I walked out feeling like one of the war veterans he often liked to include in his reelection commercials. Exhausted, unfocused, more than hungry, feeling the effects of early joint pain in my ankles and wrists after hours of doing my job. I hadn’t even approached thirty yet. Yet my employer insisted I write, rewrite, then rewrite the rewrite of a rewrite for a potential speech to be made condemning protesters of the ongoing invasion of Iraq. Plus, another thirty minutes cleaning up all the tossed or crumpled up papers into the shredder.

The only thanks Representative Johnson gave me when I announced it was time for me to return home was a mild wave, then wished me a wonderful night at the restaurant. Hearing him innocently say it almost made me regret mentioning that I lived with my ‘dad’, let alone that me and my ‘father’ were having a celebratory dinner.

“So, Brian,” he asked, “Where-a-bouts you going tonight?”

“Nowhere.” I shrugged nervously, lying through my teeth as I said, “He’s cooking some mean burgers and we’re going to watch something on the VCR.”

In truth, I did plan on coming home an hour earlier. However, Rep. Johnson outright insisted I stay behind an extra hour. Hopefully, Barney wouldn’t be too cross about my tardiness.

“Oh, believe you me, that sounds like a whole lotta fun,” he laughed while turning a page of his newspaper. “You and your dad have a good time then, okay?”

 “Right.” I forcefully nodded to the older canine, “Thank you, sir.”

 “You betcha, kiddo. Good night, Brian.” Rep. Johnson continued reading the newspaper at his desk, only to be interrupted by his landline phone suddenly blaring. The portly, balding timber wolf let out an annoyed sigh, then toned down his thick Wisconsin accent when answering, “Hello, who is this? Craig, it’s been too long! Have you seen the SCOTUS arguments yet? The oral arguments? I know, I know, liberals will say anything nowadays…and that A.G.’s arguments were the worst I’d ever heard!”

 Rather than wait long enough to be asked to do overtime (again), I made a beeline out of the office. Rep. Johnson had already kept me hostage long enough for me to miss the rush of taxicabs waiting outside. So, I didn’t give him another opportunity to ruin my evening. I flashed my congressional staffer’s badge to the feline security guard, walked through the metal detectors, patiently let him wave his wand around me, then allowed me to grab my suitcase as I walked down the front steps of the Capitol Building.

 Once upon a time, I used to be amazed by how beautiful the rotunda looked. Starting off as an entry-level staffer for Congress, I used to feel like a President each time I waltzed up the pristine marble steps. Years later, I could say with confidence that I no longer viewed the rest of D.C. through rose-tinted glasses. The naivete in me gradually receded the longer that I watched/worked for politicians and lobbyists. I saw behind the façade of American politics, especially when the cameras turned off or the doors closed shut.

 I could go on and on about the various things seen, but it didn’t matter. No matter how shrewd, hypocritical, or Machiavellian my employers often were behind the scenes, I couldn’t blame all of my past employers. If anything, I understood the secrecy on some level. No successful politician or homosexual in history ever lived a comfortable life by speaking their honest mind to everybody met.

 After hailing a taxicab and paying the fare, I let my young mind deflate from the tumultuous day. Sitting in the backseat felt like a hotel mattress compared to the uncomfortable chairs I often sat in while following Rep. Barnes around. I let my tail uncurl into a relaxed position, unfastened my work tie, then allowed my toes to stretch inside those expensive shoes I hated wearing. My eyes gazed out the left side window as the dying rays of sunlight cast the Washington Monument in a purply-orange glow, then to the driver.

 “Sheesh, you sure look beat!” The Labrador behind the wheel commented as looked at me through the rearview mirror. “Long day at the office?”

“My employer’s office suffered a nuclear bomb of paperwork,” I groaned, which led to the dog laughing. I ended up chuckling too. “At least I’ve got tonight and tomorrow off.”

“Great to hear.” the driver craned his muzzle to look at me. “Where to?”

I recited the destination by heart, then asked, “Can you get me there as fast as you can? I’m late for dinner with…her, and the boss insisted I stay an extra hour.”

“Ah, okay then,” the Labrador chirped as he guided the taxicab into the lanes. “I take it you’re late for an anniversary dinner or something?”

A small smile crept up my snout. “You can say that.”

