

Chapter Twenty-Four: “Because of You”

In February 2005, John Lewis celebrated his sixty-fifth birthday and invited Barack Obama as a special guest, who had gained national attention after his keynote speech at the 2004 Democratic convention. Although newly elected to the Senate, Obama, aware of the need to increase his visibility in the South, honored this request. Lewis had been an inspiration to Obama, especially during a pivotal moment when Lewis had bestowed encouraging words after a notable public speaking engagement of Obama's.

The birthday event drew significant attendees, including Coretta Scott King and Harry Belafonte, and showcased a budding excitement around Obama's potential candidacy for president, as evidenced by the enthusiasm he garnered when Lewis introduced him. Lewis saw the mounting support for Obama in his city, and he publicly predicted Obama's future presidency. The admiration was mutual; Obama recognized that his political rise was linked to the courage displayed by Lewis over the years.

As 2007 approached, both Obama and Hillary Clinton entered the presidential race, seeking Lewis's endorsement, making him a key figure in their competitive campaigns. Tensions rose during a commemorative event for Bloody Sunday when both candidates scheduled speeches at the same time in close proximity. Lewis's favoritism leaned towards Clinton due to their long history, yet he remained non-committal, recognizing the talents of both candidates as healthy for democracy.

As the race unfolded, Clinton built a strong lead, which prompted Obama's campaign to shift strategies and aggressively challenge Clinton's credibility. This tactic initially alienated some supporters, but as the primaries progressed and Obama's campaign gained momentum, Lewis faced intense scrutiny from younger activists appraising his loyalty to the Clintons amid a renewed movement towards generational change in leadership.

Under immense pressure from constituents and activists, Lewis wavered on his endorsement for Clinton. Engaging in thoughtful reflection, he ultimately recognized that he wanted to align with the enthusiasm for Obama, interpreting the campaign as a significant movement akin to the civil rights struggle.

After careful consideration, Lewis communicated to both Bill and Hillary Clinton about his decision to switch his endorsement to Obama, emphasizing his enduring friendship with them. Upon publicly announcing his support for Obama, he referenced the difficulty of his choice compared to his previous experiences during the civil rights movement. Obama expressed gratitude for Lewis's backing, highlighting his significance in American history.

Despite receiving backlash and challenges in the primary against his old allies, Lewis's eventual endorsement generated considerable excitement among his constituents. The narrative of Lewis's journey throughout the campaign sought to remind us of the complexities of political loyalty and the evolution of the political landscape in America .