

He feels nervous as he descends the staircase. A crowd of people have gathered by the door, a guard of honour to see him out, to make sure he's really going. He licks his lips and offers his wife a slight smile.

'Are you ready?' she asks, stepping towards him and forcing her hand into the crook of space between his jacket and his elbow.

'Almost,' he replies, breaking free of her and stepping back a little. He can hear the media gathered outside. 'Just give me a minute,' he says, shaking his head. 'There's something I forgot.'

He steps quickly down the corridor towards his private office, where the garden view has sometimes provided comfort. People usually hover here, trying to catch his attention, grab a few minutes of his time, be in his presence. Today it's empty. Before him is the quiet of an empty house, the silence of the future.

He steps inside and sits down, clutching at his chest for a moment in panic. He wonders what would happen if he refused to leave, how long it would take before someone came to take him away. For a brief moment, he actually considers it before realising how impossible that is. It's all over, he knows that.

He picks up the phone and dials a familiar number and the voice at the other end seems surprised to hear from him. He repeats his name as if he she didn't catch it the first time.

'Yes, of course,' she says, hesitating. 'What can I do for you, sir?'

'I need a quick word,' he replies, all business. No time for chit-chat. 'Is he available?'

Another hesitation. He can feel the perspiration prickle at the armpits of his shirt as he steadies himself for rejection.

'I'm sorry, sir,' she replies. 'We don't have a call scheduled from you today.'

'It's a personal call,' he says briskly.

'We don't... the president isn't available for personal calls at the moment. Have you...' She hesitates and asks him to hold for a moment, something which hasn't happened in years. There's silence at the other end of the line, no music, and he wonders whether he's been cut off. 'I'm sorry,' she says, breaking in again. 'He's busy right now. Perhaps we could arrange another -'

'Forget it,' he says, hanging up, his hands shaking. He stands up hesitantly and walks out into the corridor again. He feels like crying. He wonders whether they will ever talk again. He tries not to think the worst of his old friend, to believe that he doesn't need him anymore, that he's been dumped like a girlfriend who's outstayed her welcome. His wife's beside him again now and she leads him towards the door, like a hospital patient shuffling along with an intravenous drip by his side.

It opens. It's very bright outside.

I don't think I'm going to like it, he thinks. The future.

Serves you right, thinks everyone else as they watch him go.