



FLIRTING WITH SCANDAL

A Capital Confessions Novel

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CHANEL CLEETON

Flirting with Scandal

Chanel Cleeton

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FLIRTING WITH SCANDAL

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Chapter One

Bachelor Alert! William Andrew Clayton is running for the Virginia Senate. While this blogger hasn't had the pleasure of debating politics with him, I've heard he's seriously fine. Ladies, hurry while he's still single . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

When I was a kid, my mother used to take me to brunch at the Hay-Adams Hotel. When I got older, our outings usually involved a slinky dress and the bar. But when I was younger, before the slinky dresses and overpriced drinks, I thought the Hay-Adams was magic.

We would sit at a corner table, and my mother—perfect hair and makeup, elegant dress that cost more than our monthly food bill—would point out the powerful men who walked through the D.C. hotel's hallowed halls.

I was too young to understand that the tall man with the funny-looking hair was a senator, or that his companion was a congressman, but I knew there was something about them. Something that made my mother sit up in her seat and take notice when they walked by. Something special.

When I asked her who they were, she would smile and say, "They're kings and princes—like in your books."

She would tell me stories about them—some were good, some not so good, but they were all *powerful*. And by the reverence in her voice, seven-year-old me realized *that* was the something special, the thing that made them different.

I was eight when I first saw my father—at brunch at the Hay-Adams.

We were sitting at my favorite table, right near the chandelier. When I looked up, the light reflected off the ceiling in dazzling sparks. In my best dress and shiny black Mary Janes, I felt like a princess.

Suddenly my mother's head jerked up, her lips pursed in a tight line, her gaze trained on a table across from ours.

"Who is that?" I waited for her to tell me one of her stories—how he was a bad king or something scandalous. But what she said instead stunned me into silence.

"That's your father."

Other people had fathers. Mine had been more of a myth. I knew he'd existed at one point, but then he'd left, never to return again. Except here he was, in *my* hotel. Eating brunch a few tables away. *I'd found him.*

I stood up and headed toward him, my Mary Janes clicking against the hardwood floors. Behind me I heard my mother's voice—urgent and shrill—"Jacqueline"—calling me back. I ignored her.

My father sat at the table with three other people. They all stopped eating as I approached, and four pairs of eyes stared at me.

There were two girls—one had pretty brown hair, she looked to be a few years older than me; the other girl was blonde like me, her hair a few shades darker than mine. She looked about my age. A woman sat at the table with them. Her hair was cut in a sharp bob, so different from my mother's long tumble of waves. Her gaze traveled over me and dismissed me, but it didn't matter. Not when all of my attention was focused on *him*.

Like most of the men who came here, my father wore a fancy suit. He was tan, his teeth a bright white. He had my hair, blond, and my eyes, blue. Or maybe I had his. Because staring into his face, I saw myself.

His gaze flickered from me to my mother. I waited for him to speak, for him to acknowledge me somehow, for him to realize who I was—that I was a part of him—but he didn't do any of those things. Instead he turned, looking away, his attention back on the two beautiful little girls at his table.

I stood there, struggling to find the words, trying to tell him I was his daughter, that I'd *found* him, but my voice failed me. A slow heat spread across my face, tears filling my eyes as embarrassment rushed through me like a wave carrying me away.

"Don't you ever do that again," my mother hissed in my ear, pulling me back. "He's a very important man. No one can ever know he's your father. Ever."

"But I found him," I whispered, through tears. "He was lost and I found him."

"He has his own family. He didn't want to be found."

That was the day I stopped believing in bullshit about kings and princes.

• • •

“You want another?”

I stared down at the nearly empty Jack and Diet Coke. “Sure. Why not?”

“It can’t be that bad, love.”

“I fucked up.”

Hank grinned. “You and everybody else in this town. Just spin it. Isn’t that what you do best?”

I downed the rest of my drink, offering him a weak smile. Hank was my favorite bartender at the Hay-Adams. I didn’t come here a lot, the drinks way too overpriced for my college student budget, but I liked to come once in a while. Hank had been serving me drinks going back to the days when I drank Shirley Temples. In a fucked-up way, this place felt like home.

I needed to come tonight. Needed to remind myself of why I wanted to get into politics in the first place. Needed to drink off the epically bad day.

If a senior staffer had made the mistake I did, they would have been given a serious warning. For a college senior—a lowly intern—to make the mistake, well, let’s just say I was terrified I’d be fired tomorrow. My big D.C. career, over before it even started. Let’s not even add in the sad embarrassment of potentially being fired from a job I wasn’t even getting paid for.

“Haven’t seen your mom in here in a while,” Hank commented.

“She’s in the Caribbean with a congressman.”

There were few secrets in D.C., and my mother was basically a legend. She was a groupie’s groupie, except politicians were her rock stars, and elections her sold-out concerts at Madison Square Garden.

“He’s a good guy.”

I smirked, not surprised Hank already knew who I was talking about. Discretion wasn’t exactly Janie Gardner’s forte.

“Sure.” We both knew my mom wasn’t with him because he was a “good guy.”

I leaned over the bar top. “Give me something good, Hank. Anything. I’m desperate here.”

You wanted to know the real D.C. dirt? Bartenders saw it all.

“Let me think.” He grinned, leaning closer, my coconspirator in scandal. “Guess who’s having an affair with a page?”

“Senator Michaelson. Old news.”

“There are rumors of an inquiry on campaign finance.”

I laughed. “Brian at Yellow Bar already told me that one.”

It was pretty hard to stump a girl who’d grown up on political scandals as bedtime stories.

Will

Seriously fine?

Who wrote this trash? A high school girl? It was supposed to be a political blog. Sure, it tended to focus on the scandalous and occasionally steamy, but reducing my campaign to a few words about my looks pissed me off. Nothing about the issues or the good I could do my district in Virginia.

It was bad enough that I wasn’t a native son, my ties to the state limited to my grandfather’s legacy. I’d spent months trying to convince my prospective constituents that they could trust me to represent them, and in a few sentences, some blogger had diminished me to little more than a candidate on a reality TV dating show.

Fuck.

The blog had been a thorn in my side from the beginning. Not that I was alone in that. Half of D.C. had been caught with their pants down in *Capital Confessions* over the past few months. It was just another headache in a long line of them. I needed a drink and a moment of peace where I didn’t have to hear the words, “polls,” or “demographics,” or “election.”

I glanced down the length of the bar, struggling to catch the bartender’s attention. It was busy tonight, even for a Monday. Busy enough that bartenders were slammed filling drink orders. One guy on the end was engaged in conversation with a girl—

Okay, fair enough, I would be, too.

To borrow a phrase from *Capital Confessions*, the girl was *seriously fine*. More than seriously fine. If I were going to use my own words to describe her, I would have gone with *totally fuckable*.

She was tall—legs for days, showcased by a black skirt short enough to show them off. She was tan, her skin the perfect canvas to highlight shockingly blue eyes, and long, straight blonde hair. She leaned across the bar, and her tits thrust forward in her shirt, and my mouth went dry, my tongue all but hanging out.

Danger.

She laughed at something the bartender said, the sound low and sultry, winding its way through me like a siren's call, breaking through all of the D.C. noise.

She was the kind of girl you noticed, and by the smile on her lips, she knew it. She raised her glass to her mouth, draining the liquid in one gulp, and then she turned and our gazes collided. Everything around me disappeared except for her.

She didn't shy away. I liked that. Liked the challenge that flickered in her eyes as she met my gaze head-on. She looked young, younger than I'd expected, and there was something vaguely familiar about her—like I'd seen her around before, and yet if I had, I would have remembered.

Her lips curved slowly, widening into a blinding, megawatt smile. *Christ.* Her eyes sparkled with the kind of mischief I'd been warned about my entire life, and I could practically hear my mother's voice in my head telling me, "This one looks like trouble."

I couldn't afford this shit, not with an election in a few months. Girls who looked like they could chew you up and spit you out—and make you like it—were to be avoided at all costs. Especially during an election year.

And yet I moved down the bar, my feet carrying me toward her. At the end of the day, I was running for the Virginia Senate, not dead.

Jackie

"Incoming," Hank whispered, stepping back with a wink.

I barely heard him.

The guy walking toward me had all of my attention now. I'd noticed him across the bar; it had been impossible not to, but he was something else in motion.

I loved men. Strange for a girl who'd grown up without a father and with a revolving door of "uncles." But I did. I loved the way they moved,

the sound of their voices, the touch of their hands. This one moved with a casual grace that suggested an athletic background—lacrosse, maybe, or hockey—something preppy and something with a stick.

He was tall, six feet or so, dressed in a navy suit and a crisp white dress shirt. He was impeccable and yet . . . his silver tie was just a bit askew, as if he'd been tugging at the knot. His dark blond hair was a bit tousled, like he'd been running his hands through it. He looked older than me, mid-twenties maybe, and then our gazes locked and I stared into the most shockingly *green* eyes I'd ever seen, and stick a fork in me, I was done.

Maybe today was starting to look up.

He stopped in front of me, forcing me to tilt my head up to meet his gaze. For a moment we just stared, sizing each other up. He grinned and suddenly his whole face transformed. It was an endearing, blinding, “trust me” kind of smile, and I was pretty sure with a smile like that he could have anything he wanted. Even me. Especially me.

“Hi.”

Wow. His voice matched the total package. It was crisp and cool, with a touch of New England that made me think of summers in the Hamptons, and polo matches, and things that never seemed sexy until now. Somehow he made “hi” sound like an invitation. Or maybe it was the way his gaze traveled down my body and back again like a hot caress.

I took another sip of my drink before giving him my full attention. I needed the moment to calm the fuck down. I was just tipsy enough to feel flustered and reckless enough to want to play. Dangerous combination.

I turned in my seat, re-crossing my long legs. My skirt hem crept up and his gaze trailed back down.

I flashed him another smile like a one-two punch. “Hi.”

He leaned forward, his arm propped on the empty seat next to me. “I’m Will.”

He looked like a Will, or perhaps more accurately, a *William*. He was the kind of guy who should have Roman numerals after his name. Everything about him screamed old money, prep schools and yachts, and aunts with nicknames like “Bitsy.”

“I’m Jackie.”

I didn’t offer a last name, liked him better for doing the same. Thanks to my mother’s legacy, my last name was one I hesitated to drop in this town. But then again, something about him didn’t quite fit here. He didn’t look

like he was from D.C., like he'd been raised on political intrigue and scandal like I'd been. He was still shiny and new. I liked that.

His eyes narrowed, the easygoing expression wiped from his face, covered by something shrewd, and I wondered if I'd misjudged him after all. There was more there—more than just a nice face and a hot body.

“You look familiar.”

Years of practice kept my smile from slipping even a notch. “Familiar” could mean a lot of things.

“Really?” I affected a bored drawl. If I'd learned anything from my mother, it was how to make men work for it.

“I've seen you around.” He rattled off a list of events, half of which I'd been to, while I used the opportunity to size him up. I realized I'd seen him around, too—at parties, a lecture at Georgetown. He was familiar and yet he wasn't—I'd seen pieces of him—an elbow here, his face in profile there, a laugh heard across the room, a smile meant for someone standing behind me, perhaps.

Given the events he'd listed off, he was somehow peripherally involved in politics, although given the nature of D.C. that wasn't surprising. Still. It should have been enough to warn me off. There was a reason I usually gravitated toward musicians and artists.

“Can I buy you a drink?”

I flashed him a smile, upping the wattage to lessen the sting. “I buy my own drinks.”

He looked thrown. They always were, but on him it was kind of cute.

“You can sit, though.” I gestured at the seat next to me.

He hesitated. “Is the buying-your-own-drinks thing what you use to give guys the polite brush-off, and now you're just offering me the seat because you feel sorry for me, or do I actually have a chance here?”

I laughed. The buying-my-own-drinks thing went hand-in-hand with the paying-for-my-own-meals thing. I knew guys thought it was weird, but if they had a mother who lived her life having her way paid by men, they'd understand.

“Why don't you sit and see?”

Chapter Two

Looking for the perfect place to meet your next boyfriend? The bar at the Hay-Adams has been particularly popular lately, especially for a handsome state senate candidate.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

Smooth, really smooth.

Admittedly, I wasn't at my best tonight. I didn't pick up strange girls in bars. I wasn't even sure this was a pick-up. All I knew was one moment I saw her, and the next my feet carried me toward her. My brain lagged behind.

I sat down in the chair next to hers and ordered a martini. I could practically feel the bartender's amusement as he took my order, his gaze darting back and forth between us before he left to make my drink.

"So where are you from?" I asked, struggling to take charge of the situation.

"I was born here. I've lived here my whole life."

"That seems rare." I didn't mention . . . and kind of depressing. I barely tolerated D.C. I viewed it as a means to an end, a place where I was forced to get my hands dirty from time to time.

"Where are you from?" she asked.

"Connecticut."

She grinned. "I figured. You have the northeastern preppy vibe going on."

Awesome. My campaign staff was working on erasing that.

"Let me guess, Yale? And you played lacrosse?"

I winced. There was something in her tone, something fairly mocking. Maybe I was predictable, what-you-see-is-what-you-get. But there was nothing wrong with predictable. Predictable was dependable, and it was

going to get me elected. Some perverse part of me wanted to tell her I went to a state school in the Midwest and played football.

“Harvard, actually.”

I’d always been honest to a fault.

She grinned. “Was I right about the lacrosse? What position did you play? Center?”

The bartender set my martini on the bar in front of me, sending me a pitying look before walking away. I was beginning to think this wasn’t the first time he’d watched this happen.

I took a long swig of my drink before setting it down, needing the burst of liquid courage. Today had been a bitch, and this girl needling me wasn’t doing a ton for my ego. And yet some masochistic part of me liked her screwing with me. It wasn’t a game I got to play very often . . . ever.

“Midfielder.”

Her gaze traveled down my body, a mischievous glint in her eye, and my dick responded instantly, not giving a shit about my humiliation.

“You look like an athlete.”

“Really?” I drawled.

“I figured it would be a sport with a stick.” Her tone faintly purred with sex and innuendo.

I choked on my martini, the alcohol burning its way down my throat. *Jesus*. I couldn’t remember the last time a girl made a dirty joke—albeit a terrible one—to me. College, maybe? Years ago.

“That’s a horrible line,” I sputtered.

Her grin widened. “True, but you’d be surprised how often it works.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” I let my gaze roam down her body leisurely, taking in the tight little curves and the long legs. I needed to get the upper hand here. Somehow. My voice dropped, my tone husky. “I think we both know you could have any man in this bar.”

“Even you?” Her tone was teasing, but there was a dare behind her words.

And fuck if I could ever back away from a challenge.

I leaned forward, invading some of her space, much as she’d done to me. I was close enough to make out a hint of her perfume—floral and spicy. Close enough that if I’d leaned forward an inch farther I could have captured her full, pink, fuck-me lips. Some girls might have blushed or

backed away, but she did neither. Her stare was unblinking, the same challenge in her voice evident in her gaze.

Her eyes looked like they'd seen too much, lived too much, and yet underneath the hard edge she was younger than I'd originally thought—all barely contained exuberance and energy. Yet another reason this had the potential to be a spectacularly bad idea.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

Shit. She was young.

“Are you still in college?”

She nodded. “You?”

“I graduated ages ago.”

Her smile deepened, a hint of a dimple flashing at the corner of her mouth. “How old are you, Harvard?”

“Twenty-six.”

Twenty-one-year-old girls who looked like she did were pretty much kryptonite for soon-to-be state senators. If my brain were in charge I would have thrown some money on the bar for my drink and gotten the hell out of there. But I didn't. There was something about her, something that felt like a burst of color in a sea of gray.

And then she leaned forward, her arm brushing against me. Her fingers curled around the edge of the pick of olives in my martini. I watched, mesmerized, as one by one, she slipped the martini olives into her mouth, her eyes on mine the entire time.

Fuck me.

Jackie

I wasn't sure what possessed me to go for the olive trick. Maybe it was the Jack; maybe it was the fact that he was hot and I desperately needed a distraction. Or maybe it was just that he looked a little uptight, sitting there in his three-thousand-dollar suit, and I couldn't resist the urge to rumple him a bit.

At first glance he seemed like your average rich, preppy boy. Cute in an All-American way. Vanilla. I tended toward motorcycles, lean muscles, and tats, as far from vanilla as you could get. But this guy—this guy had “nice

guy” written all over him. He was the kind of guy you would bring home to mom and dad—well mannered, classy, definitely not my type. But he took the shit I handed out with a grace that impressed me. I was in full-on bitch mode and he wasn’t backing away. So I upped the stakes a bit, waiting to see his reaction.

Silence hung between us as anticipation filled my body. I was playing with him; he knew it, and I knew it, and I fucking loved the game. His move.

But he didn’t make a move. He didn’t do anything. He just sat there, his gaze intent, speculative almost. His smile had been blinding, but his stare was equally unsettling. He looked at me like he was trying to make out all of my secrets, and for a girl like me that was a dangerous game to play.

I’d had just enough Jack to put this evening firmly into the category of not one of my best ideas. I didn’t do one-night stands. I didn’t do relationships, either, but stranger sex was so not on the menu. He could be an ax-murderer, or a pervert, or really bad in bed. It was time to call it a day.

I reached for my bag, pulled out a twenty, and slid it across the bar top.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Harvard—”

He moved forward, just an inch, but enough that his hand reached out, circling my wrist. We both froze the instant he touched me. His eyes widened, almost as if he were surprised by his own actions.

We both looked down at the same time, our gazes glued to the spot where our flesh met.

His hand was tanner than mine. It was easy to imagine him outdoors—sailing, maybe. Maybe he still played lacrosse. He looked so masculine, and physical, and something about the sight of his hand—long, tapered fingers, neatly trimmed nails—was enough to make my breath catch. His hands, like everything else about his body, were *big*. With him arched over my chair, it was impossible to not feel like he dominated me.

We didn’t look at each other, instead we both watched as he turned my hand over, palm up. For a second I forgot to breathe. Everything around us, the sounds of glasses clinking and deals being made, fell away. I forgot that I was at the Hay-Adams, forgot everything but the image of his hand, so male, so strong, so capable, encircling mine.

I waited. It must have been only seconds, and yet it felt like an eternity. Waited until I felt it, the brush of his finger, featherlight, on the inside of my wrist—stroking, teasing, tempting—unraveling me with the slightest touch.

I went completely still, my body anchored by his. The fire alarm could have gone off and I wouldn't have moved an inch. My eyes closed, savoring the feel of his hand on my bare skin.

It was the kind of touch that was nothing and everything at the same time. It was an invitation, a proposition, a claiming, possession. With one finger, the power completely shifted.

My eyes fluttered open, unable to resist the urge to watch. His fingers stroked the inside of my wrist, lazy patterns and swirls that somehow looked like art. Each touch sent a shiver through me, my nipples tightening, heat flooding my body. I'd never been so turned on in my life, and all he'd touched was the inside of my wrist.

Will

I thought I knew my fair share about sex. Lust. Desire. Ever since I lost my virginity to Allison Daniels in the eleventh grade, I'd enjoyed sex. But as soon as I touched this girl, I realized—

I hadn't been doing it right.

Somehow stroking this girl's wrist felt like the most sexual thing I'd ever done, which was both sad and electrifying, and made me want to touch a whole lot more than just her wrist. There was something about her. Something that made you stop what you were doing and stare. She looked like trouble—the kind you couldn't wait to get into.

She closed her eyes, her lips parting, and I knew I wanted those lips—on me, around me, covering me in her warmth. I wanted to see her face when she came, to hear the moans that would escape from her mouth. Somewhere between the martini olives and my fingers teasing her flesh, I'd stopped caring about my reputation.

I moved forward, my arm brushing against hers, our bodies just barely touching. I had to fight the urge to not press against her. I was drowning in her scent, in the feel of her skin against mine. I was drowning, and I held on to her like she was my lifeline, when ironically she would be my undoing.

My mouth hovered against her ear, just barely grazing the sensitive flesh. She shivered, a soft sigh escaping her lips. Whatever tenuous grip I had on my sanity fled.

“I want you.”

I pulled back, waiting to see her reaction, lust and need pumping through my veins. I felt like the first time I'd asked a girl out on a date—nervous, edgy, afraid she was going to turn me down flat. I could just see it now in *Capital Confessions*—*which state senate candidate was turned down by a mysterious blonde?*

Her eyes fluttered open, a shocking blue framed by a fan of lashes. Her head tilted to the side, her expression inscrutable as she studied me. I prayed that whatever she saw in my face and in my eyes met with her approval.

Did I look the way I felt? Tired, a little strung out from too much caffeine and too many months of celibacy, a little worn-out from the Washington machine. She was so vibrant, and I couldn't help but feel like I was old and boring, and standing here with my dick in my hands thinking, *please pick me.*

She stood up from her chair, my hand still wrapped around her wrist. For a moment we just stared at each other, and then she tugged me forward, and god help me, I let her.

Jackie

I didn't know what I was doing. I walked through the bar at the Hay-Adams, Will trailing behind me. He released my hand as we made our way through the crowd, which was fine with me. I didn't need people gossiping about me, assuming I was just like my mother, looking for the next wealthy man to take care of me. I needed this to be completely unremarkable, especially when it felt like it was anything but.

