who would best rep them. Select in haste, repent at leisure, that was the mantra all of Election Week.

Crompton ran up to him, pale and sweaty. "Congressman, where have you been?"

"Talking, Ted, being friendly and welcoming to everyone I met, like you always want me to be. What's wrong?"

The officials running the site were insisting that room assignments were first-come, first-served. Crompton wanted Brayden close to the street, back shaking hands and kissing babies the instant he was selected. Problem was, everyone else wanted those rooms, to miss as little of their Kickoff Day barbecues as they had to. The FEC hadn't been moved by Crompton's claims that Brayden's need outweighed theirs.

Brayden said, "Ted, seriously, we've simulated today dozens of times, and we've never seen a scenario where I have a problem. I know these people, they know me, an extra five seconds, minutes, or hours of campaigning are not going to make the difference."

Crompton had spent too long in pre-Amendment politics to accept that the world had changed. There was no way that person to person contact, shaking hands, taking pictures,

trading quips wasn't the way to success. They were still arguing about it when the eight o'clock bell rang, and the woman charged with announcing rooms stepped out of the library's front door.

Her voice bounced with the merry smile that brightened her rosy cheeks, "Let the games begin, everyone, and best of luck to all aspiring representatives!"

Bunny Kraut and Samantha Colesby, the next door neighbor who had helped coordinate their Ten-rep group, were the sixteenth ones called. Their room was perhaps fifty feet from the door.

Brayden said, "Crisis averted, Ted, we're plenty close. Be back in an hour. Yes, an hour, because they're going to want to catch up, share gossip, all that. We haven't been together, all of us, for awhile. I'll come out the second we're done."

Crompton said, "How about, don't go in right away, use the time they're wasting to score a few points out here, with people you might be grouped with later in the Week." He saw the no forming in Brayden's eyes, and added, "It would make me feel a lot better."

Brayden sighed, longing for Washington, where Crompton was one of the most respected staff members on the Hill, often the difference between deadlock and compromise, legislative failure or headline-grabbing success. Brayden's name was on legislation as often because the people crafting the bill needed Crompton as they did the Congressman himself.

Out of his element, the man could drive you insane. Brayden had wanted to leave him where he belonged, which hadn't gone well. "I've always been your campaign manager. You think I can't handle the new system?"

Truth didn't factor into the answer. There was no way to say yes, which was why Crompton was there to guilt his boss into spending forty-five minutes working the crowd, old school.

He entered his selection room at 8:47. “Sorry I’m late. Everyone and their mother wanted to have a moment with me, to tell their friends and family!”

Samantha Colesby said, “Us too, Brayden, you know?”

“Sam, are you angry with me?” She didn’t usually speak with that much edge.

Voices clamored from around the table, merging into one rush of negativity in answer to his question. The wave of anger, disappointment, and frustration soaked him in surprise.

“You aren’t happy with my repping?”

Bunny quieted them and took over. “How would we know, Bray? We set up meetings, you don’t come. I arrange movie nights, barbecues, pot lucks, verify with your secretary daily, last second, some lobbyist, bigwig, or meeting keeps you away. Do you know that the ten of us haven’t sat together like this, without other people or kids, since last Kickoff Day? That’s two *years*, when your *first* job was supposed to be representing the people in this room!”

His hand reached to call Crompson, but found only the empty holder. The law said to leave devices in the bin at the door. “Well clearly, Bunny—all of you—I’ve made a mistake. I apologize. Let’s use this time to catch me up, before I go work on Hundred-rep selection.”

Samantha shook her head. “I wouldn’t plan on having time for that, Brayden. We have a lot to talk about. We might even only finish here in time to be assigned a room for the next selection.”

“Sam, I understand, and I want to hear all of what any of you want to say. But I’m hoping we remember that I have two more selection rooms today, and then one each day of the Week. The more connections I make, the more confident we can be I make it back to Congress.” At the look on their faces, he added, “Where I can do a better job representing you.”

Jack Kiefer lived a full three blocks over from the Allen/Krauts, but he'd been Brayden's best friend since childhood. Bunny always credited his wife Zenya and their daughters with easing hers and Morgan's move from Butte when she married Brayden.

Kiefer put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "Brayden, remember this, we love you. I'm not just saying that, everyone here is family to Zenya, the kids, and me, and I think the rest of the room feels that way, too." He paused to wave an arm at the bobbing heads around the table. "Still, we're not sure you're our guy this go-round."

Once it was out there and explicit, Brayden's mind forced him to remember that Ted Crompson had worried right when Bunny pushed for him to attend an actual Ten-rep selection meeting. Brayden had dismissed it, refusing to believe that these people would do that to him. He'd been so angry at Crompson for suggesting it, he'd threatened to fire him if he hinted at the possibility ever again. If Bunny said the meeting was to help him appear overconfident, that's what it was.

To his wife, he said, "Bunny, you lied to me?"

Kiefer didn't let her answer. "No, Bray, we *did* worry people would think you take us for granted. Because you take us for granted. That *was* why we wanted this meeting-- we were hoping our calling for it would catch your attention in a way we haven't been able to until now. We thought you might prepare by checking in with us, individually. That would have been enough to convince us you'd learned your lesson, and we'd have sent you on."

Zenya popped in. "But you didn't. You sent us that one message about being excited to spend quality time, then came late," she held up a hand, "and walked in here anxious to end quickly. That was my last straw."

