

Introduction

*You can't go back and change the beginning, but you
can start where you are and change the ending.*

—ATTRIBUTED TO C.S. LEWIS

I could start this book any number of ways. I could tell you about the way Vladimir Putin toyed with the president of the United States by using a very attractive translator at one of their meetings or when there was a fight with Chinese security during a trip to Beijing and the nuclear football was in the middle of it. Or when President Trump, a solemn, intense look crossing his face, leaned toward me on board Marine One to ask me the most pressing question on his mind: “Are your teeth real?” Or when Mrs. Trump enlisted her staff to reenact a White House event at the new tennis court she’d had remodeled so she could get a better photo of herself for her photo albums. Those albums—those many, many albums—you are going to be hearing about them in this book. Or election night 2020, when President Trump was being advised by a bunch of aides and randos—*Hey there, Laura Ingraham!*—on how to respond to what everyone knew, but pretended they didn’t, was a defeat. Spoiler alert: that didn’t work out too well. Then there were all of Jared Kushner’s schemes and seemingly shady dealings and “the Princess” (as the first lady and I, among others, called Ivanka Trump) trying to grab all the face time with Queen Elizabeth, her “fellow royal.”

For nearly six years I was as close to the Trump family as anyone could be. I saw everything. I saw it all. I saw so much that I forgot some of it until I started writing this book—which you will see is part chronicle of a chaotic administration, part therapy session, and part personal reckoning. I have to get this all out so I can process, in my own mind, what the hell happened.

But maybe the best way to start this story is with the ending.

On January 6, 2021, after several botched attempts, I finally left the Trump administration. To put it another way, I resigned as not only the first lady's chief of staff but one of the longest-serving "hangers-on" with the Trump family over the past six years. They didn't like that too much. Immediately my official phone was cut off and I was placed on a "Do Not Admit" list at the White House. That was something. That crowd couldn't do anything fast or efficiently—except when it came to petty revenge. We were really very good at that.

I WILL BE CALLED many names for writing this book. Traitor. Low-level staffer. Weak. Dishonest. Ineffective. A complete failure. Anonymous sources will label me an alcoholic or someone with addiction issues (I know because this has already happened with the press). Statements will go out that I want attention and am self-serving, a person who wants to profit off the Trump family. More anonymous sources will follow up to say that I was never loyal and leaked to the press—the biggest sin of all in the Trump administration. The president and maybe even the first lady will pretend they hardly knew me or they will sue me—or both. I know all of this, because that is what we did to everyone else who decided to tell their truth or who stood up against things they thought were wrong. It is what I did, personally, to many

people because it is the Trump formula: when you're in, you're in, and when you're out—you're denied and then destroyed. It's something of poetic justice, I guess, that I was once a destroyer myself.

I had been with the Trump family almost from the beginning of their political crusade—maybe the only person in history who worked at the most senior levels at the same time for the president and his wife. I spent nearly every holiday with them and flew with them all over the world. I was with the boss in private meetings with foreign leaders where he would say the most bonkers things and also, to be fair, often fight hard for our country. I was his spokeswoman during the (first) impeachment when he tried to get me to humiliate myself in front of the press and I had to trick him out of it. I was involved in standoffs with members of the Trump family over one thing or another. And I became a confidante of his wife, along with her two children: her son and her photo collection. (She loved her son the most.)

BUT BACK TO THE horror that was January 6, 2021.

Each time I tried to leave the White House for one reason or another, the first lady, whom I felt close to and protective of, talked me out of it. She was very persuasive, including with her husband. At least sometimes. But she couldn't talk me out of leaving that day.

I'd had a sick feeling in my stomach all morning, which was unusual. After five years of being immersed in all things Trump, you grew immune to chaos. Even in a weird way comfortable with it. There became something almost soothing about the knowledge that you are simply captive to a whirlwind you can't

ever control—so you sit back, focus on staying alive, and let the winds take you where they will. In fact, the longer I was there, a sick pride built in me that I had outlasted so many others. What should have been warning signs were twisted into badges of honor.

Still, there was something different in the air this time. I just felt it.

Then I saw it.

I watched as a group of very angry and frenzied people scaled the walls of our Capitol, egged on by the president and his months of conspiracy mongering (thanks, Rudy). They were on their way to behead Mike Pence, kill AOC, or arrest Nancy Pelosi. Who the hell knew? It was scary and sad and sick and in some ways inevitable, I guess. *Of course* this was how it was all going to end.