He followed me through the lobby, silent. His head was ducked, and it occurred to me that I knew next-to-nothing about him. What if he was married? I hadn't seen a ring on his hand at the bar, and yet I was living proof of how many men failed to keep their marital vows.

“Are you married?”

He blinked. “No. Are you?”

“No.”

I studied him, searching his eyes. He had a trustworthy face, but I'd been around politicians enough to know how little that meant.

I grabbed his left hand, staring at his ring finger, looking for a tan line, something to prove he was lying.

He shook his head, his tone wry. "I'm not married. No girlfriend. I haven't had a girlfriend in months, almost a year. You?"

"I don't have a girlfriend, either," I joked.

"I'm serious. Boyfriend?"

"No boyfriend."

"Not recently?"

"Not ever."

His jaw dropped. "You've never had a boyfriend?"

I didn't know why people had this reaction. I was twenty-one, hardly a spinster. Their reaction was even more comical when I explained I didn't want one.

"Are you a *virgin*?" The word came out in a strangled gasp.

I laughed. "No." My voice dropped to a mock whisper. "Are you?"

He shot me a look.

I shrugged. "That settles it then. Neither one of us is a virgin."

"Wait a second." He tugged on my hand, bringing me against his side.

I stared up at him. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "I need a minute. I came here for a drink, and it's like we went from zero-to-sixty in no time at all."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"I don't do this. Ever. I don't pick up girls in bars. I don't have one-night stands."

I met his gaze, my playfulness erased with his words. "Neither do I."

"And yet here we are."

I closed my eyes. "And yet here we are."

"This is crazy."

It was crazy—totally, utterly, crazy. And it felt too good to resist.

I stood up on my toes, leaning my body into his. I wanted to kiss him, but something held me back. I was starting to think his would be the sort of kiss best done in private, in the darkness, where he could strip me bare. So instead I settled for brushing my mouth against the base of his throat, leaving a swift kiss there, inhaling his scent, reveling in the feel of his body against mine. I wanted this more than the reasons why I should talk myself out of it.

I pulled back, but Will caught me, his hands holding me still against his body. His mouth hovered near my ear, his touch sending a thrill down my spine.

“I want to fuck you all night.”

My jaw dropped. He said the words casually, releasing me as if nothing had happened. As if he hadn't just said the single hottest thing I'd ever heard. It was a promise, and a challenge, and a dare all rolled into one heart-stopping sentence that made me want to collect on every single word.

There had been three guys before tonight. My first was my best friend in high school. He'd been sweet, and funny, and by senior year neither one of us had done it, and we'd both wondered what we were missing, so we'd said “what the hell,” which in hindsight had probably not been the most earth-shattering way to lose my virginity, but it had been comfortable, and my experience could have likely been a lot worse.

Two and three had been repeats in college, artistic types who played the guitar afterward and doodled on my skin with a pen. They'd been nice guys, and the sex had been fine, but that was it—it had just been fine.

No one had ever made me feel like they had to have me. No one had ever told me they wanted to *fuck me*. No one had ever made me believe it. Of course, I'd never been this reckless, either.

Now that we were out on the street, swallowed up in the hustle and bustle of D.C., I held his hand. I was afraid if I let go, one or both of us would wake up and question what we were doing. My brain warned me none of this was a good idea, but my body told my head to shut up and go along for the ride.

“So where are we headed?” he asked.

I struggled to think over the pounding of my heart. “Well, we could go back to my place, but I have a roommate.”

He hesitated, and for a minute I felt really young. “I have a town house in Alexandria. If you're not comfortable, I understand.”

My lips twitched. I loved that the guy who just said he would fuck me was now unfailingly polite.

“You mean if you're a serial killer or something?”

“Something like that.”

“Hank vouched for you.”

“Hank?”

“The bartender.”

His eyes narrowed. “When did he do that?”

I grinned. “He wouldn’t have let me leave with you if he didn’t know you were a good guy. Hank knows everyone.”

“And how do you know Hank?”

“He served me my first Shirley Temple. He’s known me my whole life. Trust me, if you’d been a bad bet, Hank would have told me.”

A cab pulled up behind us, and Will stared down at me, his hand on my elbow holding me back.

“Why me?” His voice was quiet, but I saw the question in his eyes, could hear the confusion in his voice.

I could have given him a lot of answers. I could have teased him, flattered him. I could have evaded his question with little to no effort. Instead, I settled for honesty.

“Because when you touched me, I had to have more.”

I turned around and got into the cab.

Chapter Three

Senator Reynolds seems to have taken young Mr. Clayton under his wing.
What's that saying about "the company you keep?"

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

I hadn't even kissed her.

The thought kept running through my mind as I sat next to her in the cab, her leg grazing mine. Her hands were folded in her lap, her gaze trained out the window. Part of me wanted to tell the cab driver to turn around and take us back to the hotel. Part of me was wondering if this was turning out to be the stupidest decision of my life. And part of me was too far gone to care.

This was risky. On one hand I was single, so having sex shouldn't exactly be front-page news. But the *Capital Confessions* mention this morning made me nervous. I was young to be running for the Virginia Senate and I needed to keep my nose clean.

We turned, the familiar sight of trees and cobblestone streets greeting me. I wondered which part of town she lived in, where she went to school. I knew very little about her, and yet I felt like I knew her intimately. Or at least I *would* know her intimately.

The cab came to a stop in front of my town house. "We're here."

I paid the driver quickly, hoping she wasn't going to argue over the bill. I followed her out of the cab and led her to my front door, the pounding in my chest intensifying with each step.

I'd thought about taking her to a hotel, booking a room at the Hay-Adams, preserving the anonymity of tonight. But it felt rude, and seedy, and tacky. And ever since I'd seen her, the image of all that long, blonde hair laid out on my navy pillows had imprinted on my brain. So here we were.

Jackie was silent while I unlocked the door and punched in the alarm code. She followed me in, her gaze traveling around the town house, taking in the décor.

“Nice place for a single guy.”

I actually felt myself blushing. “My mom decorated it.”

She shot me an incredulous look.

“She likes decorating.” Maybe my voice sounded a touch defensive . . . whatever.

“And your mom’s in Connecticut? Let me guess, Greenwich?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but she grew up in Virginia.” I held her gaze. “To avoid you busting my balls over it all night, yes, I’m filthy rich. Yes, I was born with the proverbial silver spoon in my mouth, and yes, my mother is probably a little too involved in my life. But I like my mother, and I’m her only son, so occasionally I do things like let her decorate because it makes her happy and—”

She kissed me.

Her lips were cool, hesitant at first, then bolder. She pressed against my mouth, her tongue darting out, grazing mine. She sucked on my bottom lip with her teeth, running her tongue against it. We stood apart, our mouths the only part where our bodies touched.

I just stood there while Jackie kissed me, caught off guard, powerless to do anything expect drown in the sensation of her mouth on mine. And then I couldn’t take it anymore and I reached out, wrapping my arms around her waist, pulling her against my body. Hard.

Jackie

Whoa.

There was something to be said for playing lacrosse. A lot to be said for playing lacrosse.

His body was all muscle—hard, lean, a little bulkier than I normally would have liked, but the kind of bulky that made you feel small, and feminine, and you were too fucking turned on to care if that was a good or bad thing. He wasn’t my type, not by a long shot, but he was definitely going to be the best sex I’d ever had.

There had been a moment when I was in control, a moment when he let me kiss him, but then it was gone, erased by the pressure of his mouth against mine, his hands molding my curves, his hard body leaning into mine, giving me a preview of what it would be like when he was inside me.

His touch wasn't gentle or light, not at all what I expected after his earlier embarrassment and awkwardness. He held me and touched me like a man who knew *exactly* what to do with his hands, exactly what his body needed. He caressed me like a man who was going to give me an orgasm I'd never forget.

I'd felt in control the whole night—well, most of the night—but when he touched me, everything changed.

Will broke away for a minute, his hands fumbling with my jacket buttons. He pushed the fabric from my shoulders, pulling it down until it fell to the floor. Underneath I wore a low-cut ivory silk shirt. He stared down at my breasts, his gaze penetrating.

My nipples were hard points, visible through my lacy bra and thin silk top. I flushed, warmth flooding my body. There was something about the way he looked at me. I was used to quick sex, fun and fast. But no one had ever stared at me before. Not like this. Not like they were memorizing the shape of my body. I felt a ridiculous urge to cross my arms over my chest, to move away. I felt shy, and that was definitely a first.

He reached out, his fingertip grazing my nipple through the silk. It was the lightest touch and yet it was enough to have me biting back a moan as I pushed my breast into his hand. Who knew gentleness could be the hottest thing of all?

He groaned as he palmed my nipple, fisting his free hand into my hair, tugging on my long, blonde locks. His touch was so many contrasts—gentle and almost reverent, hard and dirty—and I liked them all.

He cupped my breast with his hand, brushing his thumb over my nipple, his gaze intent. My nipples pebbled beneath his touch as he rubbed the silk between his fingers, the soft glide of the fabric against me turning my body into a series of throbbing points, dying for more. He tugged on one and then the other, drawing a direct connection between his hands and the moan they tore from my mouth. And then he lowered his head and captured the bud between his lips and sucked hard, the friction of his hot mouth—*his teeth*—and the silk, driving me mad.

“You’re really good at this,” I hissed.

He laughed, the sound vibrating against my breast.

Boys that looked like he did weren't supposed to be this good at it. Boys who wore suits and ties, and let their mothers decorate their homes, were supposed to be into missionary. *This* was all kinds of freaky naughty, and I so wanted more.

I reached down, running my hands through his hair, stroking his neck, pulling him closer to my body, rubbing up against every inch of his big, hard cock. I wanted him to devour me. I wanted him to never, ever stop touching me.

His mouth left my breast, the cool air hitting me like a shock after the warmth of his mouth. He moved to my waist, tugging at the silk, pulling it out from my skirt. His hand dipped under the fabric, and his knuckles grazed my bare stomach, sending another pull of lust through me. I moaned again, the sound loud and raw, filling the quiet hallway.

"Christ. I want to take my time, but I'm going to lose it if I'm not inside you now."

I gasped, struggling to form words. "Good, because I can't take much more foreplay."

My hands drifted down his neck, running over his shoulders, molding the muscles there, loving the strength and power beneath my hands. I wanted him inside me, hot and hard, filling me, giving me the release I craved. And then I wanted to do it again, all fucking night.

He moved out of my reach, pulling my top up, over my bra, over my head. My hip bumped against the entryway table, knocking over a vase. It hit the floor with a loud crash.

"Shit."

Will ignored it, his gaze riveted to my cleavage. His hands reached out and slipped my bra straps down, off my shoulders, my breasts spilling over the sheer cups.

"I broke your vase," I mumbled.

"It's fine." He reached out, his tongue grazing the sharp line of my collarbone, moving lower. His hands curved under my bra, his head bent as he cupped my breasts, lifting them, his mouth, warm and wet, coming down on me.

"Ohmigod."

My head lolled back, his palm moving to the small of my back, arching me forward, cradling my body in his embrace. My gaze drifted to the ruined

vase, the shattered glass on the floor amid a pile of papers that had suffered a similar fate. Pictures of Will in a business suit lay on the floor staring back at me . . . pictures of Will and . . . my gaze narrowed . . . you had to be kidding me . . .

I stared down at my father's face.

Fuck me.

Will

One minute she was trembling in my arms, her body responding to my touch, the next she . . . wasn't.

I froze, pulling back. Jackie was against the wall in nothing but a bra, her skirt, and heels. Her skin was flushed in all the places my hands and mouth had just been. Her face was pale, the remnants of desire still evident. But her eyes—gone was the light I'd seen at the bar, the mischief that had attracted me in the first place. And all I could think was what the fuck did I do to make that light disappear? I was pretty sure I'd do anything to get it back.

Her eyes opened a bit wider, running over my appearance, focusing on my face, and it was all I could do to not feel like I'd been judged and found wanting.

"Who are you?"

I flinched, stepping back from her. This wasn't a conversation I wanted to have. Will was a safe name. Will was a guy who could afford to take a pretty—okay, stunning—girl home for a night. Will could flirt. Will could joke. William Andrew Clayton, running for the Virginia Senate, couldn't do any of those things. I didn't need a sex scandal on my hands, not this late in the game. But then I'd created this problem myself, hadn't I? And I didn't want to lie to her.

"What do you do for a living?" she asked, her eyes narrowing.

"I'm in politics," I hedged, wondering why I even bothered. There was something in her gaze now, something that had nothing to do with sexual desire. She wanted answers, and for some inexplicable reason, I felt an obligation to give them to her.

She didn't respond, she just continued staring at me with unblinking eyes.

“I’m sort of running for the state legislature,” I muttered, weighing the odds of throwing a, *have I got your vote?* joke in there. She was half-naked in my hallway, I didn’t know her last name, and my dick was the hardest it had ever been. We were a late-night comedian’s wet dream.

Her gaze sharpened, and I watched the exact moment when she figured out who I was. Horror flashed across her face, and for the first time, I realized that running for a state senate seat might be a huge hindrance to me getting laid.

“Virginia.”

I nodded.

“William Clayton.”

“Afraid so.”

She shook her head, tearing her gaze away from me. I thought I heard the word *unfuckingbelievable*, but the blood rushing in my ears made it tough to hear anything over the sound of my own need.

“I have to go,” she announced, reaching down and picking up her crumpled top.

I’d sort of figured this was coming since she’d stopped responding to my touch, but I couldn’t figure out why. *Had I done something wrong? Had I offended her? Did she disagree with my political views?*

I just stood there like an idiot, watching her dress, trying to figure out what the hell had gone wrong.

“What happened?”

“I don’t do politicians.”

Once again, I was four steps behind. “But you live in D.C. You can’t throw a stone without hitting a politician. It’s the city of politicians. You were at the Hay-Adams. It’s like the home of the power lunch.” I was perilously close to begging. I blamed my dick and my apparently absent brain.

“I have to go.”

“Let me call you a cab, at least.”

She shook her head. “It’s still early. I’ll take the Metro.”

I wanted to ask her what was wrong, wanted to understand how we’d gone from naked up against the wall, to her leaving me with a raging hard-on, but I couldn’t get the words out. So I stood in my hallway, watching her walk away, wondering what I’d done to make her leave.

Jackie

There was a special place in hell for people like me.

The evening kept running through my mind on a horrific loop I couldn't seem to turn off. Guilt and loathing filled me as I headed toward the Metro, the sweltering August heat sending a trickle of sweat down my spine.

This was why I didn't do boyfriends. I was a bull in a china shop, a human wrecking ball. He'd been a nice guy, a genuinely nice guy. And the second I saw my father's picture, I'd just freaked.

I could have asked him about his relationship with my father, but that would have highlighted the fact that there was a connection there. My entire life I'd kept the secret I'd almost spilled that day at brunch.

No one was to ever know that I was the illegitimate child of Senator Edward Reynolds.

My strides lengthened as I cut through Old Town. It wouldn't be long before I was in the comfort of my little apartment, back where I belonged. That was the trouble with guys like Will, they made you want things you had no business wanting, things you could never have.

I wished I could go back to the beginning of the night, never should have let things get so out of hand. Never should have picked someone up at the *Hay-Adams* of all places. Will was totally right—what did I expect? I knew better than to let my political life intersect with my personal life.

My internship at Price, Matthews, and Anderson was pretty much the single greatest achievement of my academic career. They were *the* political consulting firm in D.C. Most of their hires came from Ivy League schools, some were even grad students. I'd gotten unbelievably lucky to even get an interview, much less hired. I couldn't afford to screw it up.

Having sex with a candidate in a major state senatorial race would definitely qualify as screwing it up. It didn't matter how amazing his mouth was.

Chapter Four

Washington has been surprisingly quiet lately . . . makes you wonder what scandal will break next. I can promise you one thing, you'll hear about it here first.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

“James wants to see you in his office.”

Shit. This was the moment I'd feared. Yesterday, before my colossal lapse of judgment at the Hay-Adams, I was tasked with working on a new database Price was developing for the coming election season. And I'd fucked it up. Not in a big way, but when competition was fierce, every mistake counted.

I nodded, trying to calm my racing heart as I stood up from my desk. They stuck all of the interns in a massive bullpen in the middle of the room. We each had our own cubicle—a little half wall I was ridiculously proud of. There were twenty of us in the internship program. Five of us would get job offers if we were lucky.

I tried to ignore the stares as I left my desk, my cheeks flushed. Given the competitive nature of the internship, it hadn't exactly lent itself to making friends. Most people were polite, but no one was overly nice. Besides, most days we worked too much to have a social life. Yesterday's bar visit had been a onetime thing.

I walked toward my boss's office, trying desperately to think of something I could say to keep my job. Nothing came to mind. An excuse wasn't going to fly in the land of we-piss-excellence.

I stopped in front of his door and knocked. *Please don't fire me, please don't fire me.*

“Come in.”

I walked into his office, still struggling to come up with a speech. *It won't happen again*, sounded too trite, too expected. And I couldn't exactly make that promise because the database was a labyrinthine mess I despised. *I'll fix it*, was equally shitty since I had no clue how to fix it, and that was what had gotten me into this mess in the first place.

"Good morning, Jacqueline."

I struggled not to grimace. I hated being called Jacqueline. Only my mother called me that, and honestly, I thought she did it more to annoy me than anything else.

"Good morning, Mr. Morgan."

James Morgan might've only been a handful of years older than me, but in the world of political consulting he was pretty much a god. He was also kind of an ass, but when you got your hands as dirty as he did, that was to be expected. For the most part he wasn't a bad guy, just a little slimy. He was also in charge of the interns.

He began speaking, and suddenly nothing he said made any sense. Because sitting behind him in a chair, his ankle propped against his knee, perfect suit, perfect hair, perfect smile, was the man who'd had me moaning in his hallway last night.

Son of a bitch.

Will

I hated this political consulting shit. Hated it with the fire of a thousand suns. But apparently I was polling low, and according to my campaign manager, Mitch, this firm was the best. They advised on campaigns that needed "fixing," or in my case, a popularity boost and higher polling numbers. James Morgan was also a classmate from Harvard, so that helped a bit. But still.

He droned on and on about image and branding, and all I could think was that it was way too early for this. It didn't help that I'd been up half the night with a raging hard-on and a mountain of questions.

"It's a little late in the season and we're pretty full, but I'm going to assign one of our interns to you permanently. She can help out with whatever you need on the campaign and be a liaison between our office and

yours. She's young, but she's sharp. Killer instinct. Even better legs." The last line was accompanied by a wink.

And now I remembered why I'd never really liked him at Harvard. He was a smart guy, but there was something seedy about him. I felt bad for the intern. He was too smart to get caught, but too much of an ass to avoid skirting the line.

"Ah, here she is now. Good morning, Jacqueline."

I looked up and my jaw dropped.

In the bar last night, she'd exuded raw sex appeal; here in the office, she could have been a different person.

Her long blonde hair was bound in a tight knot. It should have made her look severe, but instead it highlighted her sharp blue eyes, her high cheekbones. She was dressed conservatively in a pair of black pants, white shirt, and gray sweater-thing. Her cheeks were red.

Our gazes locked before she looked down at the floor.

James shot me a look that clearly said, *hot, right?*

"Jacqueline Gardner, this is William Clayton. He's hired the firm to help out with his campaign. He's running for a seat in the Virginia Senate, representing the thirtieth district."

She looked up at me, panic in her gorgeous blue eyes. I sat there frozen for a moment, and then I stood quickly, determined to take charge of the situation.

I crossed the room, reaching her in a couple strides. I held out my hand, my gaze solemn and hopefully reassuring.

"It's nice to meet you, Jacqueline."

In a way it felt like I was meeting her for the first time. This girl—*Jacqueline*—wasn't the same girl I'd met last night. She was more self-possessed, more buttoned-up. I got it, respected her ability to compartmentalize work and personal life, but for some reason, it just made me want to know more.

She closed her eyes, and I watched as she fought for composure, my body shielding her from James's gaze.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, as well."

Her words were polite; there was nothing at all that would have given her away as anything but professional. And yet there was something in her voice that seemed to linger over the word, *pleasure*. Or maybe that was just my own stupid hope.

She grasped my hand in hers as we shook, and I was instantly reminded of last night, of stroking her soft skin and watching her come alive with my touch. Her hand slipped through mine, but I couldn't resist the urge to let my fingers graze the inside of her wrist, the exact spot I'd caressed before.

Her eyes widened, her lips parted slightly, and I felt the familiar instant punch of lust.

I stepped away, struggling to get myself under control. This had disaster written all over it. Campaign-ending disaster.

I was young and I was inexperienced, just a few years of working at my father's venture capital firm under my belt, but the one thing I had was my reputation. I was blissfully scandal free—no ex-wives, or angry ex-girlfriends, or history of reckless sexual behavior. Some premonition told me that was about to change.

Behind me, James droned on about the campaign. I alternated between struggling to listen to him and trying to not look at *her*. And still she consumed my thoughts.

How long had she worked at Price? Why did she leave last night?

"That sound good?"