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No matter how much things changed or stayed the same, I still couldn’t get over how beautiful Washington, D.C. looked by nightfall. Walking or driving, nobody was blind to the majesty of illuminated monuments and the spectacular party scene apparently present once it became dark and the strategic street lighting kicked in. Tourists went on evening expeditions to see historic sites across the National Mall, citizens enjoyed the nightlife of a few open dance clubs, a few dedicated activists still carried signs for driving mammals to read at stoplights, some politicians retired to their homes, and underappreciated staffers like me returned to empty dwellings. Luckily, I didn’t have isolation to look forward to, or a noisy roommate.

The apartment I shared with my ‘father’ was a rustic townhouse resting two blocks north of the Potomac. Before the events of 9/11 and the D.C. sniper attacks, I often liked to stroll the scenic distance from the Capitol to our home, especially if the weather was beautiful or if I planned to meet Barney somewhere for dinner. Unfortunately, due to lingering paranoia from Barney and my current employer, they separately insisted I no longer walk back to the townhome on my own. Night or day, good weather or bad, they wanted me to take taxis. Especially after anti-war protests from the prior week blocked traffic.

Neither wanted me to be arrested by accident. Because Barney loved and cared for my safety and because Rep. Johnson sounded like he cared, but likely didn’t want to bother paying bail. Hell, the old wolf would probably ask me to star in a new reelection commercial.

Watching the sidewalk blur past the moving cab made me feel melancholy for those days long since passed. Not even two years since that fateful day on September 11th, and America changed in so many ways. Airport security took longer to go through, the news never stopped talking about the latest terrorist plot being thwarted, and politics seeped in almost anything and everything Americans did in their downtime. It made me miss the old days when all that Barney and I needed to worry about was remaining deep in the closet.

“Have a good night,” the Labrador taxi driver told me after I’d paid the fare. “Have fun on this anniversary date of yours!”

“Thanks.” I nodded to the dog before he drove off.

Sighing to myself, I pushed everything else all to the back of my mind, then smiled at seeing the townhouse’s front steps. With a wearied swish of my bushy tail, I walked up to unlock the entrance door, slipping inside to my true home.

The two-story townhouse we called our sanctuary had only been rented for five years, but it had felt like it was much longer. Call it adoration for the interior layout or how much Barney loved decorating the walls with delightfully kitsch paintings crafted on his days off, all that matter was the older raccoon lived there. As my adopted father and much more.

Closing the door behind me, I spoke out, “I know I’m late and I’m so sorry.”

Movement from the kitchen led to a taller, older raccoon in jeans and a plaid shirt appearing into the connected living room. The disappointment melted into concern and relief when his endearing mahogany eyes fell on me.

“Good Lord, Brian,” he groaned while stepping forward to take my jacket. “No phone calls, no messages to my pager, you had me worried.”

My ears partly folded. “I’m sorry, honey. I won’t forget next time.”

“You shouldn’t have me worried again,” he chastised me as I started walking up the narrow staircase leading to the second floor. “So, mind telling me what Mr. Ted Johnson begged you to write for him this time?”

“Can’t say,” I tiredly replied. “You know I can’t talk too much about work.”

“Hmm, since it’s all anybody’s talking about on the news,” he mused at the bottom of the stairs, watching me walk slowly upwards. No doubt enjoying the sight of my tail too. “I bet it’s either about the sodomy law case or the Iraq invasion, right?”

“Can’t say,” I replied again.

“Are you going to tell me or just be a good little staffer?” He snickered.

“Hmm.” I slowed my steps. Mulling over the consequences of telling Barney and if knowledge of what I’d revised could be leaked, my lips pursed together into a grin as I repeated to the older raccoon, “…can’t say.”

“Anyway, you get refreshed, and we’ll figure out what to do for dinner, okay?”

“Sure thing, Barney.” I smiled down to my rock in the chaotic storm that everyone called D.C.

When we first moved in together, we barely had the clothes on our backs. Looking at the photos and drawings that lined the walls of the second story though, it made me appreciate how much time went by since I first asked the big question. From the time when he said yes to the present day, times had been tumultuous, but they felt miniscule compared to happier moments, like our fifth anniversary trip down to Myrtle Beach, a moment from which hung in a frame on the left wall of the bathroom door.