Still, I had a job to do. I was the first lady's top aide, so I texted her. She had often been the sensible one. She had been the first to react to the violent clashes in Charlottesville, and how many times had we worked together and occasionally even succeeded in getting the president to dial back his rhetoric, to calm one situation or another? I'd lost count. I suggested that we send out a tweet immediately calling for an end to the violence and urging people to stand down. At 1:25 p.m., I texted her, "Do you want to tweet that peaceful protests are the right of every American, but there is no place for lawlessness and violence?"

From the Executive Residence of the White House, literally one minute later and while she was preparing a photo shoot of a new rug she had selected—yes, you read that right—Melania Trump sent me back a one-word response: "No."

I looked at that for a minute. A long minute. Then I looked at the TV again.

"No."

So many times over the years I had pushed back on the cari-

cature of Melania Trump as some sort of Marie Antoinette, cold and cruel and oblivious to the little people over whom her husband ruled. That was not the woman I knew and admired and even had affection for. But that day, as the city of Washington, DC, descended into violence that had once seemed unimaginable, I finally saw the doomed French queen. Dismissive. Defeated. Detached.

It broke me. I took a breath and waited another minute. You learned to do that in the Trump White House: make sure you are grounded and not acting out of the moment. Then I resigned. I sent her an email and cc'd her senior adviser so I couldn't take it back or be talked out of it. I was done.

ONE THING I'M PROUD of that day was that I was the first to resign over the siege on the Capitol. And perhaps news of my departure emboldened others, or so I'd like to think. Shortly after news of my resignation leaked out, others resigned. Then Secretary of Transportation Elaine Chao quit—a big deal, since she was Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's wife. Then Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. Then another. Then another.

Of course the question had to be asked—and it was by many: Why did we wait so long to leave? Why did *I* wait so long? I had stayed through *Access Hollywood*, impeachment, family separation, Charlottesville, accusations of rape and misconduct, and a million other things that had whirled by me in a blur.

I'm not going to have an answer that will satisfy many people, and I know it's useless to try. I was a White House press secretary in the Trump administration. I know how to take my lumps. I know the spin doesn't work. I'll own the things I took part in and why I did them. Some people won't ever understand. Others will pretend that they'd never make the same choices in my cir-

cumstances. Nothing I can do about that. But I'd like to have an answer at least for myself and for those who care to hear it. It's also my chance to talk about my two biggest regrets, which may surprise you in their simplicity. People who want to journey with me through this book and learn about what I saw in the Trump White House should at least have a sense of where I was coming from.

The first thing I'd say about why I stayed is that working in the White House had been my lifelong dream. Being White House press secretary, for any president, was my greatest career ambition. I thought of how proud my grandpa would be. He had worked in the Ronald Reagan administration and was one of the few men in my life who looked out for me and who I loved and admired. I had a chance to go and serve my country—probably the only chance I'd ever get—and I took it. No regrets there. Grandpa would have my back.

And let's face it, *somebody* had to work in the Donald Trump White House. The president's opponents don't like this line of argument, but the administration was staffed by many dedicated people who, out of a sense of duty, were doing their best to make the government function under an inexperienced and unpredictable executive. Remember that even the resistance hero Mitt Romney once sought a job with Trump, auditioning for secretary of state even though he had denounced Trump during the campaign. I watched Romney "interview" at Trump's golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey; then I was there for the memorable dinner in New York City, when the Trump people dangled the job in front of him just to see if he would dance. (He danced!)

I hadn't initially supported Trump; I'd worked for Romney in 2012 and a number of candidates in early 2015 before I settled on Trump. But once I was in it, I was in it. People don't want to

admit it now, but there was something refreshing about Donald Trump when he first arrived on the political scene, especially compared to all the other politicians, who were saying one predictable, poll-tested, lame thing after another. He was bold and poked at convention. He challenged dumb rules that people had just lived with for no reason. He said things people thought but never said. He took positions that no Republican had ever taken, including some shared by Bernie Sanders. During the primary race, he attacked George W. Bush and the Iraq War and railed against the deployment of our military into “endless wars” overseas. He talked about deserted industrial towns in middle America that both parties had essentially abandoned. He made weird asides and pop culture rants that no political candidate would ever utter. Once, on Air Force One, I was sitting with him in his cabin, and for whatever reason, maybe he had just read something or seen his face on TV, but Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau popped into the president’s head. Trump looked at me. “Are you okay if I say this?” That was always a troubling question. Who knew what was going to come out of his mouth? Sure, I nodded. “Trudeau’s mom. She fucked all of the Rolling Stones.” (Don’t ask me where he came up with that one.) Yes, he could be offensive and over the top, but that overlooks part of his appeal. He was also deliberately outrageous, and he was funny. He’d had a hit TV show for years for a reason.