I blinked. James stared back at me expectantly. "Will, does that plan work for you guys?"

I nodded, no clue what I'd just agreed to.

"Excellent." He stood, escorting Jackie and me out of his office. "I'll let you guys get to work now." He flashed me a grin. "Enjoy her."

Jackie

We stood out on the street outside the office as I attempted to process everything that had just occurred. I'd gone in there thinking I might get fired, and left with the opportunity of a lifetime. If I could do well on Will's campaign, it would be my best shot at getting a spot at Price. The fact that they hadn't let me go over the database filled me with the hope that I was a strong enough candidate that they were still willing to keep me on in spite of my shitty computer skills.

I had to make this work, despite whatever awkwardness lingered between us. I had to keep things professional, no matter how difficult it seemed. Even though the light of day and total sobriety had done nothing to

diminish my reaction to Will. We'd crossed a line at the Hay-Adams, and I had no clue how to fix it.

I kept my two selves compartmentalized. There was Jackie who liked sex, and guys with names like Trap who played bass, and there was Jackie who ate, slept, and breathed politics. And now both of those versions of me were standing on a crowded D.C. street with a work assignment who somehow, impossibly, looked *better* today than he had last night.

He wore a pale gray suit, snowy white dress shirt—and *cuff links*—and a slate gray tie. I'd never been turned on by cuff links before, maybe it was just his wrists, but yeah, I was feeling some things on the street today.

"Where are we going?" I asked, ordering myself to focus, to slip professional Jackie on over the girl who was too busy fantasizing about freaking cuff links.

Will—William—whatever, stood in front of me, confusion filling his eyes at my question. For the first time since we'd left the building, he stopped and looked at me, really looked at me.

"I have no idea where we're headed," he admitted with a laugh. "All I could think was 'fresh air.'"

I flushed.

"Do you want to get coffee?" I asked. "We can talk about the campaign." *And how the hell we're going to make this work.* "There's a coffee shop just around the corner."

I wanted this chance to prove myself to Price more than anything, although with everything between us, part of me wanted Mr. Morgan to assign someone else to work on the Clayton campaign, someone who hadn't nearly been fucked up against the wall by the client. But I was pretty sure that conversation would be met with a well-deserved, *you're fired.*

They might have excused the database error, but there was no way they were going to overlook me screwing up with a client.

Will nodded. "Sure."

We walked in silence, the tension that had sprung up between us in the office heavy in the air. I struggled to think of small talk, but nothing came to mind. I'd been so much more comfortable last night, bolstered by the Jack and the lust in his eyes.

Today he was the candidate. Last night I'd known the man.

As the crowds got heavier, Will put his hand on the small of my back, guiding me out of the way of oncoming pedestrians, sheltering my body

from the masses on the street. It was such a small thing, but I'd never had a guy be so protective of me. I shouldn't have liked it, and yet the smallest part of me did.

I followed him down the street, unable to resist admiring the way he moved. He had a natural grace about him. One I could easily see translating to the lacrosse field . . . or the bedroom. I pushed the thought out as quickly as it sprang into my mind.

Focus.

We stopped in front of a small coffee shop, modeled to look like a French bistro. Will opened the door for me, standing back so I could pass through first. I just stood there, staring at him, wondering where this guy had come from. Maybe it was a rich-boy thing. Or maybe it was because he was older. The boys I knew weren't big on opening doors.

I crossed the threshold, my arm brushing against his as I passed by. Okay, fine, maybe it was intentional. Blame the afternoon sun, or the door opening, or the way he looked in that gray suit, or the motherfucking cuff links. Either way I wanted to feel him against me. He stiffened at my touch, but he didn't look away. He just stared down at me with those big green eyes, his expression solemn.

He had the best poker face of anyone I'd ever seen. That would make my job easier, at least . . . and it would make my life infinitely harder.

A waitress led us to a small table in the back, tucked away from the bustling crowds. It was the perfect spot to discuss campaign strategy, and at the same time, I didn't want to be alone with him.

I was an underling, farmed out because I was available and could help out on a grassroots level. I was good at what I did; I wouldn't have gotten the internship at Price if I weren't. But I still felt like I was just playing at politics, still learning the ropes. Price's philosophy was to throw their interns out into the deep end. Those who sank wouldn't make the cut. The rest of us had a fighting chance for a job offer. This was my sink-or-swim moment—I had to keep my eye on the prize, had to pretend I was cool, calm, and collected.

That was way too many platitudes. I was officially losing it.

I slid into my chair, crossing my legs at the ankle, trying my best to look professional and ignore the memory of me up against his wall, my nipples in his mouth . . .

I flushed. Time to start over.

I forced myself to look at him. “So I think the first thing we need to do is figure out what you want from me.” *Shit.* “I mean what I can do for you.” *Ohmigod.* “How I can take care of you.” *Kill me the fuck now.* “Your campaign, I mean. How I can help your campaign.”

The corner of his mouth turned up.

“You know what I mean,” I muttered miserably.

“I do. So, *Jacqueline?*”

Of all the places I thought he would start, I hadn’t figured he’d focus on my name.

I made a face.

“You don’t like it.”

“Only my mother calls me Jacqueline . . . and the staff at Price. It was on my paperwork since it’s my legal name, and it sort of stuck. I didn’t want to correct anyone, so I just went with it.”

And now I was vomiting words.

“But you don’t like it.”

I shrugged. “It’s just a name. I didn’t want to start off on a bad foot.”

“Why ‘Jacqueline’?”

“She thought it was pretty.” My answer was way too glib; I knew it and he knew it. But I’d given that answer a hundred times. It was my standard, canned response, and no one had ever questioned it.

He did.

“That’s not why.”

My eyes narrowed.

“Why’d she name you Jacqueline?”

“Why do you care?”

“I’m curious. Humor me.”

There was something in his voice, something that reminded me of how he’d taken over our kiss, how powerful he’d been, his body looming over mine. He seemed laid back and easygoing . . . until he didn’t.

“She named me after Jacqueline Kennedy.”

Surprise flashed across his face.

“I know, I seem more like a Marilyn, not a Jackie.” My mother loved to make that joke. You’d think political mistresses would be a sore spot with her, but she had a remarkably poor sense of self-awareness.

“Actually, you seem like the type of girl who should have her own name. You shouldn’t be named after anyone else.”

I gaped at him.

“Does your mother know you hate being called Jacqueline?”

“Yes.” My tone became considerably more frigid. This was one topic that was definitely off-limits.

“You don’t get along?”

I sighed. “Let’s just say she’s not someone I would have decorating my place.”

He flushed, and I knew we both thought of last night. “Fair enough.”

I couldn’t keep this up. At some point we were going to have to deal with what happened between us. I couldn’t work with him if this awkwardness remained, and this assignment was definitely an audition. I needed this to go well. I needed to get him elected. I sucked in a deep breath and put my big-girl panties on.

“Look, we can dance around last night or we can both just deal with it head-on and move forward. It was one of those drunken, stupid things that probably shouldn’t have happened—more like *definitely* shouldn’t have happened given our current situation—but it did, and it’s just going to be awkward if we don’t address it. I’m sorry I flirted with you. It was a mistake, and it won’t happen again.”

He wasn’t reacting.

“And I’m sorry I left so quickly. It just wasn’t working for me,” I lied, feeling like an ass, but pushing on. The only way we would be able to work together was if we were both really clear that there was going to be nothing between us.

Will stared at me, his expression completely inscrutable. On one hand I envied him—I could use a bit more inscrutable in my repertoire. And it was definitely going to help with his campaign. On the other hand, he was only prolonging this, and my nerves were already frayed.

“I can step down from your campaign if you want. Or you can fire me. Tell Mr. Morgan it wasn’t working or something.” To hell with my pride. “But honestly? I really, really need this internship to work. They hire like a handful of people, and if you’re going to work in political consulting, Price is the place you want to be. Did you see what they did with the last presidential election? They’re amazing. Seriously amazing.”

More word vomit. *Shit.*

One eyebrow rose, just a shade darker than his hair.

“Are you finished?”

Chapter Five

Rumor has it that candidate Clayton has hired political powerhouse Price, Matthews, and Anderson to assist with his campaign. Is Clayton's campaign in trouble, or is he just looking to solidify his bid?

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

I wanted to kiss her.

I couldn't, of course. We were in public, and she was working for my campaign now, and honestly, everything about her screamed *trouble*. But even that didn't make the want go away.

The waitress came and took our drink orders—me: coffee, black; her: a Diet Coke—and then left us alone again.

Well.

I didn't know where to start. I wanted to know why she left last night, wanted to touch her. But everything had just become more complicated. She was now kind of an employee, and in the day seemed light-years younger than she had last night.

"Don't quit. There's no need for that. We can work together without any issues."

Relief flashed across her face. "Thank you. This internship is really important to me. I can't afford to screw it up."

"No problem. How long have you been at Price?"

"Just a few weeks. I started right before the fall semester began. I'm doing the internship full-time until December, and then I have another semester of classes before I graduate in May."

"And you like it?"

Her lips twitched, her face relaxing slightly. "You say that like it's impossible to believe."

I shrugged. “It just all seems a little bit . . .” I searched for the right word. “Cutthroat.”

She laughed. “Oh, it is.”

“And you like that?”

“I like the challenge. I like the constant bustle of it all. It’s all a big game and yet, it’s not. The stakes are high, and what you’re doing really matters. You’re helping change people’s lives, to influence policy. It’s an amazing opportunity.”

Her eyes lit up with each word, her voice getting more and more excited. Passion oozed through her pores and I was captivated.

“Okay, I’m convinced. If you bring that kind of enthusiasm and intensity to the campaign we’ll be in excellent shape.” I leaned back in my chair. “What do you need from me?”

Jackie reached down to her bag, pulling out a notebook and pen. “For now, just the basics. I need to have a good idea of who you are both as a person and as a candidate.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Tell me a bit about your childhood, your family, where you grew up, that sort of thing.”

“Well, you already know I grew up in Greenwich.” She grinned. “I have three sisters—all younger. My dad runs a venture capital firm. My mom does a lot of charity work.” I hesitated. “And decorates town houses in her spare time.”

Another smile, this one more blinding than the last. It felt amazing knowing I was responsible for that, even if it was at my own expense.

“I went to Exeter and then Harvard. I studied government. After that, I worked with my dad at his venture capital firm. It was fine, but ultimately not my thing. I started getting involved with a few charities, enjoyed it, and started thinking about running for office. I moved to Virginia two years ago. My father’s firm has an office here. What else? I’m a Libra. I hate baseball, love Italian food, would rather be cold than hot, and find all of the attention that comes with running for office a bit overwhelming.”

She laughed again, and I thought, *that needs to keep happening.*

“Why Virginia? It sounds like you have a lot of ties in the Northeast—you grew up there, went to school there. Why didn’t you move to Connecticut to run for a state senate seat there?”

There was no way to say it without sounding like an asshole. “My mother was a Harrington before she married my father.”

Jackie’s eyes narrowed for a beat. “Wait a minute. Like John Harrington?”

I nodded. “He’s my grandfather.”

Her mouth opened and then closed again. “Your grandfather was vice president of the United States.”

“Yep.”

Her expression was a mixture of shock and awe.

My grandfather was eighty-one now, but he was still loved in the state of Virginia. He’d been a senator here before he became vice president, and had returned to the state once he finished serving. He divided his time between his town house in Georgetown and his racing farm in Upperville.

She was silent for a moment as if attempting to process this new information about me. She jotted something down in her notebook.

“How involved is he with your campaign?” she asked.

I shrugged. “He comes out to some events. He’s busy with his horses, and his health isn’t great, but he still has ties here. He and his friends were the ones who approached me with the idea to run for the thirtieth district. I was already living in Alexandria, so it seemed like a good fit. I spent a month every summer for most of my childhood at his farm. In a way Virginia feels like home, too.” I took a sip of my coffee. “So that’s me in a nutshell. Give me something about you so I don’t feel totally self-involved just talking about myself.”

“You’re supposed to sound self-involved. You’re running for political office, remember?” she teased.

“Ouch. I thought you loved politics.”

“I do love politics. I didn’t say I loved politicians.”

“I don’t get the difference.”

She grinned. “You’ll figure it out.”

“I bet you’ve seen a lot in this town.”

She laughed. “You’re one to talk. Your grandfather was vice president of the United States. I have a hard time believing you weren’t raised on this stuff from birth.”

“Honestly, I wasn’t. I was a kid. Apparently I went to the White House once, but I was way too young to remember it. Afterward, as I got older, my grandfather had already retired from politics and I spent my time on the

farm with them. My grandmother hated D.C. She said she'd served her time and was happy with her horses."

Jackie smiled. "So I was right about you."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't have that perpetually jaded look about you that the rest of us have. You're right, I have seen a lot here—the good and the bad. That's how I can tell you're one of the good guys."

I was ridiculously pleased to hear her say that.

"My opponent is fighting dirty, so I'm not really sure how helpful being 'one of the good guys' is going to be."

"Well, that is true. His campaign has all of the forward momentum. We need to spin it, give you a chance to get your message across. We'll look at increasing your mailings, come up with some more aggressive talking points. Find a way to get your message across while also highlighting your opponent's pitfalls."

I nodded. "Our mailers have not been good lately. That was one of the reasons we hired Price in the first place. I was told you're the best."

"We are." Jackie grinned. "Okay. Let's go over the issues."

For the next hour we talked policy. I learned that she was smart—really, really smart. James had been right—she had an instinct about her I lacked.

"You're really good at this."

She looked up from her notepad. A rush of pleasure covered her face before it disappeared.

"Seriously, though, if Price doesn't hire you after your internship is up, they're crazy."

She flushed. "Thanks."

"You know, you still owe me something about you."

She laughed. "I told you, it doesn't work that way."

"Well, maybe it should. Tell me something about you. Something no one knows."

Jackie

I was so turned on it wasn't even funny. We'd been sitting here for an hour now—talking policy which was basically my foreplay—and with each

minute that passed, I became more and more interested in reaching across the table and picking up where we'd left off last night.

This guy was going to kill it with female voters. He was funny, and smart, and just self-deprecating enough to be a fresh change from the usual BS we saw. Not to mention he was easy on the eyes. Even more than that, when he talked to you he seemed like he was really listening, like he really cared. It made him irresistible.

"Come on. Give me something here," he cajoled.

I flushed. We needed to keep this professional; the focus needed to be off of me.

"I'm really boring. Nothing to tell."

He laughed. "I don't buy that for a second."

I also kind of liked that he called me out on my BS.

I sighed. "I'm also a Libra."

"Scandalous."

I rolled my eyes. "Well you've already seen me without my top on, so I think we surpassed scandalous a few steps ago."

Shit. It was one of those moments when I wished I could stop the tape, rewind, and erase the last thirty seconds or so from my life. That was what was dangerous about him. He was laid-back and it was easy to feel relaxed around him. He was nonthreatening . . . until he wasn't. And now I was thinking about last night, and me naked, and his body pressed against mine, and heat flooded me, and oh god, he knew, didn't he?

I winced. "I'm really bad at this. I've never done this before. I'm normally the world's biggest advocate for separating your personal and professional life, and now they're blending together—"

"No need to apologize. It's nice to know I'm not the only one."

Eyes wide, I stared back at him.

"I've been distracted for the last hour." His mouth curved. "Actually, before then. Since I saw you in James's office. Okay, that's a lie too. I've been distracted since I saw you across the bar."

My pulse picked up a notch.

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable or be inappropriate, but I can't stop thinking about you."

The words came out in a rush, like it was a secret he was sharing only with me. I didn't know how to respond.

“You’re uncomfortable.” Guilt flashed across his face. “I didn’t mean to upset you—”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” I met his gaze. “I’ve been a little distracted, too,” I admitted.

He sighed. “This is crazy, isn’t it?”

“Probably. Yeah.”

He grimaced. “Let’s start over, okay? Let’s pretend I haven’t seen you naked.”

Jackie

His words kept running over in my mind, like a song on repeat—

“Let’s pretend I haven’t seen you naked.”

Not exactly the most auspicious start to my internship.

I glanced at my watch. It was eight p.m., and the office was still full. Political consulting didn’t know normal working hours. We ate take-out Chinese at our desks for dinner and worked well past the midnight hour. Besides, I definitely needed to put in the extra time after last night.

I stared at my computer screen, struggling to concentrate on the words in front of me. Tomorrow I’d head over to the Clayton campaign headquarters to start helping them, and I wanted to have as much information as I could. Our coffee break had helped. My notepad was filled with interesting facts about Will, including his impressive legacy; but more than that, I loved how interviewing a candidate allowed me to get a feel for their personal style. You could tell so much more about a person by how they responded to your questions.

For all intents and purposes, Will Clayton appeared to be the real deal. He was confident without being arrogant, smart enough to be a good leader without being too academic for voters. He was clearly ambitious, and yet he wasn’t an asshole. He was almost too good to be true.

If he had skeletons in his closet, I wanted to know about them.

The Internet search didn’t bring up anything crazy. He attended charity events and was apparently heavily involved in philanthropic work. There were a few pictures with girls on his arm, but they were all perfectly appropriate—hyphenated last names, polite smiles, shiny hair, elegant but conservative clothes. I ran a few more database searches, waiting for the

other shoe to drop—the arrest record from his time at Harvard, the DUI . . . something like that. But after another hour of searching, nothing came up.

He was either so good that he didn't have secrets, or he was adept at burying them. Either way, it was my job to find out before his opponent did.

“Working late tonight?”

I looked up from my desk, my gaze connecting with Charlie Douglas. I grimaced, not missing the inflection in his voice. I wanted to respond with something biting, but instead I did what I always did when Charlie spoke to me—I counted to ten before responding.

“Yep.”

“The Clayton campaign, right?”

I moved my elbow over the notebook, blocking out my writing. Technically we all worked for the same team, but I didn't trust Charlie as far as I could throw him. He'd made it clear he would do anything for a spot at Price, and I didn't doubt that meant screwing me over.

“Yep.”

“It's gotta be nice to be off the database.”

No one had said anything about yesterday's screw-up, but apparently that was about to change.

“I noticed you had some issues with it,” Charlie continued.

Time to start counting.

“If you ever need someone to show you the ropes, just let me know.” He shot me a grin that was no doubt meant to send my heart aflutter. I struggled not to gag. “I'm sure all those numbers can be confusing.”

I pasted on a saccharine smile to match his tone.

“Sure thing.”

Ass.

No doubt him “helping” me would lead to me making an even more colossal error—one that would get me kicked out of the internship program. Hell, that kind of a move would probably be lauded here. They started us out young, training us to embrace their “take no prisoners” approach.

I turned away, my attention back to the computer screen in front of me. A few more searches and then I'd move on to interview prep.

Will—Mr. Clayton? I had no idea what to call him in public—had an interview tomorrow evening. It wasn't anything big, but I wanted to do my part to make sure he was ready.

I scrolled through a few political blogs to see if there were any recent posts about him. Nothing major, a few mentions here and there, but nothing scandalous. I skimmed the most recent posts, searching for any other news I may have missed.

My phone rang. I stared down at the caller ID, feeling the same combination of guilt and avoidance I always did when her name popped up. I grimaced, my finger hovering over “accept.” It didn’t really matter. She’d keep calling until I answered.

“Hello, Mother.”

“Did you hear?” Her voice was full of the kind of excitement that could only mean one thing—something scandalous had happened in D.C., and somehow my mother was in the thick of it. I hated that half my leads came from her.

“What happened?”

“They’ve called off their engagement.”

“Who?”

“Blair and Thom.”

I froze. My mother prattled on in my ear, but I’d stopped paying attention the second she said her name. I typed in the *Capital Confessions* address and saw the post right at the top—

Called off! Blair Reynolds and Thomas Wyatt III End Engagement at the Altar

Beneath the headline was a picture of a stunning brunette. She was two years older than me, her dark brown hair pulled back in a sleek, tight bun. Her skin was like porcelain, her eyes chocolate brown, her lips a soft red that gave the impression she never had to wear lipstick. She looked like one of those expensive, old-fashioned dolls. She was impeccably dressed, her slim body in blue, an enormous teardrop-shaped diamond on her left hand. I recognized the picture from her engagement announcement, even though I’d never actually spoken to my half sister. In fact, I was pretty sure she had no idea I existed.

“Your father must be freaking out. This kind of publicity can’t be good for his campaign.”

No, it wouldn’t be. As much as I felt badly for Blair, I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of satisfaction that the daughter he did acknowledge—the perfect one—was screwing up his Senate reelection campaign.

“He’s not my father.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course, he is.”

I rolled my eyes. In a biological sense, yes, he was my father. In every other sense of the word, he was nothing to me.

“Are you still in the Caribbean?”

“No, we got back to D.C. last night.”

I tried to fight the building resentment. It was her life, her choices. But I hated how much she dumped on me, the messes she left behind for me to clean up. Hated that I still took care of her, even though I knew she’d never change.

“Have you been back to your apartment? I paid your rent.”

“There was no need to do that. Randy would have paid it.”

Maybe. Sometimes they paid her bills. Other times they took her on expensive trips, bought her jewelry, and dumped her when they got home. I didn’t blame them. I’d be the first to admit—a week alone with my mother was an endeavor.

