

CHAPTER

1

First Lady Rose Gannon, frail and pale, reclined on a divan.

We were in the East Sitting Hall of the private, second-floor residence of the White House.

I sat across from her in an easy chair, our interview about to begin.

Rose was dying of pancreatic cancer. And we both knew it.

A middle-aged butler with salt-and-pepper hair placed two tumblers of ice water on the coffee table between us.

“May I offer you something stronger to drink, Lark?” she asked me. She wore a pale blue silk robe with dark blue fuzzy-puffy cuffs. Her feet were curled beneath her and an afghan covered her legs. Her back was to a gigantic fan window with a view of the Treasury Building.

“No. Thank you,” I said. “My stomach’s been roiling all day.”

“Oh, dear. I hope it’s nothing serious.”

I shrugged. “It comes and goes.”

“Shall I have James bring you some mint tea?” She looked up at the butler now standing expectantly off to my right, then continued her stream-of-consciousness. “Now that I’m on all these ghastly meds, I’ve found that mint tea settles my stomach. But I don’t drink it any more. The mint reminds me of toothpaste, and *hot* mint is even worse.”

I giggled. “You’re not making a very convincing case for mint tea,” I said, adding, “I’m fine now. But thank you.”

She smiled at the butler. “Thank you, James. I think this water will be all we need.”

“Yes, ma’am.” James bowed slightly and left through the doorway behind me.

Rose picked up her glass of ice water from the coffee table between us and, after taking a sip, turned her full attention to me. “Did I ever tell you about my tea experience with the Russian ambassador?”

“Rudolph Petrovsky? No.” I sat forward expectantly and hit *record* on my iPhone for another one of our ongoing interviews.

“It was at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner,” she began.

“The night you collapsed?”

She nodded.

“You really scared all of us.”

That was a month and a half ago. Days later, she’d revealed to me, off the record, that she was dying. The news was still a secret, but I’d been able to negotiate an embargo that would allow me, and the wire service I work for, the Associated Press, to break the story when President Will Gannon and his wife gave the go-ahead. In the meantime, our interviews were for the biography I was planning to write about her, even as she was scrambling to assemble her memoir. We were meeting every day.

She slumped back against the divan’s pillows, exhausted, but a bright smile creased her face as she remembered the anecdote. “It was at the beginning of the dinner,

right after Will and I arrived. Petro was seated next to me at the head table. He leaned over to me and whispered in my ear conspiratorially in his gruff baritone.”

Rose lowered her voice two octaves and did her best to mimic the ambassador’s broken English. ““Rose, you should have some exquisite *Russian* tea. Not this weak, mass-produced poison you see here on table.””

She was just getting warmed up. I laughed. It was like being an audience-of-one for a *Saturday Night Live* cold open.

Rose continued. “Petro waved a hand dismissively at the teabags packed into a small container in front of us on the head table.”

As I listened to her story, I studied the first lady. Rose Gannon was only thirty-five years old, but already the fast-moving cancer had aged her. Her face was drawn. Her hair was graying. She looked ten years older. She’d cut back on her schedule and hadn’t been seen in public for a few weeks, but telling the tea story energized her and some color rouged her cheeks.

As she talked, she placed her right hand beneath the folds of the dark green afghan on her lap, then brought the hand back into view, pretending to hold something between her thumb and index finger. “Petro reached into the side pocket of his pinstriped tux and produced a small tea bag. ‘May I?’ he asked.”

Rose continued to pantomime her description. “He then put the teabag into my cup and poured hot water into it, all the while *raving* about how everything Russian – including tea – is so *wonderful*.” She rolled her eyes.

“And how was the tea?” I asked.

Rose made a face. “Honestly, Lark, it was *revolting*.” She threw her head back and laughed in the brash Lauren-Bacall style I’d come to appreciate.

“Did you finish drinking it?” I asked.

She nodded demurely. “I was . . . *diplomatic*.”

We laughed.

“But my *God* it was horrible.” She looked up and her face brightened even more when she looked behind me. “Hello, darling,” she called.

I turned around in my chair and saw the President of the United States leaning jauntily against the doorjamb, dark blue suit coat slung over his shoulder and hooked by an index finger. He wore a blue shirt with French cuffs, tie askew. At forty-eight, Gannon still had thick, black, wavy hair graying slightly at the temples.

I shot to my feet, still gripping my phone. “Good evening, Mr. President.”

“Hi, Lark.” He motioned for me to sit down, but I remained standing.

“Will you be able to join us?” I asked.

He started to answer, but then a look of alarm darkened his face.

“Rose!” he shouted, dropped his suit coat, and dashed past me.

I turned just in time to see the first lady clutch her chest and topple to the floor.