Truth sinks in slowly. The Republican nominee for President, endorsed by all the power brokers, was failing to make it to Ten-rep.

Shock receded enough to make room for hurt. “How long have you all known?”

Samantha said, “Not until you rushed us this morning, like Zenya said.”

He tilted his head, lips pursed, demanding the real answer.

Bunny spoke from her seat, looking down at the table. “Five months ago, you missed a poker night. The next time you popped in to Helena for a few hours, I brought it up, even said I was worried you were depleting your goodwill accounts with our friends. You remember what you said?”

Unfortunately, he did. He’d said he was a busy man, Washington was a 24/7 environment, he came back to the district when he could. He’d said she and the group had to understand that he was organizing a run for office in a challenging new political environment, and they couldn’t expect him at every event they decided to set up.

Ouch. “Bunny, all of you, that was a mistake. I was under a lot of stress, and I spoke more freely and harshly than I intended. It won’t happen again.”

She shook her head. “That’s the point. Stress tripped you into speaking freely, not misspeaking. The problem isn’t that you said it, it’s that you think it, that you see us as a distraction, a chore to dispense with, to free you up for your real work. When I told everyone what you’d said, I wasn’t the one who said we needed to consider alternatives.”

New revelation, new betrayal. “Wait, you’ve been working on this *together*? This was a plan? What, do you also already know with whom you are going to replace me?”

Jack laughed. “For God’s sakes, man, you’re on the verge of taking the political hit of your life, and you still say ‘with whom’? In Montana? When the hell did you stop being the guy down the block, my hiking and hunting partner?”

Brayden collapsed into a chair, mind racing for the wisecrack that would win the room back. No, humor would ring wrong, they wanted to hear humility and regret. He sat straighter, clearing his throat to make room for the humble pie.

“You need to know how sorry I am that we’ve come to this. I went into politics to work on your behalf, each of you and all of you, and I have to do better. In the coming term, I will be here, for you and with you. We’ll retrieve our handhelds and lock in, what, monthly meetings? Weekly? You say. I am committed to--”

Hudson Colesby, Samantha’s husband, owned the store where Brayden bought his running and camping gear. “This is hard enough for all of us, Bray, but what’s done is done. We are where we are, and there’s no going back.”

Heads nodded around the room, and Brayden uncoiled. Nothing left to lose, he let a little anger seep out. “Why didn’t you tell me back when, when I had time to rectify what I’d done or find another Ten-group? Hell, I could have found a *hundred* people ready to pre-certify me.”

Zenya gave him an unnecessary refresher course in the Thirtieth, droning on about their duty as citizens to choose good representatives. He wasn’t listening, he was thinking about his years paying dues, cultivating kingmakers here, around the state, D.C. and the Republican Party. All out the window because ten oversensitives thought he wasn’t available enough.

Worse, he couldn’t dump them for a more appreciative group now, because no one in politics would look at him until these people restored him to being their rep. He had two years to prove to them that he’d changed, or there wouldn’t be a second act to his political life.

His mind wandered to who they'd chosen. Zenya wasn't done with her civics lesson, but he was. "Who is it?"

They looked right and left, hoping someone else would step up to say. Taking his slot as Ten-rep was going to wound, maybe mortally, a relationship that went back years. It couldn't be easy to own up to.

Finally, Samantha said, "Brayden, remember, we were hoping to make you take a break, not destroy your career. We know how talented you are, how good you are at your job and, bottom line, how much you can help the country. It's a term off we were thinking of, for you to reconnect with us, with what it means to represent us. We were looking for a placeholder, not a real rep, someone you can trust to step aside in two years."

She was hoping the light would dawn before she had to say it. It didn't. "Who, Sam?"

Bunny stood up, walked over behind him, leaned down, put her arms around his neck, her mouth at his ear. "They've asked me, Bray. They say three years living with you has probably taught me the ropes, and that I'm the best bet from among us to hold on to the seat. I'll keep your staff if I make it, warm and ready for when you come back."

He threw off her arms after the first sentence. She stepped back, but finished saying her piece. He couldn't see her through the haze of her words, as he struggled to believe she was serious.

When it sank in, he rotated around the room, staring down his former friends. "You're giving my job to my *wife*? It's not enough to ruin my career, you had to break up my family?"

When he reconstructed those minutes in his memory, this was a blank spot. He supposed one or more of them answered him, but twenty-five years of memories had hijacked his mind. Memories of the work he'd put into reaching this point, finding and befriending the professor

who had the connection for an internship, converting the unpaid position into a job with Mary Federkopf, sticking with her for the last ten of her forty-seven years as Congresswoman, covering for her when the Alzheimer's showed, easing her out when it advanced too far to ignore. Then he'd sacrificed a further fourteen years, his first marriage, and his hopes for biological children, all for the people of the district.

He'd earned everything he'd gotten, every vote, every perk, every hint he was ready for more. They needed to understand what they were doing, what they were giving up.

He finished his oral resume. "All that experience, all that clout, it was to benefit you."

He almost said, "Now you're blowing it because I hurt your feelings! Grow up, people! Nine hundred and fifty thousand others rely on me to take care of Montana in the House of Representatives, and I bet three-quarters of them are hoping to see the first Montanan in the White House!"

A lifetime in politics stopped him. He did say, "I'll tell you this, Bunny, I'm using our bathroom nights and mornings from now on, sleep or no sleep."

Early January, he didn't go to Washington to watch her sworn in to Congress, either.