“Well, your apartment manager called me. You had my number listed on your application, and they couldn’t get ahold of you.”

“We were in the Caribbean.” Her voice had that slightly petulant tone I’d grown familiar with. My mother thought being beautiful gave her a free pass on life. Sadly, at times it was true.

“It wasn’t just this month. You were behind for three months.” To the tune of six thousand dollars, which had severely depleted my bank account. “They were about to evict you.”

“That’s just silly. Of course I would have paid. It’s not like I didn’t have the money; I’ve just been busy. I’ve been thinking of moving, anyway. The closets in that place are tiny.”

I didn’t even bother answering. The closets were fine. Just like the bathrooms had been fine in her last place, her neighbors not too noisy in the place before that. This was her fourth move in two years.

“Well, I have to go. We’re going out for drinks. Bye, darling.”

I stared down at the phone in my hand, annoyance coursing through me at the sound of the click on the other end of the line. I didn’t know what pissed me off more—that I’d paid the money, that she didn’t even bother to say thank you, or offer to pay me back, or that she didn’t ask where her twenty-one-year-old daughter had gotten an extra six thousand dollars.

Apparently my secret life wasn’t so secret anymore. That she knew, or even suspected, was beyond dangerous. Thanks to my job as one of the

anonymous bloggers at *Capital Confessions*, I was one of D.C.'s biggest sources for scandal. If anyone found out about my blogging, my internship with Price—and my career—would definitely be over.

Chapter Six

Rumor has it the Clayton campaign has taken over an entire building on Adams Street. The young, aspiring state senator seems to be bringing his A game. Hopefully nothing trips him up . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

I loved Will’s campaign headquarters as soon as I stepped inside. The building housing his campaign staff was nice, but nowhere near as over-the-top as Price. It was comfortable, modern, and clean, with shiny Macs and furnishings that looked like a slightly fancier version of Ikea.

The staff seemed young, and everyone had a smile on their face, as if they actually enjoyed what they were doing. But that wasn’t even the best part. The best part was that Will’s campaign manager was Mitch Anders, my own personal hero.

Mitch was a legend in politics—a throwback to old-school consulting. I figured Will’s grandfather played a role in luring Mitch to the campaign; he’d worked on a few of Vice President Harrington’s senate campaigns years ago.

We met briefly as one of Will’s assistants showed me around the office, and it was all I could do not to freak when I shook his hand. But then the candidate himself came out of his office and hero worship went straight out the window.

Today Will wore dark gray trousers and a white dress shirt—no jacket, no tie. His collar was open, the top button unbuttoned, exposing his tanned neck. I shoved my hands into my pants pockets.

Will grinned at me and nodded toward his assistant. “I can take it from here, Jeff. I’ll show Jackie around.”

Oh god.

Will led me around the office, his arm hovering near the small of my back, pointing out the staff offices and conference rooms. He led me down a long hallway, opening a door to my left. His shoulder brushed against my arm and it took everything I had to keep from leaning into the curve of his body. So much for willpower.

“This is the kitchen and break room.” He closed the door behind us. He walked over to a small stainless steel refrigerator in the corner. “Word of warning, we have a food thief.”

I laughed. “Duly noted. Thanks.”

“Hey, it’s not a joking matter. I’ll have you know my yogurt was stolen on five separate occasions, including after I put my name on it. I finally had to start keeping food in my office.”

My lips twitched. “The horror.”

He grinned, moving closer to me, his mouth grazing my ear. His voice dropped down to a mock whisper. “I stress-eat when I’m nervous. Oreos—Double Stuf, white fudge, you name it, I have to have it. I have a bit of a sweet tooth.”

I wanted to laugh at him. It was cute, and boyish, and there was something about him that made it impossible for me to not want to grin. But then he moved closer and laughter became the furthest thing from my mind.

His scent filled the air around us. His body just barely brushed against mine, enough to feel his hard muscles. I’d been in his arms before; I knew what his body felt like, how his lips would kiss, his mouth would taste. And fuck, I wanted more—

I tilted my head up, moving backward. My ass hit the kitchen countertop. Our gazes met.

Desire filled his gaze. It was the same look I’d seen that night at the Hay-Adams. The same look that began in his eyes and ended with me topless in his hall. *Gah.*

“We shouldn’t do this, right?” My voice trembled over the words, asking for permission when I should have been pushing him away. My brain checked out as my body took over.

His jaw clenched. “Probably not. Not here. Not like this.”

It should have been relief that filled me. He was right; this was such a risk. I couldn’t afford to screw up my career, didn’t want to have the same reputation as my mother.

Besides, he had no idea what he was getting himself into. He didn't realize I was a political grenade. Any woman linked with him would be thoroughly investigated by the media, by his opponents. I was the illegitimate child of one of the most powerful politicians in the country, a man who had never deigned to acknowledge my existence. Will didn't deserve to get involved with someone like me.

I struggled to smile, despite the disappointment filling me. "Well, thanks for the tour and for the warning on the food thief. I'll hoard all dairy products at my desk."

He pivoted, walking toward the door. *Okay.* I pushed off the countertop, ready to follow him, but he didn't open it. Instead, he turned the lock with a decisive click and turned to face me.

Will

Once again, my dick was doing the thinking. I didn't even care. Maybe I could have resisted her if I hadn't already had a taste. Maybe I was an idiot to think it even mattered, that I'd ever stood a chance.

I walked toward her, shoving my hands in my pockets. I'd barely been able to sleep last night thinking about today, wondering how I was going to work around her, and when all was said and done, I hadn't even lasted an hour.

Jackie stared at me wide-eyed, her ass leaning against the edge of the countertop, her tits thrust forward in her sweater. I wanted to lift her up and set her on the counter, wrapping those mile-long legs around my waist. I wanted to bend her back and feast on that gorgeous mouth, on those full pink lips.

I wanted everything, so I shoved my hands in my pockets, and waited to see just how fucked up this really was.

"I want you."

Her lips curved. "I know."

I swallowed nervously. "I get that it's a weird situation. I'm not technically your boss, but you're here in my office, and I don't want you to feel like I'm pressuring you, and if you aren't interested, this ends now."

"I don't want you to think I'm the guy who preys on unsuspecting females at work, or that I'm some sleazy politician using his career to get

laid. I mean yes, I absolutely want to have sex with you, but I want it to be because you want it, and not because—”

“Will?”

God, I kept losing my fucking mind around her. She had to think I was an idiot. “Yeah?”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Jackie

I expected him to pounce, waited a beat for the feel of his mouth on mine—harsh, demanding, passionate. Instead I was surprised.

Will closed the distance between us, stopping inches away from my body. He leaned down, his palms resting on either side of my hips against the countertop. He surrounded me.

His face was so close; his lips tantalizingly near. I wanted to make the first move, wanted to grab him and haul him toward me until I got what I wanted. But I didn’t. He didn’t let me. There was something in his gaze that gave me pause. He may have been nervous a minute ago, but he was definitely in control now.

I closed my eyes, giving myself over to the sensation of him—his scent, the brush of his dress shirt against my hand, his hard body hovering over me.

His mouth grazed mine, my mouth opening immediately. I wanted this kiss with a desperation I’d never felt before. I’d kissed plenty of guys; hell, I liked kissing. But I’d never craved it. It was always just a prelude to the main event. Now it felt like everything.

I kept my hands at my sides, our bodies barely touching except for his lips brushing against mine. His tongue licked out, tracing the shape of my mouth. His teeth nipped my bottom lip and his tongue followed with soothing strokes. I moaned, the sound swallowed between us. And then his tongue slipped in, changing the kiss, giving me what I wanted.

Will groaned, his mouth devouring mine, his body pushing me back against the countertop. My hips hit the edge, my back bending. He broke away from the kiss for a second, his hands moving to my hips, lifting me up onto the countertop so my ass perched against the cool granite. He pushed

my thighs apart, moving between my legs and settling there, every inch of his hard cock rubbing against me.

“Fuck me,” I whispered against his mouth, my hands stroking up his neck, gathering in his hair, tugging on the ends. I couldn’t resist. I moved forward, my breasts brushing against the front of his shirt, my nipples pebbling instantly. I raked my teeth across the skin at the base of his neck exposed by his shirt’s opened buttons. Will’s fingers fisted in my hair, pulling my head back, his lips swooping down to ravage my mouth.

Gone was the restraint, the teasing. *This* was what I wanted. To get to the man under his preppy, polished facade. I didn’t know what it was, probably some slightly fucked-up part of me, but I wanted to rumple him, watch him get messy, shatter his control. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him even closer, wanting him inside me, filling me. He throbbed against me and I rocked forward, desperate to come.

“Fuck. We can’t do this. Not here.” Will released me, leaving me spread open on the edge of the counter, feeling empty and horribly deprived.

The sound of our breathing filled the break room as we stared at each other.

His hair was a mess from my hands, his lips swollen, his eyes wide. The faintest of red marks colored his skin at the base of his neck where I’d dragged my teeth against his flesh. He looked like a walking contradiction—his outfit so staid and conservative, his eyes filled with a heat that left no doubt what he wanted.

We’d created something wild here, something dark and dangerous that wound its way through me, tempting me to break every rule I’d ever set for myself. And we’d just kissed.

Will ran a hand through his hair, his eyes wide. “Obviously we need to set some ground rules.”

I couldn’t think right now.

“We probably shouldn’t be alone during office hours. I seem to uh—have a problem with self-control.”

“And outside of office hours?”

His eyes gleamed. “Oh, I definitely plan on seeing lots of you outside of office hours. I want to see all of you.”

It sounded amazing, and yet I couldn’t help but worry about how all of this was going to play out.

As much as I wanted it, it wasn't a great idea. We worked together, and even though he wasn't exactly my boss, it would make things messy—messier than they already were, at least. And there was a part of me—a part I hated—that wondered if this wasn't history repeating itself. If I was doomed to be exactly like my mother, drawn to powerful men I could never have. But I wasn't drawn to powerful men. Not really. I just wanted Will, and no matter what the logical part of my brain screamed, a bigger part of me was dying to kiss him again.

So really, my decision had been made once my lips touched his a few minutes ago.

I cleared my throat. “As someone on your campaign staff, I think we both need to keep things discreet. If Price gets wind of this, they'll fire me. And trust me, the last thing you need is the media finding out you're involved with a staffer. And I'm not exactly the kind of girl people expect a state senator to be involved with,” I joked, struggling to ease the tension between us.

He didn't laugh. Instead he tore the rug out from under my feet.

“Anyone would be lucky to be involved with you. I'm lucky you kissed me. So fucking lucky.”

I flushed. With each word he laid siege to my resolve. I fought for composure, clung to the logic and instinct that made me good at what I did. It was all I had when I was too shaken for anything else.

I struggled for sanity.

“Let's just keep this casual between us. Obviously we're attracted to each other, but neither one of us is looking for a relationship from each other. My career is the most important thing in my life, and if you're going to be a state senator, you need the proper woman on your arm, someone who can help your campaign. So let's just have fun with this, okay? No one needs to know.”

Will was quiet for a long moment and then he blinked, his mouth tight. “So let me get this straight, you want to have a fling?”

I nodded, trying to lighten the tension with humor. “And just think, you get to have sex and not worry that I'm going to spill all of your dirty little secrets when it's over.”

He frowned. “'Cause you don't do boyfriends, right? No strings attached?”

There wasn't judgment in his tone, but there was something . . . I couldn't put my finger on it, but it was something that made me uneasy. I couldn't very well explain that I had the kind of skeletons in my closet that would destroy his career. And at the same time, I couldn't help but think that if I'd ever want anyone to be my boyfriend, it would be him.

Will

I couldn't say why her no-boyfriends rule pissed me off, but for some reason it did. In a way she was right . . . I wasn't looking for a casual girlfriend, not with the campaign going on. My relationship would be front and center, especially since I was unmarried and young. And yeah, there was something about her that screamed sex in a way that probably wouldn't endear me to my constituents. But I didn't really care. I liked her, wanted to get to know her, not just the sexy bits, but all of her.

"So just to be clear, if I'm fucking you, no one else is."

Yep, I was pissed. Before her I'd never said the phrase, *fucking you*, to a girl. It was dirty, and crude, and my mother would have died if she heard me. And yet, there it was. I wanted to be dirty and crude with her. She made me feel like someone I'd never been before. Someone out of control. Maybe it was the way she made me feel like she held all the cards, like she was *managing* me. It pissed me off and turned me on at the same time.

Her gaze flared with heat, and I knew I'd struck a nerve. And at the same time, I watched as desire rose in her pretty blue eyes.

"Oh, really?" Her tone was frosty, and the sound of it had my dick hard again. There was something seriously wrong with me. "What makes you think you're going to be *fucking* me at all?"

Jesus. I'd been dating the wrong girls.

My voice hitched as desire rammed through me. "Those little breathless moans you make when I kiss you. Or because your lips are swollen, and your cheeks are flushed, and all I did was kiss you. Imagine what it'll be like when I make you come. That's how I know I'll be *fucking* you. Only me."

Her lips parted, and it took everything I had not to walk over and take her mouth again.

I shrugged. “You want this to be casual? You want to pretend like this is just fun between us? Fine. But I’m the only one touching you, kissing you, *fucking* you. I don’t share.”

Her eyebrow arched. “And I’m assuming the same rule applies for you then? You want to go out on dates, go to campaign events with other women, fine. But if you’re expecting me not to screw around, then I expect the same from you.”

“Deal.” My lips twitched. “Besides, I have a feeling you’re going to be more than enough to keep my hands full.”

Chapter Seven

Looking for a new man-crush? Look no further than the state of Virginia.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

I hated doing interviews. Did my prospective constituents really care if I preferred tea or coffee? Were they really dying to know what kind of girl I was looking for? Even if I did get to talk about the issues, there was a good chance the question would get buried between my favorite food and favorite movie.

“You ready for this?” Jackie asked, her ever-present clipboard in hand.

It had only been a few days since she’d joined the campaign and she was already invaluable. She was possibly the only person on my staff who actually liked doing research, and she was amazing at prepping me for interviews and events.

I grinned. “No. I’d rather have my teeth drilled without Novocain.”

She shot me the look I now recognized as her no-nonsense face. She lived and breathed this stuff.

“When you’re asked a painful question, focus on why you wanted to get into politics in the first place. Keep your eye on the prize, on the change you want to bring your future constituents. That helps when you’re dealing with bullshit questions or prying eyes.”

I grinned, loving how capable she was. We were in her wheelhouse now, and I was happy to follow her lead.

“Do you want to go over the questions again?” she asked.

“I think I’ve got them.”

“It’s always better to be over-prepared, rather than under-prepared.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I leaned closer to her, my voice dropping to a mock whisper. “They’re all in awe of you, you know.”

“What are you talking about?”

I gestured behind us. “The staff. Everyone. Even Mitch.”

My campaign manager, Mitch, was one of the most intense people I’d ever met, but even he seemed impressed by Jackie. She worked insane hours without complaint. When I was her age I was going to parties and football games. She worked what had to be a nearly seventy-hour week, and we weren’t paying her in more than free meals and crappy “Vote for William Clayton” T-shirts. The first time I saw my name written across her chest, I’d about had a heart attack.

“You look like your mind is always running, like you’re never resting, always thinking about the next move, the next plan, the next strategy.” At times it was exhausting; it was also seriously fucking hot.

“Maybe I am.”

“Yeah, but what do you do for fun? What’s your version of downtime?”

She grinned, her eyes sparkling. “I have my moments.”

I knew we both thought of that night, of her in my entryway. I thought about it every time I walked in the door and plenty of times in between. She was a hard memory to forget.

“So what else do you like to do? Besides the obvious,” I teased.

The more I saw of her, the more interesting I found her to be. She came from a totally different world from the one I knew. I’d grown up around women like my mother—proper, polite, elegant. Jackie was something else entirely, different in an irresistible package.

She shot me that look again. “I’m supposed to be prepping you for your interview, not the other way around.”

“Maybe it will help relax me. Take some of the pressure off.”

“Please. You never look anything but relaxed in these interviews. You charm every reporter we throw your way.”

I grimaced. “I sound like a douche.”

“Shh,” she hissed. “Do you want that to be the sound bite that gets picked up by a stray microphone?”

“No, ma’am.” I tried to look properly contrite.

She shook her head in exasperation.

“Come on. Something you like to do.” My voice lowered. “Something that involves clothing,” I amended with a grin.

She reached out and hit me in the arm. “Very funny.”

“I’m serious. We’ll make it a game. You tell me something, I’ll tell you something you can add to your giant notebook filled with all of my secrets.”

She grinned. “I haven’t discovered any of your secrets—yet.”

“You know one.”

She blushed. “I thought we weren’t supposed to talk about that.”

“Sorry. I forgot.” I sounded anything but.

She laughed. “Don’t try to charm me. You forget, I’ve seen it all.”

“Come on, then. Give me something.”

“Fine. I like to run.”

That explained her body. “Where do you run?”

She shot me an arch look. “That’s not how this works. I get to ask you a question now.”

“Do you need to write it down?” I gestured to her notebook.

“I think I can handle it on my own.”

“Shoot.”

“Tea or coffee?”

I grinned, the smile impossible to resist. “You heard me bitching about the interview questions to Mitch.”

“I did no such thing. It’s a serious, important question. If I’m going to throw big business your way, I at least need to know which side to shill to.”

“Coffee. Black. Where do you like to run?”

“I’m a treadmill girl.”

“Treadmill? That’s disappointing.”

“What’s wrong with the treadmill?”

“Where’s the wind in your face? The smell of burned leaves?”

“I’m not really outdoorsy.”

“I’m starting to see that.”

She frowned at me. “You aren’t one of those guys, are you?”

“What guys?”

“You know the type—loves camping, hiking, that sort of thing. Thinks a moose head counts as decorating.”

I laughed. “Nope. I’m pretty much a city boy through and through. I do like to sail, though.”

“I had a feeling.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you always going to give me a hard time for having money?”

“No. Maybe.” She grinned. “I don’t mean to give you a hard time. Honestly. You just seem so—”

“Worthy of mocking?”

“Perfect. Golden.” Her eyes danced with mischief. “It makes me want to rumple you a bit. Screw with all that perfectly ordered control.”

Christ. It was a completely inappropriate conversation for me to have with an intern. Everything with her was inappropriate. She was so dangerous—to me, my campaign. Everything about this screamed really fucking bad idea. And god help me, I leaned in toward her when I should have walked away. I lowered my voice, my words for her alone.

“I haven’t had much control since you flashed me that *fuck me* smile at the Hay-Adams.”

Her eyes widened, her cheeks coloring. Her teeth bit down on her lower lip—plump, lush—and my dick got hard. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. She just stared at me, her gaze unflinching. It wasn’t embarrassment I read in her reaction, and the second I recognized the emotion simmering around her, I had to restrain myself from grabbing her and carrying her off somewhere. She was just as turned on as I was.

Mitch walked over and interrupted us. “How’s the prep going?”

It took every ounce of well-honed self-control to keep from jumping away from her like a boy with his hand caught in the cookie jar. But as fucked as I would be if word got out about me flirting with my very young, very pretty intern, it would be even worse for her. It was obvious that this internship meant everything to her and the last thing I wanted was to be the reason she lost it.

“Excellent. Jackie is doing a great job, as usual.”

She looked down at the floor, refusing to meet either of our gazes.

Mitch nodded. “They’re ready for you.”

Jackie

He was good—really good.

He was young, and as far as problems went, that was his biggest one. But the camera—and reporters—loved him. Hell, I was half in love with him after watching the segment.

The reporter was an excellent choice. She was old enough to be his grandmother, and within a minute of sitting down with her, Will had her eating out of his palm. And nothing about it seemed fake. I'd been around enough politicians to tell the difference, so had everyone else in this room. He was genuinely a nice guy and it showed. When he laughed at her jokes, his dimples flashing, there was no doubt his reaction was sincere. He may not have realized it, but he was made for politics. Voters—especially female voters—would love him.

“You did a good job prepping him.”

I turned as Mitch sat down beside me.

“Thanks.”

In politics, Mitch Anders was kind of a legend. He didn't work at a fancy consulting firm like Price; instead he had his own firm with a skeleton staff, but he was known for winning campaigns. He was the epitome of behind-the-scenes D.C. His suit wasn't flashy, his haircut a little too long in the front. He had a perpetually disheveled look about him—as if he were too busy mucking around in the D.C. filth to care about anything else. He had a name people feared and a reputation everyone respected. A good word from him would take my career far.

“How long is your internship with Price?”

“Just through December.”

“And you graduate next May? Political Science major?”

“Yes.”

“You're looking for a full-time position at Price?”

“It's the only place I've ever wanted to work.”

“Because it's the best?”

I considered his question. “Maybe. It's a really great place to get started and it'll look amazing on my resume. I eventually want to go out on my own. Experience working at a firm like Price would go a long way to making that happen.”

“You're good enough to work at Price.”

Omg, Mitch Anders thinks I'm good enough to work at Price.

I tried to calm my inner fangirl. “Thank you.”