I lingered for a moment at the photograph. It’d been taken by a fellow friend in the closet, who also brought his husband from Amsterdam to celebrate their European marriage. We faced the Atlantic Ocean, arms wrapped around each other as we posed in front of a crashing wave, wearing only our swim trunks and matching grins. Had I lost weight since then?

A low growl in my stomach compelled me to go take that shower. My sore body guided itself into the bathroom sitting opposite our shared bedroom. Seeing a pair of clean clothes neatly folded on the closed toilet seat made me paused midway through stripping down, and silently reminded myself to make it up to the wonderful man later that night.

Overall, a hot shower and therapeutic brushing of my gray-and-black fur helped out greatly in calming down. My heartbeat slowed, my limbs didn’t crackle like an arthritic masochist, and I didn’t even think about Rep. Johnson. Nor ponder on if the final draft I’d helped write for him would be good enough in the event of Saddam Hussein’s capture. When working as a congressional staffer, one needed to always be hypervigilant at the office. On a whim, the employer might change details of a speech at the last minute, require a meeting scheduled one minute to be rescheduled the next, or follow the congressman across the city for important events. Most often, they were half-baked fundraisers in local businesses.

All the stress of the day washed down my fur, trickled into a pool at my toes, then emptied into the drain. I felt like a baptized baby.

“So, why’d you give me day clothes instead of pajamas, Barney?” I asked the raccoon once I’d made it downstairs into the living room. “Aren’t we staying home?”

I peered over the descending banister to find Barney dressed in casual night clothing too, putting on his evening jacket and snatching mine from the nearby coatrack. His smile lit up upon hearing my voice.

“We don’t have to, Brian.” He smiled, then proposed, “You seemed so stressed out, and I’ve been too busy today at the university too to get the ingredients before coming home. So, why don’t we go out to eat this time? Since it’s our anniversary and all.”

My tail swayed at the thought of eating food we didn’t need to cook.

“Eh, sure. Why not?”

His grin brightened like Lady Liberty. “Sounds good then, son!”

“Ugh, please don’t call me that.” I shuddered as my bare feet touched the hardwood floor at the stair’s bottom step. “Johnson calls me that, and it’s bad enough I have to tell everyone you’re my father.”

“But I am your daddy, in a sense,” Barney said, smirking as I rolled my eyes again. “Now, now, you begged me to sign the adoption papers exactly seven years ago today, didn’t you?”

A heavy sigh escaped my lungs. “Yeah, yeah.”

“Now, are you ready to go out to dinner, *son*?”

My tail shuddered again, much to his amusement. As much as I loved him, Barney was deplorable in finding ways to make the situation weirder than it needed to be.

“Sure am, *daddy*,” I spat out to the giggling mammal, who then helped me into my jacket and caressed my elbows. Staring into his handsome mahogany eyes again made me instantly forget everything else. “I love you, by the way.”

“Heh.” He leaned close to my lips, “I love you too, Bri.”

Barney and I didn’t share one drop of blood. Not a single drop. In fact, the older raccoon guiding me into a passionate kiss happened to be only fourteen years my senior, yet looked the part of a middle-aged father. Anybody who investigated each of our public records would clearly see that, as well as other interesting things like how my biological sperm donor lived in northern Florida with my mother and siblings. Meanwhile, his parents were long dead and his extended family not wanting anything to do with him. If anything, the closest that me and Barney could ever be genetically related was in terms of matching species.

With no state in American allowing gay couples to marry, it made the most logical sense at the time. Having Barney adopt me prevented any intolerable outsiders from getting in the way of inheritance, as well as allowed me visitation rights to a hospital if Barney’s cancer ever resurfaced. The papers gave all the benefits of a marriage without going to a judge. If Representative Ted Johnson ever knew the truth about me and my adoptive father, I bet the old timber wolf would probably suffer a hernia. At best, he’d simply fire me and then blacklist me from ever working with other congressmen again. Whatever helped punish me for being in love.

Our lips parted after a long, sensual kiss, and I smiled goofily up at the older raccoon.

“Thanks, I needed that,” I mumbled.

 “No problem, sweetie.” He beamed, then clasped my fingers with his. “Let’s get going.”