But as a candidate for president, Donald Trump wasn’t so entertaining anymore—at least not to his former fans in the media, who had written puff pieces about him for years and soaked up his exaggerations and larger-than-life persona. Suddenly he could do nothing right. Every day, it seemed, brought a new revelation, a new scandal, a new accusation. Not all of them had equal weight. Not all of them were proven. Not all of them were true. The endless attacks on Trump actually had the opposite effect from what

the more partisan critics may have hoped for: it became impossible to keep up with it all. We became hardened to it. It all started to fall on deaf ears. When you are buffeted by daily controversies and grievances and crises, and sometimes just false information, those who are fighting back tend to form a tight bond. I felt, in a way, part of a family of misfits who clung together, fighting against the established order. We had an imperfect leader at the top, and none of us wanted to see how imperfect he actually was. Just as his critics never wanted to give Trump credit for anything, we didn't want to give any credit to the critics who hated us. Even when they were right.

So we tied ourselves even more tightly to Trump and looked away. As I look back, it felt like a classic abuse relationship—something that I unfortunately know a lot about from experiences in my childhood and some romantic relationships throughout adulthood. I won't get into details, but suffice it to say that I had become an expert at making the best of a bad situation. The secrets you hold. The lies you tell yourself. The ways to keep your abuser from becoming upset with you. The fear, the panic that come from anticipating who he might be on any given day or at any given moment.

At the White House, Trump was the distant, erratic father we all wanted to please. I tended to forgive his sins, forget his foibles, believe that he was better than outsiders were saying he was. When he liked you, when he was pleased with you, he overwhelmed you with charm and generosity and even affection. And when something set him off or someone else did, he'd start screaming. His temper was terrifying. And it could be directed at anyone, whether he or she deserved it or not.

When I saw my phone ring and I knew it was him, I'd feel a panic in my chest. Would he be happy? Would he be mad? What

did I just do (or not do) that might have pissed him off? How can I make him feel good again? I had the news on 24/7 (CNN, much to everyone's irritation), but still when he called I would scroll Twitter frantically before I answered. I had a notebook with me at all times so I could tell him "how things were playing," ask him questions, or transcribe things he'd want me to say.

I was wrapped up in this cycle for years, and to be honest, I had few options anyway. I was a single mom with no trust fund. If I had quit earlier, where would I have gone? Corporate America was not going to welcome someone from the Trump White House with open arms. The Trumps were all I had. At least that was what I believed for a long time. So I stayed and endured and tried to make the best of it. Many of us did. And we saw what happened.

AS I WRITE THIS in the early days of 2021, we have a new president and a new administration. I have been commuting between DC and Kansas for many months now. After my resignation on January 6, I was summarily dismissed by the Trump family and many friends and colleagues in a way that my ego had never allowed me to think could ever happen. To this day I have not heard from a majority of the people I worked alongside for years and years, all for doing the one thing Mrs. Trump had instilled in me constantly and that she told women and children all over the world to do: "Always stay true to yourself."

In the past months, I have been able to reflect on the past six years: why I joined the campaign, why I entered the White House and stayed for so long, what I saw, and, most important, what I learned. This book, which started as a personal journal, is not just about politics or the White House. It is about loyalty and family,

learning and really fucking up, proud moments and monumental regrets, narcissism and humility, love and heartbreak, friendships and loss, and of course falling down and trying your damndest to get back up. As someone once said, “Stockholm Syndrome is what it is when you begin to identify with your captors—they get nicer every day that they don’t kill you.” It is a story that has not been easy for me to tell. There were many times in writing this book when I had to take a moment or a day and focus on something else. Emotions surfaced, and I forced myself to relive some painful experiences.

I realize now that I had devoted much of my time over the past six years to people who in the end probably didn’t deserve my taking time away from my friends, my family, and my two boys, whom I don’t intend to mention again in this book. One of the things I learned from Mrs. Trump is that kids deserve privacy, and that includes my own. I became excellent at compartmentalizing that part of my life. Looking back, it was not only to protect them, but I think to block the pain of how much I missed them every day and the uncertainty of whether I was doing the right thing.

This is not a book, by the way, where you need to like me. I am not trying to win people over or gain moral absolution. But I do think this is something people need to read because I observed a truly unique, scary, bizarre, often funny, riotous, wild, and at times tragic period in our country’s history. I want to answer all the questions I think I would have about the Trump White House had I not been there: What were they really like? Why did people put up with things? What was that marriage really like? What was the deal with the Russians? Was it all as wild and crazy as it seemed?

That era will be talked about and remarked on long after I am gone. I saw a lot of it from a unique vantage point, working

simultaneously for both the president and first lady. I was their adviser, their underling, their annoying nag, their gossip buddy, even sometimes their friend—or so I told myself. I liked them and I disliked them and I miss them and I hope I never see them again.