“Piece of advice? You're good enough, but think really hard on whether you want to work there. They may be the best, but it's a tough place. They lack imagination and want their consultants to fit the Price mold. You may find it's not a good fit for you.”

It was a familiar criticism. Honestly, after interning there for a few weeks, I got where it came from. They were intense, but that was why they were the best. And I could be intense, too.

“Is that why you went out on your own?” I hadn’t really had a chance to pick his brain yet, and I couldn’t resist the opportunity. I’d been following his career for *years*.

“Part of it. I fucking love this business. Love the game. But I want to play it on my terms, not someone else’s. There’s too much red tape, too much bullshit associated with firms like Price. It can wear you down.”

“Makes sense.”

“This industry is a beast. It’ll cut you to the bone.” His gaze ran over me, and I couldn’t help but feel like I was being tested. “Why do you want to do it? Pretty girl like you, smart as a whip. You could do anything you wanted. Why do you want to get your hands dirty in other people’s secrets and scandals?”

I wasn’t offended by the comment. Politics was a very male industry, and I’d learned early on that getting judged by my looks was often part of the territory. It sucked and it pissed me off, but the truth was, it was all part of the game. If they wanted to underestimate me and think I was just a dumb blonde with a pretty face and an empty head, fine. It just gave me that many more opportunities to catch them off guard.

I started to give him a pat answer, but the truth came out instead. “Because there’s nothing else I’ve ever wanted. It’s always been politics.”

He smiled. “Of course. It’s in your blood.” He was quiet for a moment. “I worked on his campaign in the early years. I remember your mother.” I froze. There was no need to know who *he* was. It really was true—Mitch Anders knew where all the bodies were buried.

“You remind me of him. Smart, determined, ruthless.”

I couldn’t say anything. Didn’t know what to say. I was so used to not talking about my father, spent so much time filled with loathing for him, that it was nearly impossible to say his name without giving my emotions away. I knew Mitch had been my father’s campaign manager a long time ago; I just hadn’t realized he knew about me.

Did my father explain me as a problem he needed fixing? A mistake he needed to take care of? He’d wanted my mother to get an abortion when she found out she was pregnant. He was married then, and a pregnant mistress

would have ruined him. Especially when he and his wife already had one daughter with another on the way.

I struggled to fix a polite smile on my face, struggled to push past the disgust clawing at my throat. “I’m nothing like him.”

Chapter Eight

Am I the only one drooling over those new ads from the Clayton campaign? And the dog . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

“I’m really getting sick of this. There has to be a way we can get them to focus on something else.”

The latest *Capital Confessions* post was pulled up on the screen in front of us. We’d been working for hours now and it was just after midnight. I was on my fifth cup of coffee; Jackie had been chugging Diet Coke like it was her lifeline. There had been five of us when we started, but little by little people filtered out, going home to try and salvage time with their families. I was exhausted and dying to go to bed, but it seemed wrong to leave Jackie working by herself. And then *Capital Confessions* had come out.

Jackie shrugged. “We can try to control the message, sure. But, at the end of the day, the media’s going to lead with the angle they think will most appeal to voters. And right now, unfortunately, you’re a young, hot guy in politics—a young, hot, single guy. We can’t avoid that.”

The thing about running for office that I hadn’t realized until I was in it, was that each day felt a little more soul-sucking than the one before. And yet Jackie truly seemed to love this part of it. Her eyes lit up when we talked strategy, making her impossibly more beautiful. And as much as she loved it, she made everyone else love it as well. She was a great asset to the campaign.

“What can we do about it?”

“Short of you radically changing your appearance? Probably not much.” She paused. “A girlfriend might help—a nice, classy, demure girlfriend—

the kind who won't steal the spotlight but will give you the stability that attracts voters. Actually, a fiancée would be better."

I groaned. "You sound like my mother."

I didn't know how she could talk about me having a girlfriend; the memory of kissing her in the kitchen was still firmly embedded in my mind. I'd never been less interested in the idea of meeting someone else.

Her lips twitched. "Well, you're in that phase in your life when it makes voters nervous to see a single candidate. You're young for this level of politics. You have huge financial backing and a lot going for you on a party level, not to mention your grandfather's political connections, but that might not be enough. You're lucky your opponent has been dogged with scandals for the past few years. But still—your age is a factor. Your marital status is part of that."

To me, all of this was a means to an end. I wanted to get elected, wanted to make a difference serving my constituents. But I hated what I had to do to get there. I didn't give a shit about the interviews, and the uncomfortable photo shoots, or the fucking dog they suggested I "borrow" for my latest ad campaign. And I definitely wasn't going to date someone I wasn't attracted to in order to endear myself to my prospective constituents.

But she was also right. That was part of what made her so good at her job—she had amazing instincts. My opponent was sixty years old and had been in politics for nearly as long as I'd been alive. A fact he frequently liked to throw out during interviews and speeches. He'd been married to the same woman since college, had three kids, and four grandkids. Their campaign photos looked like the picture of the American dream. Mine looked like a singles ad.

"So, what, are you going to start fixing me up on dates now?" I asked, unable to keep the annoyance out of my voice. I wasn't sure if it was her job on the campaign or her personality, but I couldn't escape the feeling that she was *managing* me again. I may have been five years older, but the age difference seemed to evaporate when she got like this.

Jackie laughed. "Do you need fixing up?"

I loved her laugh. I'd been listening to it for days now and it was impossible to not feel it ripple through you, her enthusiasm infectious.

"I don't know. It might be a little awkward if you're fixing me up on dates during the day and I'm seeing you at night."

She flushed. "True."

And suddenly I knew we were both thinking of that day in the office . . . and our kiss.

I'd said we shouldn't be alone together at work mainly because I couldn't ignore how risky things had been in the kitchen. Anyone could have tried to come in, found the door locked, and jumped to the wrong conclusion—or the right one in this case. But now, we were really and truly alone in my office. Everyone had gone home for the night. And suddenly I wanted the image of her sprawled out on my desk more than I'd ever wanted anything in my life. I wanted to pick up exactly where we'd left off.

“You know, you're right. Maybe I do need fixing up.”

Jackie pulled out her notepad, pen poised. My dick twitched. *God, she had the sexy librarian vibe down.*

“Okay, what kind of girl should I be looking for?”

I opened my mouth to answer her and then closed it again. If she'd asked me a week ago, I would have described someone like my ex-girlfriend, Caro. I'd always preferred brunettes—tall, slim, smart. But I didn't say any of those things. I didn't say anything. I just stared at her, notebook in hand, pen ready.

I rose from my chair, walking around the desk, moving toward her. I stopped a foot away, leaning my hip against the edge, crossing my arms across my chest.

“For one, I like blondes.” She just stared at me, her hand not moving. “Blue eyes. Tan. Legs for days. The kind of legs that are the perfect length to wrap around my waist when I'm plunging inside.” She set the notepad down on the floor, her hand shaking slightly. “She'd be so smart. Scary smart. She'd challenge me—keep me on my toes. I'd never get bored. Sexy as hell.”

She flushed and her lips parted, and suddenly all of the words just disappeared.

Jackie

I leaned forward, pressing my mouth against his. His lips were warm, his mouth slightly parted, almost as if I'd taken him by surprise. Maybe I had. But I'd seen the kiss in his eyes, and my fear that he wouldn't kiss me eclipsed my concerns that I was crossing a line.

If I'd had the advantage of surprise, it was only for an instant, because the second our lips touched I was seduced.

He kissed like he did everything—well, elegantly, as if he were in charge. He wasn't demanding, he was just *everywhere*. He didn't just kiss my lips; he invaded my senses.

His hands were bold—long, tapered fingers teasing, stroking my flesh. His cologne was strangely seductive. I'd never thought that a smell could be sexy, but there was something so masculine and real about his scent. I wanted it covering my skin.

I tore my lips away from his, kissing my way up his neck.

Will leaned down, pulling me out of the chair, his arms around my waist, carrying me over to the desk. His mouth covered mine as he laid me back, pushing papers out of the way, his hand behind my head, protecting me against the hard wood.

He lifted me, settling between my thighs, wrapping my legs around his hips. He was already hard.

His body came down, covering mine, his lips plundering my mouth, his hands lifting the edge of my top, exploring the bare flesh under the silk. I arched my back, pressing my skin into his hands, wanting them all over my naked body, wanting *him* thrusting inside me, making me come so hard I forgot everything.

"I want you naked," Will murmured against my skin. He moved back and his eyes darkened as he lifted the shirt higher, pulling it up over my head. He tossed the shirt to the ground, his hands drifting down to the front of my pants, caressing my bare skin along the way. *Gah*. My breath caught in my throat as he unbuttoned them, dragging the zipper down.

I lifted my body instinctively, letting him slide my pants off my hips, down my legs, until they landed in a heap on the floor. I lay before him on the desk, wearing nothing but a black lace bra and matching thong and heels.

I waited for him to move closer to me, to cover my body with his, to go back to kissing me, waited to feel his hardness rubbing against me, the throbbing ache between my thighs impossible to ignore.

Instead Will stood there, staring at me, his gaze raking me over from head to toe. He looked at me like he had all the time in the world to stare, as if there were no urgency, only his needs, his pace, his desire. He looked at me like I was his, and god help me, I wanted to be.

“You’re so beautiful.” His voice strained as the words escaped his lips. “You know it, too. So, so beautiful.” He reached down, his hand closing around my ankle, circling it, lifting my leg up, spreading me, baring more of me before him.

His eyes on me the entire time, his fingers teased the inside of my ankle, the feeling light, tickling almost. And then his hand moved higher and the urge to laugh completely disappeared. He paused at my knee, his fingers dipping into the soft, hollow spot behind my kneecap. It was literally the least erotic place I could think of, and yet his touch had my hips jerking off the desk.

His other hand came down on my stomach, holding me still while his hand continued its torment. And then I realized the difference between him and the three guys who’d come before him.

I’d been sleeping with boys and he was a man.

“I want to touch you.” The words tumbled from my mouth, somewhere between pouting and begging.

“Maybe later.”

My eyes narrowed. “Do girls usually get off on this whole bossy thing you have—”

His hand brushed against the edge of my thong, his fingers dipping under the fabric and slipping inside me before I even had the chance to finish my question.

Unfuckingbelievable. My moan broke the silence.

He chuckled, the sound low and throaty, just enough of an edge to it to make me think I wasn’t the only one losing my mind.

“I think you’re going to get off on it. Right here on my desk so that every time I sit in that chair I’ll remember the image of you like this, spread out before me, wanting to be taken.”

His voice cracked as he moved over me, his body covering mine, his mouth brushing against my nipple through the black lace. His fingers stroked me, dominating me, filling me. He teased my clit with his thumb, sending sparks through me. Orgasms had never been easy for me, but I had a feeling that was about to change.

His mouth left my breast as he pulled back, staring down at the point where we were joined, where his fingers possessed me. There was enough heat in his gaze to set me on fire.

“I want you. I want to be inside you. I want to fuck you like this on my desk. I will. I’ll have you here. I’ll have you everywhere. Whatever is between us, it’s just starting.

“I’m not going to fuck you tonight. Not like this. I want you in my bed the first time. I want all night to taste you and tease you. I want to make you come the whole night; to wake you up in the dark with my cock inside you and my mouth on those gorgeous tits.”

I couldn’t. There were no thoughts. Nothing. My mind was blank; my body so turned on I didn’t care about anything else. He could have me any way, every way, as long as he never, ever stopped touching me.

“Tonight’s about you. Ever since I saw you for the first time I’ve been wondering what your face looks like when you come, what sounds you’ll make when you do. I wanted to know how you would feel, so warm and wet. I’ve wondered how you’d taste. Tonight I’m going to make you come with my hands and my mouth, and next time I’ll make you come with my cock.”

Will

Jesus Christ.

Jackie spread out naked on my desk was pretty much every fucking fantasy I’d ever had. Better. The words coming out of my mouth were every dirty, wild thing I’d ever wanted and never been able to say.

I’d never been this guy. I was always polite, respectful in bed. I wasn’t bad or anything . . . I just wasn’t *this*.

There was something about this girl—something that spoke to the side of me I’d never indulged. I couldn’t have imagined doing this with anyone else, showing this side of myself to anyone else. I trusted her with this part of myself. Trusted that I could let go.

I knelt down in front of the desk, momentarily speechless at the sight before me. The words that came out of my mouth may have been bold, but inside I felt wild, nervous, unrestrained.

I leaned forward, my lips grazing the inside of her thigh. I inhaled her scent, floral and sweet, nipping the skin, teasing her flesh with my teeth and tongue, my mouth moving higher. Her knuckles gripped the edge of the desk, a soft moan escaping from her mouth.

I wanted her badly. More than I'd ever wanted anyone. But there was still a part of me that didn't want our first time to be like this.

We were at *work*—in my office. And there was something that seemed tacky about fucking her over my desk. I didn't want her to think she was just someone I screwed around with. Whatever she said about keeping things casual, it wasn't my style. If I was with a woman it was because I liked her, wanted her. She would be more than just a fuck for me whether she was ready to accept it or not. I wanted all of her, not just the pieces she was willing to give.

So I ignored the raging hard-on, the part of my brain that wanted to unzip my pants and sink into her warmth. Tonight was for Jackie. Tomorrow could be for me.

I took one last look at her, memorizing the image. I had a thing for lingerie. I knew I was a guy so I wasn't supposed to care about the packaging, but there was nothing hotter than a girl who dressed like she owned her sex. This girl knocked it out of the park.

Her black bra was sheer enough that I could see the outline of her nipples through the lace, her tits high and full. Her thong was a little scrap of lace that had my blood pounding. Add in the fuck-me high heels and I was a goner.

I reached behind her, her breasts rubbing against my chest as I unhooked her bra, stripping it away. Her gaze met mine and heat reflected back at me.

I leaned forward, reaching up and pulling the edge of her thong down, trailing the lace across her flesh as I pulled it off her gorgeous legs. I stuffed the thong into my suit pocket, turning my attention to her body spread out before me. She was perfection and I almost couldn't believe she was mine . . . even for just the night.

I bent my head and a flash of ink at her hip caught my eye. I froze.

Oh god, she had a tattoo.

I was done. Absolutely fucking done. This girl had me strung so tight I was ready to come in my pants.

Jackie levered up on her elbows, her face flushed, her lips swollen from my earlier kisses, her blonde hair tumbling in a cascade over her tits. My mind went completely and utterly blank.

“Why'd you stop?”

“You have a tattoo.”

“Yeah.” She looked at me like I was crazy. Maybe I was.

“What does it say?” My voice sounded like it belonged to someone else.

“It’s a line from a Roethke poem.”

Yep, done. She was sexy, and fucking brilliant, and I could feel myself tumbling headfirst, and I just didn’t care.

I looked down at the ink—my mind struggling to process the words written on her skin.

I’d had to take a poetry class at Harvard. I’d hated it—every fucking minute. We’d spent hours talking about symbolism, and imagery, and I’d spent most of the time wanting to shoot myself.

Until Roethke. Until “I Knew a Woman.”

She had the final line from my favorite poem tattooed on her hip—eight words that when strung together formed the sexiest sentence I’d ever read—and all I could think was—

Mine.

Jackie

I needed his mouth on my skin now. Will knelt in front of me, staring at me, his expression slightly dazed. I wanted to shake him, wanted to beg him to go back to kissing me. I was insane with need, and want, and lust, and the orgasm that dangled just barely out of reach.

He seemed fixated on my tattoo. His lips rubbed over my hip, over the ink, tracing the swirls. It made me uncomfortable; it felt too intimate. *I* felt too much. It was crazy, of course, considering I was sprawled out naked on his desk, and still I couldn’t help but feel like I’d just given him a part of myself, one I’d never intended to give. He was too good at this and I was too raw.

And then his mouth left my hips, and traveled a few inches south, and I began to fully appreciate what he meant by *taste*.

Confession? I’d never had a guy go down on me. Ever. It was just one of those things that had never happened. I’d hooked up with guys before, but it had always been more about mutual pleasure than anyone doing *this* to me. And *fuck*, his mouth was magic.

Will teased me, working his mouth over me like a man who knew his way around a woman’s body. He tongued my clit, my back arching off the

desk. I was so close, could feel the orgasm building as he played with me, his lips and tongue ravaging me. I reached down, my hands threading through his hair, pulling him closer to me, wanting more than just his mouth on me.

I wanted it all.

The pressure began to build, his tongue increasing its pace, his teeth grazing my flesh, and suddenly I shattered, my head lolling back and hitting the desk, my hips lifting against him, riding the wave of the best orgasm I'd ever had until I saw sparks. He kept his mouth on me while my body shuddered and quaked until I had nothing left.

For a minute I just lay there, staring up at the ceiling, struggling to get my breathing under control. I sat slowly, my body sore from being draped over his desk, my skin unbelievably sensitive. It was the kind of orgasm that left your body feeling electric, as if any touch would set you off.

"What was that?" I asked, my voice breathless, my body utterly wrung out.

He stared at me, and then slowly his lips curved, transforming his whole face. It was a naughty, private smile, one I couldn't help but think he'd only shared with me.

"The beginning."

Chapter Nine

Washington has been remarkably scandal-free these days. Not for much longer . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

The next morning I woke to the memory of Will’s mouth on me, of those magic lips. I was turned on, and craving more, and wondering how my life had gotten so complicated.

I dressed quickly, throwing my hair in a messy bun and putting the barest amount of makeup on. I’d planned on working from home for most of the day, but after last night I had one stop to make first.

I took the Metro to the *Capital Confessions* offices, not bothering to wait for an invite to enter before I barged into the editor’s office.

“Who do you have feeding you information on William Clayton?”

My editor, Sean, stared up from his desk, an annoyed expression on his face. “Hi Jackie. How are you? Are you here to turn in your post that’s three fucking days late?”

I grimaced. *Shit*. With everything going on these past few days, I’d completely forgotten. “I don’t have anything.”

“This is D.C. Are you seriously telling me you couldn’t get any dirt for me? A sex scandal? Fraud? Misuse of government resources? Nothing? What have you been doing these past few days?”

Will Clayton.

“I don’t know, Sean. My internship at Price has kept me busy. And now I’m working on the Clayton campaign, and someone’s leaking information about him. I need to know who it is.”

Sean’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

Because I liked Will more than I should and the last thing I wanted was for him to get raked across the coals on *Capital Confessions*. And the

second to last thing I wanted was for him to realize I was their best blogger. My secret life had the potential to colossally fuck up my personal and professional life.

“Because it’s messy having someone in his camp when I’m there. I can’t afford to screw up my position at Price, and I could if they start getting suspicious about where the leak is coming from.”

Sean groaned. “He’s twenty-six, rich, and he looks like an underwear model. You know he has a piece on the side or some skeletons in his closet. No way I’m missing the chance to dig deeper on this one. Not even for you, gorgeous.”

My heart nearly stopped. He did have a piece on the side—he had me.

“Who’s your source?”

“Come on. You know better than that. Do I ask you to reveal your sources? You know the rules.”

“Fine. Then give me the Clayton campaign.”

“I thought the whole point was that you wanted nothing to do with it.”

The whole point was that I didn’t want to be any part of a smear campaign against Will, no matter how peripherally. If he ever found out about me working for *Capital Confessions*, he was going to be seriously pissed. At least this way I could control the flow of information.

Up until this point nothing really bad had been written about him. The *seriously fine* comment was a pain in the ass, but in the grand scheme of life it could be so much worse. Like screwing-the-illegitimate-daughter-of-one-of-the-country’s-most-esteemed-senators worse. Damage control became a necessity.

“I don’t need your source mucking it up. If you want in on the Clayton campaign, then I’m your connection. Take it or leave it.”

I’d been working at *Capital Confessions* since my senior year of high school. Back then it had been nothing—me, Sean, and a few other freelancers. At first he’d been skeptical about hiring an eighteen-year-old girl, but I’d convinced him he had nothing to lose. A week later the stories started coming in, and he never looked back.

It wasn’t my dream job. At eighteen it had been a chance to make some money when my mother forgot to pay the rent, or broke up with whatever “boyfriend” was paying for our current apartment. And then it became my ticket to help pay for college.

The blog expanded, and we started taking private projects on the side, digging up dirt on campaigns. Everything I did was anonymous. My pen name kept my two lives from blurring and kept me from incurring the wrath of some of D.C.'s biggest power players. The money was great, and it wasn't like I was hooking or anything, just exposing people's sins. But I didn't ever want Will to know about any of this. I doubted someone like him would understand the things someone like me did to survive.

"Fine. But get me something good. And turn in your fucking post."

I nodded, heading for the door. Sean was cranky and irritable on his best days, and I'd just gotten what I wanted. No point in poking the beast.

Will

"Are we going to talk about it?"

I looked up from my lunch, wishing I didn't feel like I was about to get a scolding in the principal's office. Mitch and I were at the Blue Duck, allegedly talking campaign strategy. I was beginning to think I was here for a completely different reason.

"Talk about what?"

Mitch shot me his no-nonsense look. "Have you had sex with her yet?"

I choked on my sandwich. "Jesus. Are we seriously having this conversation?"

"I told you from the beginning. I'm your campaign manager, priest, fucking wife. I have to know everything."

"You don't have to know that. I'm not talking about my sex life."

