

# Relative Values

by Tanaqui

Edward looked around the reception and tried to keep the slight disgust he felt from his face. After a year spent under siege, and six months before that trying to restore order in the Western states, he was finding it hard to accept that, here in Columbus, government and big business were still holding cocktail parties like the end of the world hadn't happened.

He also didn't much like being paraded around like a performing bear by the congressman who'd dragged him along. But his testimony about Thomas Valente to the House, as part of the hearings into the September attacks and Cheyenne's involvement, had caused quite a stir. Not that it shouldn't have done, but Edward didn't see why that had apparently made him something of a celebrity too.

Still, he had his own reasons for agreeing to attend this particular event. For one thing, even this was better than spending another evening alone in the plush hotel room they'd put him up in—another culture shock—trying not to think about what he'd left behind. Who he'd left behind.

The congressman finished his conversation—Edward had been briefly introduced and had answered the usual inane questions before the talk turned political—and steered him on round the room, shaking hands with people but not really stopping. Edward could see he was working his way toward his intended goal and the person Edward had clearly been brought along to impress: the businessman who was hosting the party.

The feeling was definitely not going to be mutual. After what he'd seen of J&R, Edward had discovered he'd developed a strong distrust of big corporations doing work the government should do. This particular tycoon, conveniently on vacation in Mexico when the bombs went off, had won dozens of contracts to rebuild hospitals and schools and government offices. No doubt skimming enough off the top to more than pay for the kickbacks involved, judging by what Edward had heard about his business practices before the attacks.

As they neared the man, Edward saw him glance in their direction. He dipped his head, and murmured something to the young woman, dressed in a sober black dress, standing at his side. She looked across at the congressman and nodded curtly, before making her way across to them.

"Ashley!" The congressman greeted her enthusiastically.

"Congressman." Her reply was more guarded. Edward suspected she'd been sent over to keep the congressman away. She glanced towards Edward, and he saw her take in his service dress uniform. Her gaze lingered for a moment on his ribbons, although he doubted she knew what any of them meant, and they certainly weren't nearly as impressive as the rows sported by the two- and three-star generals dotted around the room.

She transferred her attention back to the congressman when he reached out and put his hand on her arm. The gesture was over-familiar, and she clearly wasn't comfortable with it, but she allowed him to draw her towards Edward.

"Major, I'd like you to meet Miss Ashley Beck. She's her father's executive assistant. Miss Beck, this is Major Edward Beck, who's been so... illuminating at our recent hearings." The congressman

laughed awkwardly. "Why goshdarnit, I only just realised.... I don't suppose the two of you are related?"

Ashley briefly met Edward's gaze, her careful makeup not hiding her blush. She gave a brittle laugh. "Oh, I do hope not, for the major's sake."

"Actually, we are." Edward spoke quietly, and it took a moment for her to react. Then her head snapped round, her eyes wide with shock. Edward smiled bitterly at her. "Although I don't suppose your father's ever mentioned the black sheep of the family who disgraced you all by marrying a chicana."

"We—?" Shaking off the congressman, she grabbed Edward's arm and dragged him away a few steps to a quiet space at the side of the room. She was surprisingly strong. "You're joking, right?"

Edward glanced back at the congressman, whose mouth was hanging open like a fish. Someone buttonholed him—Edward rather thought it was one of the lobbyists the congressman had been trying to avoid earlier, though they all looked the same—and the man was forced to drag his attention away from the two Becks and plaster a fake smile on his face. Then the movement of the crowd hid him from view.

Edward looked back at Ashley, who was still gripping his arm tightly, and shook his head. "No, I'm not joking. Your great-grandfather and my grandfather were brothers. My grandfather went West, bought himself a ranch in New Mexico. Your great-grandfather stayed in Pittsburgh."

He saw she'd gone pale under her makeup. Her hand fell away from him, and now he was the one to reach out, to steady her. He dipped his head in embarrassment. "My apologies, Miss Beck. That was not the way I should have told you."

"We're really—?"

She was looking him over a little disbelievingly. He could understand that: the two of them couldn't look less alike if they tried. Though her eyes were also dark, she was fair-skinned, and the roots of her long, carefully styled hair hinted at light brown underneath the chestnut. When she brought her gaze back to meet his—with her heels, they were much the same height—he nodded.

She looked across at her father, still holding court. Suddenly, she snorted. "Well, thank god I'm related to at least *one* person I can be proud of." She grinned at him, and tossed her head. "I bet you're really fed up of being shown off by that slimy congressman, aren't you? Let's grab some drinks, and you can tell me all about all the other great people I'm related to."

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