"It's going to affect the campaign."

I knew it might. I'd figured that out somewhere between making out with her in the break room and going down on her on my desk. I just . . . didn't care? Didn't care enough? I was hooked and I didn't see a chance of me walking away.

"I won't let it."

Mitch shook his head, a snort escaping. "Please. Do you even know how ridiculous that sounds? Do you have any idea how many candidates I've watched fuck up their chances because they couldn't keep their pants zipped?"

“I can keep my pants zipped.” There was a line, and he was getting close to crossing it. “You worry about the campaign, I’ll worry about my personal life.”

“Your personal life is the campaign. When you started running for office, every single thing about you became fair game. That includes the women in your life. You knew this.”

I did. And when I’d originally started running for office, it hadn’t seemed like a problem. But then I’d never lost control over a woman before, either. And after last night, my control hung by a thread.

“She knows how it is. She’s not stupid. Hell, she’s probably a million times better at this than I am. She’s not some girl who’s going to go running to the tabloids. I trust her.”

I hated the D.C. machine, and as much as I knew she was part of it, Jackie was loyal. She had too much class and integrity to kiss and tell.

Mitch closed his eyes. “Sometimes I can’t tell if you’re too good to be true, or my worst fucking nightmare. Is this what it’s like growing up as a Clayton? You never had to get your hands dirty, never had to live in the muck, so somehow you just naively think the best of people? Did your grandfather teach you nothing?”

“I’m not my grandfather. Not even close.”

“No shit,” he muttered, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

I was definitely a masochist—first Jackie, now Mitch. But honestly, I kind of respected them more for giving me a hard time. My whole life I’d been surrounded by people who’d sucked up to me, wanting to be part of the Clayton power machine. It actually felt good to have someone be honest with me.

“You don’t like her.”

“See that’s where you’re wrong. I like her a lot. She’s smart and she has some of the best fucking instincts I’ve ever seen. She works hard and I think she has a real future in this town. But she’s not going to get ahead by screwing a candidate, and in the long run this shit is going to hurt her as much as it will hurt you.”

“We’re being discreet.”

“Please. You looked at each other and I knew.”

Yeah, I had to work on that.

“I’m not walking away from her.”

“She has a past.”

“Everyone has a past.”

“Hers is career-ending. She has skeletons in her closet. Big ones. Ones you want nothing to do with.”

“And you know this, how?”

He chuckled. “You forget. I keep everyone’s secrets.”

“Then keep hers. She’s got shit in her past, fine. We’ll deal with it. I’m not walking away from her. We’ll keep things quiet, but my private life is mine. Understood? I’m not discussing it again.”

The thing about being a nice guy was that once you were, people always expected you to be nice. They didn’t seem to realize that “nice guy” wasn’t synonymous with pushover. I wasn’t afraid to go after what I wanted, or to do what I needed to in order to keep it.

Mitch shot me a look of disbelief. “Fine.”

I took a sip of my drink. “While we’re on the subject, I want you to be in charge of reporting to Price; from here on out you’re her boss and you’re responsible for her. I don’t want to cloud things more than they already are.”

“Too fucking late for that,” he muttered.

“Mitch.” There was a warning in my tone.

“Yeah I got it.”

At least that was one problem down.

• • •

I left lunch, heading back to the office in a cab. Mitch’s words kept playing in my mind. So Jackie had secrets. Everyone had secrets. Hers made her interesting, and mysterious, and just made me want to know more. I felt like I’d been living my life in black and white, and I’d just discovered life in Technicolor.

I pulled out my phone, scrolling through my contacts for Jackie’s number. Last night had been mind-blowing, but if I didn’t get inside of her soon I was going to come undone.

I texted her.

Are you coming to the benefit tonight?

Tonight was an annual charity black-tie event at the St. Regis. Mitch thought it would be good for PR, and I knew he and some of the senior staffers were planning on going.

A minute later my phone buzzed.

I'll be there.

My face broke out into a grin. I couldn't wait to see her dressed up, and I couldn't wait to undress her later. My fingers typed out the text—

Come home with me after.

I'd never been particularly impulsive. Always played it somewhat safe. And now I wanted her, and safe had flown out the window along with self-control and reason. I waited for her response, minutes passing as I stared at the phone clutched in my hand. And then my phone beeped, and I looked down at the screen, my heart pounding in my chest—

Okay.

Chapter Ten

Tonight's gala at the St. Regis brought out the usual mix of power players and the women who love them. One couple looked particularly cozy . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

It took me an hour to get ready. Okay, technically two.

Black-tie events were iffy for me. On one hand, they were usually great sources for gossip, and I did owe Sean a story. On the other hand, black-tie events raised the chances of me running into my father. Not that I was even sure it mattered. The most fucked-up thing was that I didn't even know if he knew who I was. We'd never spoken, and I wondered if he would have recognized me if I stood in front of him, although I did bear an uncanny resemblance to my mother—and, most unfairly, to him.

I was nothing to him, but no matter how much it pissed me off, I refused to let him win. Refused to slink into the shadows or avoid going to events out of the fear that I would run into him. But I couldn't help the fact that I was really, really nervous.

His connection to Will was another problem I hadn't addressed.

As an established, well-respected U.S. senator, my father frequently took up-and-coming political candidates under his wing. He was known for grooming the party's next generation, and Will definitely fit the bill. But I couldn't help but wonder just how deep the connection between them ran. Was Will a family friend? Did he know my sisters?

For a brief moment I thought about telling him the truth, that I was Senator Reynolds's illegitimate daughter. Not just illegitimate—completely unacknowledged, a nobody in my father's world. A dirty little secret.

My parents didn't have some star-crossed, epic romance. He slept with my mother because she was hot; she slept with him because he was rich and powerful. It was seedy and tacky, and for a guy like Will who oozed class

and came from the right family, I was the girl from the wrong side of the tracks. He looked at me like I was special; I didn't want to see that look die out of his eyes when he realized I wasn't.

I was freaking out by the time I arrived at the St. Regis.

The St. Regis was elegant, the kind of place that made you feel like royalty right when you walked through the doors. I'd been there before—with my mother mostly—and I couldn't help always feeling just a bit out of place.

I had an uneasy relationship with money. I'd grown up around it enough to be able to slide into these situations. I knew how to dress, what to say, how to act. But underneath it all I knew that's all it was, an act. I played a role, pretending I was more than I was, pretending I fit somewhere I so clearly didn't. Guys like Will were born into money, and I was always on the outside looking in.

For the most part I didn't care. At least I shouldn't care. But it was another reminder of how different my life would have been if I hadn't been illegitimate, if my father had claimed me.

I was backroom deals and wading in muck and scandal. Will was shiny and elegant, the poster child for a new political dynasty. We couldn't have been more ill suited if we tried.

Will

She was late.

I stared at the entrance again, trying to ignore the guy droning on in my ear. He was the lieutenant governor of some state in the Midwest, so I probably should have been paying more attention, but yeah, not happening. I'd been here for an hour and I was already eager to leave.

I wasn't crazy about events like these. I hated making small talk, the feigned interest about each other's lives, hated the fake smiles and the gossip, and all the things that came with playing the game. I was bored, and tired, and my bow tie choked me, and all I wanted was *her*.

A woman to my right smiled at me. "You simply have to meet my niece Cornelia. Just graduated from Stanford Law. She'll be moving to Georgetown and joining a firm there. I'm sure she'd love to spend time with some young people her own age."

The other thing I hated about these events? Every fucking person had a niece, or a friend, or a daughter they tried to set me up with. It was like my marital status offended everyone in the room. As if a single politician was blasphemy, and they all wanted to personally rectify it. For what felt like the millionth time that night, I wished I could have brought Jackie as my date. At least she would have made the evening fun.

“If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to go get a drink—” My voice broke as I saw her and my heart fucking stopped.

She wore black. The dress covered more of Jackie’s body than it exposed, but it fit her in a way that showed every single curve. It was conservative, and yet it was the sexiest thing I’d ever seen. Almost as if to atone for the dress’s severity, her hair was a tumble of blonde curls that called to mind images of her draped over my desk, her hair a delicious mess that made it look like she’d just been thoroughly fucked. Her skin was fresh, her full lips bare, and unlike the women covered in diamonds, Jackie wore no jewelry. She was still easily the most beautiful woman in the room.

She turned to the side, searching for something, and I caught sight of her bare skin exposed by a deep oval at the back of her dress—a stark contrast to the conservative front. She turned again and our gazes caught across the ballroom. She flushed, and then a smile spread across her mouth, a smile that lit up the room.

And just like that I was excusing myself from the group, my feet carrying me toward her.

Jackie

The man knew how to work a room.

I couldn’t take my eyes off of him as he approached me. I’d seen men in tuxedos, at benefits, in James Bond movies, and yet *nothing* prepared me for the sight of Will in one. Maybe it was the stark contrast of the black and white, but everything about him just seemed *more*. His shoulders appeared broader; he looked taller, older, infinitely more male.

He stopped in front of me, a glass of champagne in hand, a heartbreaking smile on his face.

“You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

My cheeks flamed. “That’s not being discreet,” I chided, my voice low.

“I don’t care.”

A flutter built in my stomach and moved its way up to my heart. “You should care. You’re trying to get elected. We’re all trying to get you elected. You shouldn’t be reckless.”

“Come outside with me.”

I wanted to go anywhere with him, but something about seeing him like this made me incredibly shy. He felt completely out of reach, and I couldn’t help but worry that I was just another version of my mother, good enough to screw around with, but not enough for anything more.

“We’ll say we’re going outside to talk about campaign things.”

“Are we going outside to talk about campaign things?”

Will laughed. “Of course not.” He leaned into me, close enough that the scent of his cologne teased my nostrils. His voice turned husky. “We’re going to talk about how good you look in that dress and how much I can’t wait to get it off of you. How I can’t wait to see what you’re wearing underneath.”

Holy shit.

His expression was perfectly calm, his voice low as he spoke to me. There was no one around to hear him, his words safe between us. It was the hardest thing I’d ever had to do to keep from reacting.

We were playing with each other, flirting with each other, vying for the upper hand. Most of the time I felt in control with him, most of the time I could look into his eyes and see how much he wanted me, and it was enough to make all of the bullshit disappear. But right now I couldn’t read the want in his eyes, only the lust in his voice.

I didn’t know what we were doing anymore. It was supposed to be fun and casual, and yet I craved him in a way I’d never craved anyone before.

“Come home with me.”

I blinked. “You can’t leave, you just got here.”

“I’ve been here an hour.”

“The whole point of you coming here was to mingle. No one leaves after an hour.”

“Watch me.” He leaned in closer. “You know you’re only making it worse the more you fight it. If you don’t want to make a scene, come with me.”

“No. You’ll make a scene if you leave this early.”

“I’m more worried that I’ll make a scene if I stay. I want you. I’m tired of pretending I don’t.”

“You can’t say things like that in public,” I hissed.

His lips quirked. “You’re going to manage me again, aren’t you?”

“You’re staying for two more hours.”

“Thirty minutes.”

“An hour and I’ll let you know what I’m wearing underneath my dress.”

For a moment his jaw dropped before it snapped back into place. His green eyes gleamed. “You drive a hard bargain. Fine. An hour.”

I grinned, leaning into him. “Absolutely nothing.”

I walked away, feeling a rush of satisfaction at the knowledge that he was definitely watching me walk away.

Chapter Eleven

More than one individual was on hand to see some very steamy action at the St. Regis last night. There were fireworks throughout the gala, and one couple looked particularly explosive . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

Thirty more minutes. Okay, twenty-nine more minutes. This was definitely the slowest hour of my life.

I let Mitch lead me around the room, introducing me to people. I shook hands, dodged phone numbers, solicited contributions, and laughed at really bad jokes. The whole time I watched Jackie. She stayed within my line of sight, working the room, and I couldn't help but think it was deliberate. Either she was trying to make sure I held up my end of the bargain or she was screwing with my head. The end result was the same—I was fighting a hard-on and she consumed my thoughts.

She was a natural. She drifted from group to group, greeting people she knew, talking for a minute or so, and then moving on. I definitely wasn't the only one watching. Men noticed her, their gazes roaming over her body—old men, young men, waiters, congressmen—it didn't matter. She held everyone's attention. Maybe more so because she didn't even seem to care.

Despite the looks, she didn't react. When an elderly senator touched her arm, she easily moved out of his grasp, a charming smile on her face. She was polite and funny, but there wasn't a hint of flirtation in her. I'd never seen her flirt with anyone but me.

We were quickly going into uncharted territory. There was something about this girl. She'd gotten under my skin so quickly in a way no one ever had before. I was still trying to make sense of it, trying to understand why everything inside me screamed, *this one*.

I wasn't the kind of guy who spent his life wondering what he wanted. I was pretty much, "I see. I want. I get." I didn't change my mind or second-guess my decisions. Maybe I wasn't impulsive, maybe I was more deliberate, but whatever it was, the choices I made always stuck and never fell into the category of regrets. My gut had never steered me wrong. Which was why I didn't freak out last night when I came to the only conclusion that made any sense—

I wanted her.

Jackie

He kept watching me. It was sexy, and unnerving, and so distracting that I could barely think, let alone make intelligent conversation.

We had ten minutes left.

I was nervous about tonight, which was, of course, totally dumb considering everything that had already happened between us. And yet I was still nervous. I wasn't a virgin, far from it, but Will was different. Everything about him was different. Maybe it was the age difference, or the money, or my own insecurities. Either way, he scared me a bit. I didn't feel like I was running the show with him, like I held all of the cards. I felt like I was struggling to keep up. What if that was how it would feel when we went to bed?

"How's work at the Clayton campaign going?"

I pushed the thought of Will inside me out of my mind and took a sip of my champagne, struggling to focus on the question. I smiled at James Morgan. "It's going well, thanks."

"How's Mitch Anders?"

Honestly? I kind of loved him. He was surly, and difficult, and spent more time yelling than praising. He always looked rumpled, like he'd been sleeping in his office—and given the hours he kept, he probably had been—and there was always a telltale sign of spilled coffee on his clothes. He was far from the polished, glossy environment I'd come to know at Price, but I loved him for it.

"I'm learning a lot working for him." That was the biggest understatement ever. The guy was a genius.

Morgan nodded. "Good. He's not trying to steal you away, is he?"

The inference that I could be stolen away from Price was enough to send my little job-hunting heart aflutter.

“Not at all. I’m very happy with my opportunity at Price.”

“Good. I’ve heard good things about your work on Will’s campaign.”

Oh my god. The fact that anyone was talking about me to James Morgan was amazing. “Thank you.”

“I know you had a little bit of trouble with the database, but besides that, we’ve been really impressed with what we’ve seen from you so far.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” I answered, wishing I never had to hear the word “database” again.

His gaze drifted to a point over my shoulder. “And here’s the candidate himself.”

I turned to see Will standing behind us, and my heartbeat kicked up a notch. Seriously, no one should look that good in a tuxedo.

Will came up next to me, his hand at my elbow. “Excuse us for a second, James, but I need to have a word with Jackie about campaign stuff. I have to head out soon. I have that engagement later on.”

I nodded calmly like his engagement wasn’t fucking me. Somehow I smiled at Morgan. “Excuse me.”

I walked away, Will trailing behind me, his hand drifting down to the small of my back. To the onlooker it was a perfectly casual touch as he guided me through the crowd. But I recognized it for what it was, could feel it in the way his skin pressed against mine. He was marking me, and strangely enough, I liked it.

“That guy’s an asshole,” Will muttered.

Surprise filled me. “I thought you were friends.”

“We were in the same final club at Harvard. We were definitely not friends.” He stroked my back lightly. “I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

I stopped mid-step. “Are you jealous?” I couldn’t keep the shock out of my voice. I’d never had a guy actually be jealous over me.

“Of James Morgan?” Will laughed. “Trust me, I’m not worried about you being interested in someone like that. But I still don’t like the way he looks at you. Be careful with him. He’s not the kind of guy you want to get stuck working late with at the office.” A flush covered his cheeks as if he’d realized what he’d just said.

I shook my head. The last thing I wanted was for him to feel guilty about something that was as much my choice as it was his.

“Don’t. It’s completely different.”

“Is it?”

He asked the question like my answer really mattered, and for the first time it hit me, *really hit me*, that there was something to liking a nice guy. I’d never liked jerks, never been the kind of girl who wanted some guy to screw with her head or tell her what to do, but I’d also never liked guys who were all that considerate, at least compared to Will. Maybe on the surface they’d been nice guys, relatively honest and free of emotional fuckwittage, and yet they weren’t like him. They didn’t really care, not like he did.

I stopped walking, my sudden movement seeming to catch Will off guard. He stopped short, his arm brushing against my body. I stared up at him, his broad shoulders blocking out the room around us.

I lowered my voice. “Just so we’re clear, I’m here because I want to be. No other reason.”

“Good, because I’m not planning on letting you go.”

The promise in his words rocked me, throwing me off balance once again. He was like a puzzle I was trying to solve, and every time I came close to the end, the pieces changed.

“Jacqueline!”

I froze at the sound of that voice, all thoughts of Will momentarily abandoned.

Shit.

This was the other reason I hated black-tie events.

“I’m so sorry,” I mumbled, turning away from him to face her.

She didn’t walk toward us; instead, she did some combination of a sashay and a glide, as if she knew all eyes were on her. Maybe they were. Even at forty-five, she turned heads. Lots of heads.

It was one of life’s little ironies, that for as different as our personalities were, I looked like a carbon copy of my mother. On the surface, at least. There was an energy about her, something that made her dazzling that I lacked, but I had her height, and her hair, and her skin tone. The rest was my father.

She leaned into me, exchanging air kisses and enveloping me in a cloud of Givenchy. She pulled back, and I caught sight of a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee standing next to her. *Of course.*

“You look beautiful, darling.” She frowned slightly. “Although you could have worn some jewelry. I would have lent you some if I’d known

you were going to be here.”

I stifled a groan. “It’s not a social event. I’m here for work.”

“Of course you are.” She shot me a knowing look, and I wondered just how much she knew about this *Capital Confessions* business. “And who is this with you?” She flashed a blinding smile at Will, and I wished the floor would open up and swallow me whole.

What would he think of my mother? Did he even realize who she was? That she was infamous? And dear god, was she flirting with him?

I made the introductions, horror filling me with each word that came out of my mouth. I emphasized the word “candidate,” hoping she wouldn’t make more of this, especially in public. Discretion wasn’t anywhere in her vocabulary.

Will smiled. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

Her eyes lit up. “So polite.” Her gaze darted between us. “And how long have you two been working together?” Her voice emphasized the word “together,” and my eyes narrowed.

“You know, Will’s running late. He has a meeting later, and I was just briefing him on the campaign. We should get going.” I leaned forward, giving her one of her stupid air kisses. “It was great to see you.”

Will followed my lead, his charming campaign smile firmly in place. I all but ran out of the room, leaving my mother and her date behind us, Will at my side.

“You okay?” Will murmured, leaning down, his head inches from mine.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” I squeaked.

“You seem a little freaked.”

Then I was doing a great job of covering, because I was definitely more than a little freaked.

“We aren’t close. And believe me, she’s the last person I want getting wind of anything happening between us.”

I didn’t know how to explain the rest. I loved my mother, but her life choices were such a disaster, and I hated the scandal she’d become, the trouble she caused everywhere she went.

I waited for him to say something, to comment on how similar we looked, or how beautiful my mother was. But he didn’t say anything. He just walked beside me, his presence quiet and reassuring.

Will

I couldn't help but feel a sense of déjà vu as we drove to my town house. Jackie sat next to me, silent, staring out the window. I'd ordered a car service tonight, wanting the comfort and the privacy.

She'd been quiet ever since we ran into her mother. There was something there, something she definitely didn't want to talk about. And even more, she seemed nervous. It was strange to see her like this, strange to think that I might somehow be the cause of it. I reached out, linking fingers with her. I squeezed her hand.

She turned to face me and a hesitant smile slid onto her lips. "Feels familiar doesn't it?"

I laughed. "I was way more nervous last time."

"And now?" Her voice was soft, her usual confidence missing. Something in her tone made me bold.

"Now that I've had a taste, I want more." She flushed, a pretty pink spreading across her cheeks. "I've thought about you all day. I went home last night and all I could do was see you spread out on my desk. I wanted you in my bed. Wanted to fall asleep beside you, wanted to wake up next to you in the morning. I even wanted to make you eggs. I make mean eggs." I grinned. "You can add that to your little notebook with all of my secrets."

A look of pure panic spread across her face instead of the laughter I'd intended. "I have to get up early tomorrow," she sputtered. "And I didn't bring clothes or a toothbrush. I figured I'd just get a cab home after."

I was momentarily thrown, and then my lips twitched as awareness dawned. "You're one of those, aren't you?"

Her eyes narrowed. "One of those what?"

"You don't stay the night."

She looked perturbed, and then she shrugged. "I like my space when I sleep. I don't want some guy stealing the covers or smothering me. Or snoring."

I laughed at the horror in her voice. "I don't snore. Or smother, although I have been known to cuddle, but only on very special occasions. And all bets are off on the cover stealing, but somehow I have a feeling you'll be able to hold your own."

"You're mocking me."

"I am."

She shook her head. “I don’t know—”

“You’ve never done it before, have you?”

“Done what?”

“Slept with someone.”

Irritation filled her voice. “I thought we already had the virgin talk.”

“No, not sex. Sleeping. Curled up against each other, waking up in the morning and trying to hide your morning breath.”

She made a face. “That sounds terrible.”

“Hey, I’m an amazing cuddler. Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. Maybe you’ll be lucky and get to experience it yourself tonight.”

She stared at me, her mouth open in surprise as if I’d just shaken her foundations. “Who are you?”

“What do you mean?” I couldn’t keep the amusement from my voice. It was cute to see how flustered she got. She was the kind of girl who knew she could bring a man to his knees and I couldn’t resist the urge to keep her on her toes. I’d never realized how much I’d like the challenge of a girl who made you work for it.

“Guys don’t talk like that. And I’m pretty sure guys don’t cuddle.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s bullshit. I’m sorry, would it make me more masculine if I pushed you out of bed after we had sex? If I made some stupid excuse about having to work the next day and needing to get up early? Or if I said I liked my space when I sleep? That’s not called being a man, that’s called being an asshole.

“If a woman’s in my bed, it’s because I want her there. I’m not a child who gets bored with his toys after five minutes. If the guys you’ve been with treat you like that, then you’ve been screwing around with boys. Wouldn’t you rather fuck a man?”

Jackie

I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t think. Nothing.

Nice guys were supposed to be easy, safe. There was nothing safe about this conversation or this night. He scared the shit out of me.

“I’m not good at this.”

I didn’t mean to say it, the words just slipped out. That he had me admitting my weakness made it even worse.

“Why?”

“You terrify me.”

“Good.”

I gaped at him. His easy, charming, campaign facade was completely gone. Something dark and dangerous lurked in its place.

“I’m glad I scare you. I bet it’s easy for you. You just smile and guys fall at your feet because you’re so beautiful they can’t help it. And then you open your mouth and you say something witty ’cause you’re so fucking smart and you dazzle them, tie them up in knots until they can’t think straight.

“Maybe some of them actually want casual. Maybe they’re fine with the scraps you toss their way. But maybe some of them want more. And you just want easy.

“I want you to be scared. I want things to be messy, and complicated, and difficult. I want you to feel, and I want you to know I’m the one making you feel, that I’m the one making it mean something.”

Heat filled his gaze as the words poured from his mouth.

I didn’t have a snappy answer or a comeback. All I had was a pounding heart, and the sense that I was in so far over my head it wasn’t even funny. So I did the only thing I could think of. I kissed him. Because kisses at least were easy, it was everything else that made me feel like I couldn’t measure up.

I looped my arms around his neck, pulling his body against mine, needing to feel like I’d gotten some of my power back. With a few words he’d stripped me bare. He was right, of course, right about all of it. He just didn’t know the rest.

“You’re trying to change the subject,” he murmured against my mouth, his teeth nipping at my bottom lip. Thank god for the privacy window between the driver and us.

“I don’t feel like talking anymore.”

“You’re staying the night.”

I glared at the challenge in his eyes. “We’ll see.”

I brushed my mouth against his again, my tongue darting out and licking his bottom lip. I could already feel how hard he was against my hip. But he didn’t kiss me back.

“Either you stay the night or I take you home now.” His voice was firm. “I’m not going to be some guy you use to get off and then leave. I’m not

going to let you turn us into that. If we're going to have sex, then you're going to be there through the night when I wake up wanting you, and you're going to be there in the morning. Those are the terms. Take it or leave it."

The car came to a stop. "We're here." He held out a hand to me, a dare in his voice and a promise in his gaze.

"Coming?"

Chapter Twelve

We're beginning to wonder if there isn't a scandal playing out under our very noses.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

I'd definitely pissed her off.

She walked into the town house with me, silent, anger coming off of her in waves. Maybe I'd pushed her too far. Maybe I shouldn't have called her out on her shit. But I meant what I said—I didn't want her thinking that “nice guy” meant she could walk all over me. Or that she could just turn this into casual sex and walk away unscathed.

We stood in the hallway facing off, both of us looking like we'd underestimated each other. Maybe we had.

I didn't know her secrets, and I'd meant it when I told Mitch I didn't want to know, not until she trusted me enough to tell me, but there was definitely something there. This was more than a girl who wasn't looking for commitment. There were parts she'd completely closed off, and I didn't know how to get to them. That I desperately wanted to made the stakes even higher.

“Come upstairs with me.” I held my hand out to her again. “Please.”

She hesitated before she placed her slender hand in mine, the contrast between us even more noticeable. In that moment she felt delicate, and I felt an urge to protect her, even though she was the girl who seemed like the last thing she needed was protecting.

Jackie

We walked up the stairs together as Will led me to his bedroom. He opened the door, flicking on the light, waiting while I crossed the threshold before coming in behind me.

I tried to focus on his bedroom, on the elegant paintings, and the ginormous bed with its pool of navy sheets that looked soft as butter. I tried to focus on the hardwood floors, and the ornate light fixtures, everything but the man in the room with me.

The night we'd met at the bar, I'd felt reckless. I'd never intended for it to be anything more than one night; he'd just been a hot guy that my body had been *very* attracted to. But now, I liked him, a lot. He was smart, and funny, and kind. And as much as it scared the shit out of me, I respected him for challenging me. He didn't give me a free pass on things because he wanted to get laid.

I just didn't know what to do next.

I moved around the room, taking in the decor, using the time to calm my nerves. His bedroom was gorgeous, male, elegant, just like him. It was so much more grown-up than my shitty little apartment with the *Les Misérables* poster on the wall, and furniture that didn't match, and the roommate I barely got along with. A five-year age difference was beginning to feel like much, much more.

"Jackie."

The sound of his voice sent a shiver down my spine. Where was the nervous guy I'd flirted with at the Hay-Adams? How did he do it? It was as if he flipped a switch, and suddenly became someone I didn't know how to handle. Someone who could make my body respond with just a few words.

I turned slowly, desire winding its way through me like a drug.

Will sat on the edge of his bed, his gaze eating me up. He'd removed his jacket at some point during my exploration of his room, draping it at the foot of the bed. He began undoing his bow tie, the sight of his fingers popping open the top button of his collar the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen. He looked every inch the satisfied male, calm and in command of everything.

There would be no fumbling with him, no awkward sex moves, nothing but toe-curling, sheet-gripping pleasure. Every inch of his body promised me the best sex I'd ever had and I couldn't do anything but stand there staring at him, admiring him, wanting more. My pounding heart kicked into overdrive as my whole body trembled with need.

He'd left his snowy white shirt on, the top button unbuttoned. His hands moved to his wrists, removing his cuff links next, and holy shit, I died a little bit inside. His movements were unhurried and deliberate, and I saw an even more intimate view into his life. He gave me my own private striptease, but instead of sweat and spandex he oozed power and control.

He finished removing his cuff links, setting them in his jacket pocket, and then he rolled up his sleeves, the movement lazy, as if I weren't standing there, lust raging through my body, waiting for him to make a move. I was treated to the sight of tan wrists and muscular forearms before he finished and turned his attention back to me.

His lips curved. "Come here."

Will spread his legs, making a space for me between his thighs.

I moved forward, my legs shaking slightly with each step. I stopped inches away from him. His eyes tracked my every movement, desire in his gaze.

"Strip."

A shiver ripped through my body as my nipples throbbed with need and I grew impossibly wetter. It was a command, and yet it wasn't. It was a promise. It lingered between us unspoken, and I could hear it in the lust soaking his voice—*if you do this, I promise you, I'll make it the best you've ever had.*

My hands trembled as I unhooked the nape of the dress. The brush of the fabric against my body was enough to send another flash of heat through me. My skin was so sensitive, my body so far gone. We'd crossed over the line from want to need a long time ago.

The dress fell to my waist, exposing my naked breasts, my nipples hard, sensitive points dying for his mouth and hands. His gaze trailed down my face, resting on my breasts inches away from his lips, so close that if he moved forward just a hair he could capture one with his mouth. All I could think was, *please*. His gaze ran over me, leaving an ache in its wake.

Will didn't move forward; he just sat there watching me, the only sign that his control was slipping, the white of his knuckles as his hands gripped the edge of the bed.

"All the way."

Those three words sent me spiraling over the edge. I hooked my fingers under the fabric and wriggled my hips. The dress hit the hardwood floor in

a pool of silk. I stood in front of him, naked, still in my heels. His eyes widened, his voice hoarse.

“Kneel down.”

There they were again, words that sounded like a command, delivered in a tone that bordered on desperation. I didn't know who was in control anymore; it was like that with us, a constant shifting of power that kept me continually off balance. I liked it, and hated it, and wanted more. Now.

I knelt between his legs, my hands grazing his strong thighs. The hard line of his erection pressed against my stomach, sending a flash of need through me.

“I've been thinking about this all day. Wanting you, hard for you. Have you thought of me?” There was something raw in his tone, as if I'd just wrested a confession from him.

“I haven't been able to stop thinking of you,” I admitted, my voice shaking as I tripped over the words.

I reached out, mesmerized by his voice and his smoky gaze, and stroked him through the expensive fabric of his tuxedo pants. I traced that hard line, loving the groan that escaped from his lips. He was in control, and yet he wasn't. I loved the power coursing through me at the feel of him against my palm, loved knowing I made him this hard.

Will pulled me toward him, brushing his lips against mine, the kiss firm and more intense than any we'd shared. It was a preview of what it would feel like when he was inside me, his body thrusting into mine, possessing me.

Despite the dominance in his kiss, I met him stroke for stroke, my lips hungry and wanting, plundering his mouth. I plastered my body against his, rubbing my breasts over his hard chest, his muscles pushing against me. And then it hit me that I'd never seen him without his shirt on, never gotten to explore his body the way he'd teased mine.

I broke away from his mouth, my chest rising and falling with heavy pants. My hands reached up, fighting with the buttons of his shirt, moving down until the fabric gaped open, exposing a broad chest and flat, muscular stomach. I pressed my lips to the skin there, loving the feel of him—satin and smooth—loving the taste of him against my mouth. My hands joined my lips, exploring his chest, dipping lower to trace his stomach muscles. I reached up, pulling the shirt away, and pushed back on my heels, unable to resist staring at the man before me.

He had an athlete's body. His shoulders and chest were broad, his collarbone defined. His pecs weren't bulging, but they were *impressive*, tan, strong, just the barest sprinkling of light hair. I reached up, my finger grazing his collarbone, stroking the line before dipping lower, down the middle of his chest, lower still until I reached his abs, the kind of abs women fantasized about.

I played with him, teasing his skin, moving forward and pressing my lips back on him, my hands, and mouth, and teeth leaving marks on his flesh. His muscles jerked beneath my touch.

Will sat on the edge of the bed, silent while I caressed him, in part seducing him, in part being seduced by him. He didn't touch me. Instead he seemed content for me to explore, letting me take my time, worshipping his body with my hands and mouth. The more I touched, kissed, licked, the more I wanted. I longed to move lower, to unzip his tuxedo pants, touch him, taste him. Yearned to take him deep into my mouth, to trace the length of him with my tongue.

I'd never gotten off on giving pleasure. For me sex was always *quid pro quo*. But in this moment I was perfectly content to take care of him, to feel his cock hard against me, to hear his breath growing ragged with each touch. I wanted to know that no matter what happened, he would always remember this night. Always remember me. I shouldn't have wanted for this to mean something, but I did.

My hands moved lower, tracing the sharp indent on either side of his hips, the temptation to see *all* of him suddenly too great to resist. My hands trembling, I reached between us, my gaze never leaving his as I unbuttoned the top button of his pants, pulling the zipper down, my hand brushing against his hard length.

"Do you have any idea how much I want you right now?" His voice was raspy, containing an edge that hadn't been there before.

I grinned, his words sending a thrill through me, the urgency in his voice giving me the confidence I needed. I palmed him, his cock jerking beneath my hand, another groan torn from his lips.

"I think I have some idea."

I hooked my fingers underneath the waistband of his boxer briefs, pulling them down along with the pants. He leaned back on his elbows, watching me as I undressed him. Watching me watch him. And then my gaze dipped lower and I forgot all about his eyes.

Will

The sight of her kneeling between my legs about killed me. And then her hand fisted around me and I died.

She stroked me up and down, her touch bringing me so close to the brink. Everything about this was too much, too intense. I wanted her with a longing that had pushed over to need, and if I didn't have her soon, I'd explode.

Jackie's head bent down and she took me between her lips, her tongue licking over me, her mouth sucking me deeper. My hand gripped the sheets as I lost all sense of time, everything focused on her mouth wrapped around me.

I was so close, on the brink of coming, and yet I held myself back.
Fuck.

I moved out of her reach, wrapping my arms around her waist, pulling her up on the bed. I shifted, pushing her back against the mattress until my body hovered over hers. She felt so small beneath me, and some primal part of me I didn't even know existed loved it.

The second I covered her, all of the desire that had been building while she teased me took over. Gone was the passive guy who was content to be seduced. I wanted her flushed and wet, needed her just as desperate as I was.

My hands were everywhere, teasing her body just as she'd explored mine. I had the advantage here; last night I'd had the chance to see her, last night I'd learned what turned her on. It took the edge off, made it easier to move faster this time. I bent my head, kissing the tattoo over her hip. I licked my tongue over the ink, my dick jerking at the moan that escaped from her lips.

My hands moved up, exploring her breasts, playing with her nipples, each touch bringing out little sighs that stoked the fire within me. Her hips arched, her clit rubbing against me, the wet friction sending off a tremor that passed from her body to mine.

"*Will.*" She threaded her hands through my hair, pulling me against her. My name passing through her lips sent a shudder through me, but it was the unspoken words that lingered between us that had me falling.

I trailed my hand down her skin, teasing the shiver from her body as I grazed her sensitive flesh, slipping my fingers inside her wet warmth.

Whatever control remained evaporated as she throbbed around me, soaking my hand, drawing me deeper into her body. I slid in and out, my thumb rubbing her clit as my fingers fucked her.

Jackie moaned. “Need you inside me. Now.”

I pulled away, grabbing a condom from the nightstand. I ripped open the foil package, my hands shaking as I slid the condom on.

I rolled onto my back, pulling Jackie with me, holding her tight against me while she straddled me, her body surrounding mine. *This* was what had been missing from sex—this need to possess that bordered on madness. This was messy, and complicated, and everything I never knew I wanted or needed.

Jackie’s body slid over mine, her hands reaching between us, circling my cock, guiding me into her. I was the furthest thing from a poet, but in that moment, our bodies joined as she slowly eased herself down on me, inch by inch, her hair spilling around her breasts, eyes filled with lust, Roethke’s words ran through my head before she sank down on my cock and I stopped thinking at all.

Jackie gasped as she began rocking over me, riding me, each sway of her body sending me further into oblivion. I pumped my hips, matching her pace, my heart racing. I gripped her, pulling her down, *so fucking tight*, thrusting deeper.

It took a minute or two to adjust, to learn what each of us liked, until our bodies moved to a beat we found together. I reached down between us, finding her clit, fingering her while she rode me, until she tensed over me, her head thrown back as the first wave of her orgasm hit her. It ripped through me, the pressure building, my own release slamming through me, draining me until our bodies sagged against each other.

I lay there, my body spent. Jackie leaned down onto my chest and I wrapped my arms around her, pulling her against me, loving the feel of her body next to mine. We stayed like that for a minute until I rolled over onto my side. She didn’t speak, and as much as I struggled to think of something to say, I came up blank.

Mind blown.

I went into the bathroom, cleaning up and splashing water on my face. I stared at my expression in the mirror, needing a moment. I hadn’t lied to her; I had no interest in playing games. And yet as much as I’d imagined the sex between us, reality had been something else entirely. She’d turned

me inside out, and I barely recognized the guy staring back at me. And at the same time, I knew he wasn't going anywhere.

When I came out, Jackie was still in bed, looking deliciously ruffled, the sheets pooled around her waist, her breasts bare.

She flushed. "I should go."

Like hell.

I climbed into bed, tucking Jackie against the curve of my side, making the decision for her.

"Stay. I'll make you eggs tomorrow."

I expected her to fight me. But she didn't say anything—she stayed there, her body flush with mine, until exhaustion took over, and we both fell asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Nothing to report here.

—First draft, *Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

I woke in bed alone. For a moment, confusion set in. The mattress was softer than mine, the sheets a dark navy rather than my ivory ones. And then I remembered. I woke in Will Clayton's bed.

I rolled onto my side, wrapping the duvet around me. No sign of Will. Was I supposed to get dressed and leave? In my evening gown? I hesitated, stepping out of bed and grabbing his tuxedo shirt from the floor. I felt stupid going down in my dress, and as awkward as this was, at least the size difference between us meant it covered the important bits. The fact that his scent clung to it, surrounding me, sent a flutter through me I had no business feeling.

Last night had been . . . I didn't even know. Mind blowing? Confusing? Terrifying? All of the above?

I liked him. I loved talking policy with him, loved the way he looked at me. And he was amazing in bed. But it was hard to see this going anywhere. I had my career to focus on. I *had* to get this job at Price. Despite my job at *Capital Confessions* and the money I'd made there over the years, I had student loans. I didn't have a safety net, didn't make enough money blogging to pay the bills. It supplemented my income, sure, but I needed something more permanent, with benefits, and health insurance, and things that kept me up late at night with worry.

I didn't have the option of moving in with mom and dad after graduation, didn't have a parent who I could rely on for anything. Hell, half the time I felt more like my mother's parent. I couldn't afford to be

impulsive, or let my personal and professional life get any more tangled than they already were.

Plus he didn't really know me, didn't understand the mess he was getting himself into if this went any further. My paternity was a closely guarded secret, but if Mitch Anders knew, I didn't doubt someone else did. And the media could be ruthless when they scented blood in the water.

The best thing for both of us was to call it a day. It sucked, but it was the only conclusion I could come to. Now I just had to convince Will of it.

I walked down the stairs in search of him, following the noises until I came to the kitchen. I froze in the doorway.

Will stood in front of me, dressed in a pair of gym shorts and a ratty Harvard Lacrosse T-shirt. His hair was rumpled, his feet bare, and he looked so adorable that I wanted to curl myself against him. Music played from speakers in the wall, the sound of R.E.M. filling the room. He turned and his gaze met mine. His lips curved, the hint of a dimple winking back at me.

"Good morning."

How did he make that sound sexy?

I didn't even mean to smile; it just took over my face. "Morning."

"Want some coffee?"

I hesitated. What the hell, it was just a cup of coffee. "Sure."

Will turned and gave me a mug, our fingers brushing as I took it from him. He leaned back against the countertop, crossing his arms over his chest, studying me. I looked away, my gaze taking in the beautiful space, struggling to focus on anything other than how good he looked and how badly I wanted him again.

"Nice kitchen."

His smile deepened. "You really want to talk about my kitchen?"

My cheeks flamed. I took a sip of the coffee—*so good*—hoping the caffeine would jump-start my brain. I felt off. My body was sore, my mind a clouded, jumbled mess. The resolve I'd felt upstairs wavered at the sight of him in the morning.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"About ten."

Shit. I *never* slept that late. "I should get going. I need to work today." Political campaigns didn't take weekends off.

“You could eat breakfast first.” He gestured to the stove top behind him. “I made omelets.”

My jaw dropped as I followed his gaze. Was this guy for real?

“You made omelets?”

“I told you I would.”

“Yeah, but I thought that was just something you said—”

“To get girls in bed?”

I nodded.

He flashed me a knowing grin. “I would think by now you would have figured out that I don’t have to lie to get a girl in bed with me . . . or to keep her there.”

There it was again—that voice. It was his husky, I-can-make-a-woman-do-anything-I-want voice. It slid inside me, tempting me, seducing me.

“I should go.”

He rolled his eyes. “Are we going to do this again, the back-and-forth? You pulling away when you know that’s really the last thing you want?”

I shrugged. “Nothing’s changed. All of our issues are still reasons why this shouldn’t be anything other than casual.” And after last night, I now understood how stupid I’d been to even think casual was a possibility. I craved him in a way that would massively fuck with my life.

“Last night happened. Multiple times.”

My body was all too aware of how many times last night had happened. That was the problem. But there was something in his tone, an arrogance I couldn’t resist. I hadn’t given him a free pass before, and I definitely wasn’t going to give him one now, even if he did hand out orgasms like they were candy.

“So what, you think we had sex and now I’m so overcome with need for your magic penis that poof, all of our problems will magically disappear, and we can continue on, screwing like rabbits into a happily ever after?”

His shout of laughter broke off the end of my little speech, but I figured I’d gotten my point across.

He shook his head before stalking toward me. “Sorry, I know this is breaking your rules, but I have to.”

His lips claimed mine in a fierce kiss. At least it started that way. His mouth fairly commanded mine to open, to welcome his tongue, his hands cupping my ass through the bottom of his shirt, pulling me against his hard, aroused body. *Jesus*. And then the kiss changed, his touch softening, his

mouth relaxing into mine, until it stopped feeling like a conquest, and more like a slow unraveling—of my walls, my resolve, my heart.

Just as quickly as he'd kissed me, he released me, turning back to the food on the stove, leaving me reeling from his touch, my body already hungry for more.

Will served the food onto two plates, grabbing silverware and napkins. He turned to face me, a wicked smile on his face—

“So you think I have a magic penis, huh?”

Will

Jackie may have had the upper hand when it came to political strategy, but I was beginning to learn how to manage *her*. She thrived on control, and any time I did something to throw her off balance or catch her off guard, a wall came down. I discovered more of her, bit by bit.

Somehow I'd maneuvered her into breakfast. She sat in my formal dining room, staring at me across the table, dressed only in my shirt, her hair everywhere, her makeup smudged, her eyes bleary with sleep. She looked adorable, and for as many times as I'd had her last night, I wanted her again.

“You're a really good cook.” She gestured toward her plate. “This is one of the best omelets I've ever had.”

I grinned. “Thanks. Although to be fair, just so you don't get the wrong impression, breakfast is pretty much the only meal I can cook.”

She snorted. “Let me guess, to keep the ladies happy?”

“Can't blame a guy for trying.”

“I thought you weren't a player,” she teased.

“I'm not. Having some tools in your arsenal doesn't make you a player. Even us boring nice guys need a trick or two up our sleeve.”

She shot me a wry smile. “Somehow I don't think you need any more tricks.”

“Maybe it's not about need, and more about want,” I countered.

“Maybe not all of us can afford to place wants before needs. Maybe we all weren't born with a silver spoon in our mouths.” She took a bite of her omelet with a meaningful expression on her face as if drawing my attention to the fancy flatware.

“So is that what you think of me then, that I’m just some spoiled boy who always gets what he wants?”

I tried to keep the edge out of my voice, and yet it was there despite my best intentions. I loved the banter between us, loved that Jackie was hard on me, and yet the last thing I wanted was for her to discount me when one of the things I liked most about her was how much I respected her.

She set down her fork, meeting my gaze across the table. “I don’t think you’re spoiled. I see how hard you work, how nice you are to the staff. I’ve been around plenty of dickish politicians, and I know you’re not one of them. I’m sorry I give you shit about the money thing. It’s just . . .”

“Just what?”

She sighed. “I don’t fit in with all of this. I’ve been around politics my entire life. I know the drill. There’s a type of political girlfriend and wife. She’s proper, and polite, and went to the right schools, and wears the right clothes, and comes from the right family. She doesn’t swear, or wear neon yellow, or drink whiskey, or pick up strange men in bars.

“I’m not that woman. And if you’re serious about this lifestyle, you can’t be the single guy out on the town with a different girl. You don’t even seem like you want to be that guy. So where is this going? I just don’t see a point.”

I gave her a moment to catch her breath, and then I launched my attack.

“Well, first off, did you ever consider that I like that you wear neon colors and curse? And maybe you weren’t picking me up; maybe I picked you up. I’ve dated the girl you described. She’s all I’ve ever dated. I like that girl. There’s nothing wrong with any of those things. But maybe that’s not what I want. I like that girl, but she doesn’t fill my thoughts or drive me crazy. She doesn’t make me want to be better or work harder so I can impress her.

“The truth? There’s a reason I’m a twenty-six-year-old politician who isn’t married. I’ve liked plenty of girls, but I’ve never found one I could imagine spending my life with. Not even close. So from where I’m sitting, maybe the right girl isn’t the right girl for me.

“I like you. I want to get to know you better. Stop freaking out and give me a shot. From where I’m sitting, things were pretty fucking amazing between us last night. You want to pretend that doesn’t mean anything, fine. But you’re lying to yourself, and you’re lying to me. So think about what

you really want, and stop telling me what you think I should want. I want you. I don't give a shit about the rest of it."

Her jaw dropped. She stared at me like I was a puzzle she was trying to work out. It was a full minute before she spoke.

"Okay."

"Okay? Just like that?"

"No, not just like that. I still think this is a horrible idea, but I'm tired of trying to fight you." She shook her head. "You speak and I forget everything I was going to say."

Triumph surged through me.

"Maybe you should trust me," I coaxed.

"I'm not so good at trusting."

"Yeah, I'm getting that." I hesitated, wondering where the line was between pushing her and trying to get her to see that she could open up to me. "Let's play a game."

The look she shot me was pure suspicion. "What kind of a game?"

"You tell me something you're afraid of and I'll tell you something I'm afraid of. Something I've never told anyone."

"That sounds horrible."

"You know in some circles this is considered dating, sharing parts of yourself with another person. It's really not that barbaric or strange."

"It's really personal."

I laughed softly. "I've been inside you, multiple times. I think we're way past that point."

She flushed. "Fine. You first."

Success.

I thought about it for a moment.

"I'm afraid I'm not great at anything. I'm good at lots of things, but I don't have—" I searched for the right words. "—I don't have the kind of passion for anything that makes me truly great at it. My whole life doors have opened for me because of my family, because of my money. And things are fairly easy for me. But I've never been truly exceptional. And I've never loved anything, or been excited about anything, the way you are with politics.

"Look at Mitch. The man eats, lives, and breathes this stuff. And he's amazing at it. I envy finding that thing in your life that makes you feel complete, that feeling that it's what you were born to do. I feel like I'm

trying to figure it out, but I'm twenty-six, and at some point I should probably get my shit together. So yeah, I'm afraid I'm unremarkable."

Jackie

It was strange to hear someone who I viewed as perfect express the same kinds of insecurities and doubts that plagued me on a daily basis. I didn't totally get it—I mean, yeah, my whole life it had always been politics—but I understood the insecurity and the doubt. And as soon as he gave a voice to it, I wanted to take his fears away.

"You're not unremarkable."

Will shrugged. "I wasn't fishing for compliments."

"I know. I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it." I needed him to know that I saw him. That for all the shit I gave him, I admired him. "You're a good guy, a really good guy. Maybe that's your thing. Being a good guy. Trust me, I wouldn't underestimate it. I've been around enough politicians to appreciate that it's not a given.

"And for what it's worth, I think you could be great at this. You just have to find a way to be comfortable with it. Elections suck. Consultants and advisors are the only people who actually like campaigns, and honestly, we get burned-out on them, too. Focus on the end result—getting elected, making changes. That's what drew you to politics in the first place. Focus on that."

He smiled softly. "You're really good at this."

"What? Giving pep talks?"

"All of it." He took a sip of his coffee, his gaze on me. "Okay, I shared mine, how about you?"

When he'd originally suggested this, I'd thought about making up some BS. But now he'd trusted me with a part of himself I doubted he showed to many people, and it was hard to not feel like I should do the same with him.

"I'm afraid I'm going to turn into my mother."

It was my biggest fear, the thing I'd never told *anyone*, and yet I gave it to him without hesitation.

"Why? What's wrong with your mother?"

He'd met her. How could he not see it?

“She dates powerful men who treat her like she’s no better than a mistress. Which she basically is.” It was the perfect opportunity for me to add the rest of it, and yet I couldn’t. Maybe I was an idiot, or a coward, or all of the above, but I couldn’t say the words, couldn’t let him see how ugly my origins really were.

Something flickered in his eyes—understanding and what looked an awful lot like sympathy. “Jackie—”

“Don’t feel sorry for me. It’s fucked up, and I hate it, and yeah, that’s why I don’t get into the politician thing.” The unspoken, *except for you*, hung between us. “But don’t feel sorry for me. It’s not the end of the world. It’s tawdry and cheap, but it’s fine. But now you get it. Why I am the way I am. It’s not you, it’s me.”

“The whole drink thing at the Hay-Adams?”

I nodded. “I pay my own way. Always. I don’t want some man taking care of me. I don’t need it.” The unspoken, *not even you*, hung between us, too.

“And your father?”

Will’s voice was gentle, completely devoid of judgment, and yet that word sent fear through me—fear and shame.

“You never talk about him.”

As wrong as I knew it was, I’d been telling the lie for long enough that the words just slipped out of my mouth, even as I knew I should have told him the truth.

“My father’s dead.”

Chapter Fourteen

Fuck me.

—First draft, *Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

Do not picture him naked. Do not picture him naked.

We sat in the conference room, planning out Will's next campaign stops. I'd been staring at a blank piece of paper for the last half hour. To say my mind was somewhere else would have been a massive understatement. I kept flashing back to Saturday night—to images of Will's body, Will's *naked* body, and of him thrusting into me, gripping my hips, of his mouth ravaging mine . . .

Our gazes connected across the conference table and a flush spread over my cheeks. His eyes widened slightly, his lips twitching as if he'd read my mind. So much for self-control.

I'd never been this girl before. I'd laughed at this girl. I'd liked guys, kissed guys, had sex with a few, and I'd never been the girl who was tied up in knots over a guy.

Until now.

I couldn't fucking think. My *Capital Confessions* post was so overdue that I was avoiding angry emails from Sean, and my brain was seriously lagging. I was three freaking steps away from writing Will's name on my notepad and drawing hearts around it.

Fuck me.

"Love to," Will mouthed across the table. My cheeks flamed.

I talked to myself when stressed; at least I hadn't said it out loud. But still, mouthing it in a meeting was bad enough. I was officially losing it.

"Excuse me," I mumbled to no one in particular, getting up from my chair. Mitch droned on about some campaign mixer, and I opened the door,

making my way through the empty office, heading for the bathroom. We'd been in the meeting for two hours now with only one break and I was starting to crack.

Sitting across from Will had obviously been mistake number one. I was already hyperaware of him, and two hours of staring at his hands, his lips, his mouth, was driving me crazy.

I'd left his place Sunday afternoon and had spent all day and night giving myself a mental pep talk. I was the queen of compartmentalization; it should have been easy to keep my private life out of the office. Except he'd brought me a muffin and coffee this morning.

It wasn't a big deal; he did nice things like that for the staff all the time. But the smile he'd given me when he dropped them off at my desk was nothing like the smile he gave Mitch or anyone else. And it wasn't just his smile, it was the hands that had brushed against mine, curving around my fingers as he handed me the cup. It was so easy to remember the feeling of those fingers inside me, stroking me, filling me. It was the scent of him that surrounded me as he leaned in and dropped the muffin on my desk.

It had been a day since I'd last seen him, and I already wanted him again. Badly.

This was such a fucking disaster.

Mitch, who I was beginning to think was omniscient, kept shooting me looks throughout the meeting, and I worried everyone knew I'd been screwing Will Clayton's brains out over the weekend.

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, my hands gripping the edge of the countertop.

"Stop freaking out. He's just a guy. It was just sex."

I repeated the mantra over and over, hoping that if I said it enough, I'd believe it.

Maybe I should hit the gym after work. A run was the perfect distraction to stave off the sexual frustration that was like a geyser waiting to explode. *Sexual frustration?* I'd just had sex with this guy. What was wrong with me? I leaned my forehead against the glass, my eyes shutting.

"Fuck me."

And then I heard it, the sound of the bathroom door closing, followed by a lock turning. My eyes opened as I whirled around, coming face-to-face with Will. He just stared at me, his shoulder propped against the bathroom

door, and then a slow smile, one that sent a tingle through my body, followed by a flash of heat, spread across his lips.

“Yes, please.”

Will

My resolve to stay away from her lasted all of four hours. Impressive.

I locked the bathroom door behind me, drinking in her appearance. Everything had been good up until this morning. On my way into the office, I’d stopped and picked up a coffee, and somehow ended up getting her one and a muffin. I’d noticed she sometimes forgot to eat during the day, and I was already there . . . no big deal. I’d meant to drop it off at her desk, maybe get a chance to see her, and that would be it. But then I *saw her* and it all fell apart.

She’d never worn a dress to work before. It was sad that I noticed her outfits, but I did.

Today she wore a dress. I knew nothing about women’s fashion, but whatever type of dress it was, poems should have been written about it. It was a DRESS.

Nothing about it was overly sexual. It was knee-length with a V-neckline that didn’t actually show anything, but since I’d already seen it all, that was almost *worse*. It was as if the dress taunted me, hinting at curves I’d already explored, teasing me with the memory of her body. I blamed the dress for everything that followed.

“This isn’t a good idea.” Jackie’s voice was breathless, her skin flushed, that same slightly crazed look in her eyes that I knew could be found in mine. Everything about her—her tone, her gaze, the energy surrounding her—was at odds with the caution in her words. *This isn’t a good idea*, sounded suspiciously like, *please, yes, now*.

“I know. It’s a terrible idea. But right now, it feels like the best bad idea I’ve ever had. I have to be inside you.”

I could have struggled for smooth, but I settled for honesty instead. There was need in my voice, vibrating through my body, every muscle tense, my dick hard, while the primal part of my brain that screamed, *mine*, told me to fuck caution, logic, and sanity, and go straight for pleasure—warm and wet.

I stalked toward her, my heart pounding in my chest like I'd run a fucking marathon. It was the same feeling I always had around Jackie—nerves, excitement, and a kind of edgy energy that pumped through my veins.

I stopped in front of her, our bodies touching, bending her back against the bathroom countertop. My gaze drifted from her face, and I caught sight of my reflection in the bathroom mirror. I froze, barely recognizing myself.

I looked just like I felt—wild, lost, savage almost. Gone was the boy who wore khakis and dated “nice girls;” gone was the man who wore business suits and avoided scandal like it was a contagious disease. This man, the one staring back at me in the mirror, didn't give a fuck about any of that. He wanted one thing, and one thing only, and her ass was pressed up against the marble, her tits inches away.

Jackie arched her hips, bringing her lower body against mine, rubbing herself over my erection as the last vestiges of sanity slipped through my fingers.

I reached down between us, taking her hand, pressing it to my cock until she cupped me as I strained against my zipper.

The voice that escaped my lips was raspy, desperate, and sounded like it came from someone else.

“I've been hard all day thinking about you. I don't have a fucking clue what was said in that meeting because all I could think of was you. I woke up last night, surrounded by your scent on my sheets, wanting you. I had to jerk myself off just so I could fall back asleep.”

She moaned, her teeth sinking down on her full lower lip, and suddenly I couldn't wait anymore.

I fumbled with the skirt of her dress, my hand skimming up her leg until I reached the edge of her thong, playing with the lace there before I dipped under the fabric, burying my fingers in her wet heat.

“Christ.”

Jackie moaned again, her hips rocking back and forth as my fingers pumped into her. Her hand wrapped around my dick, stroking up and down.

I moved back, kneeling on the tile floor, lifting her skirt up, baring her body as I pulled off her thong, trailing kisses down her leg as my mouth followed the path my hands had taken.

“You've been driving me crazy all day. I kept fantasizing about you in this dress, wondering what you were wearing underneath it.” I reached up,

stroking between her legs, loving the soft little sighs that escaped from her mouth. “I saw you in the meeting; I saw you and knew you were remembering Saturday night, how good it was between us. I wondered if you were wet like this, if you wanted it as badly as I did.”

She gasped.

“Tell me. Tell me how badly you want this; tell me I’m not the only one going crazy here. Tell me you touched yourself yesterday wishing it was my hands between your legs, my tongue on your clit, my cock making you come.”

I slid my fingers in and out, all that wetness surrounding me, creating a delicious friction between my skin and hers.

Jackie’s head fell back against the mirror. “Yes. God. Yes to all of it. I can’t fucking think; I can’t breathe.” My fingers twisted and her body jerked. Her voice was breathless, need breaking through her words. “You’re driving me crazy. I’ve never been like this. Never wanted anyone like this.”

With each word that came out of her mouth, the desire within me grew. I played with her body, wanting to watch her fall apart, needing to watch her come. She was so close, so responsive.

“Wait.” Her hands moved between us, fingers fumbling with my clothes, unbuttoning my pants, sliding my zipper down, pulling down my boxers. “I want you inside me,” she panted.

“Come home with me tonight. After work.” I was using sex to barter more time with her and I didn’t even care how messed up it was. If there were ever a time to play dirty, this was it. I worked a third finger inside her, my thumb rubbing back and forth against her clit, teasing another moan from her lips. I held back, my fingers keeping her on the brink, giving her pleasure, drawing it out until she looked like she was about to break.

“Come home with me.” *Come home with me and I’ll make it amazing.*

“Fine. *Fuck.* I need you inside me. *Now.*”

Blood rushed through my head like a steam engine. It hit me then. *Shit.*

“I don’t have a condom.”

I’d never had sex in public before. I wasn’t the guy who carried a condom in his wallet, hoping to get lucky. I was a fucking idiot.

She stilled, meeting my gaze. Neither one of us moved, my hand between her legs, her lips inches from mine. Everything hung in suspension between us.

Jackie sighed. “I’m on the pill, and I haven’t been with anyone in months. I’m clean.”

Thank god. I knew I should back away, but we were so far past that point.

“I haven’t been with anyone, either. Not in a long time.”

I didn’t add the rest. I’d never had sex with a girl without a condom. Ever. It was one of the Clayton rules. Growing up wealthy meant there would always be women who wanted a piece of me because of my name and the money that came with it. So I was cautious. Always. Even with girlfriends. I was a lot of things before Jackie.

I saw nerves in her eyes, mixed with uncertainty. And then she pushed herself up on the edge of the counter, her legs spread wide, her dress bunched up against her waist, and my mind went completely blank.

Jackie

You’re playing with fire.

It was the last thought before he thrust into me, stretching me, pushing my body back against the cool glass.

We were in the bathroom at work, I was the oops-baby to end all oops-babies, I was fucking him without a condom, and all I could think was, yes, as his body pushed into mine.

My legs wrapped around his waist instinctively, pulling him closer to me, unable to tell where his body ended and mine began. He was still dressed in his suit, looking like he’d just walked off of the cover of *GQ*. I reached out, grabbing his tie, and pulled him toward me, fusing my mouth with his. I fucked him with my mouth, using my tongue, and lips, and teeth to tell him what I wanted where words failed me.

His hands gripped my hips, pulling me tighter against him until I felt the orgasm building. My head lolled back as his lips ravaged mine, swallowing the scream his body tore from my mouth as I broke. His hips jerked against me, and then he shuddered, the force of his orgasm knocking us both back until we sagged against the counter, our bodies boneless.

Holy shit.

A minute passed, maybe two. The sex haze erased all sense of time.

“Give me a second.” Will’s arms wrapped around me, his head buried in the curve of my neck, his lips brushing against my skin. The scent of sex surrounded us, and little by little sanity returned. Sort of. We were in the bathroom at work, and he was between my legs, and he’d just fucked my brains out. And we’d officially been gone longer than we could make excuses for.

“Shit. Shit. Shit.”

Will groaned against my skin. “Please don’t freak out.”

“We’re in the bathroom.” This took tacky to new levels. “The bathroom. At work.”

He pulled out, slowly, a hiss escaping my lips as his touch vibrated through me. He turned away while I struggled to fix my dress and clean myself up, my legs shaking as they hit the tile.

Will turned back to face me, his clothes wrinkled, his face wary.

“I’m sorry. Okay, that’s a lie. I’m not sorry. Not for what just happened. But I’m sorry I put you in an awkward position. It was reckless.”

I didn’t trust my voice enough to speak. We’d brushed by *reckless* and were now moving squarely into *stupid*.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

“What am I going to say?” I glanced down at my watch. “It’s been twenty minutes. How the hell am I going to explain that I’ve been on a twenty-minute bathroom break?”

Will ran a hand through his hair, a panicked expression crossing his face. He took a deep breath.

“You’re not. You’re going to go to Starbucks. I’ll go back in and say I’ve sent you off to get coffee since the meeting was going on for so long. If anything, I’ll look like the asshole making you go run errands. Besides, no one’s going to care. I promise you, we weren’t the only people bored in there.”

“And you think people will buy that?”

He shrugged. “I’m the boss. I don’t care if they buy it. They don’t have much of a choice.”

“What if someone had tried to go to the bathroom?”

“I locked it. They didn’t.”

“What if they had? What are we doing?”

“I’m not ending this.”

“Why?” I searched his gaze as if I could find the answers I needed there. As if I would somehow understand my own actions, find an explanation for the insanity building inside of me. But all I saw was the same confusion mirrored in his eyes.

“Come over tonight.”

I shook my head. “This is such a bad idea. We both know it. We should be smart about this.” I gestured around us. “A lot smarter than this.”

“Come over.”

He leaned in closer to me, his lips on mine, his tongue darting in and out of my mouth with a soft caress. An invitation I couldn’t refuse. Hands that should have pushed him away gripped his collar, pulling him closer to me.

“We could ruin your political career. You get that, right? All of this, quick sex here and there, could end you.” I struggled to find reason to argue with when my own had fled. “Is all of this really worth your political future?”

His lips brushed mine and the word disappeared between our mouths.

“Yes.”

Chapter Fifteen

A very reliable source tells us Will Clayton has been seen around town with a mystery blonde. Could romance be in the air?

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

I stood on his doorstep wearing the biggest pair of sunglasses I owned, a trench coat, and a fedora hat my roommate had purchased for a university production of *The Maltese Falcon*. My hand shook as I rang the buzzer.

The office shut down around six today. Mitch was annoyed when Will told the staff to go home, but everyone else had been relieved. Most of us worked weekends, and we all needed a break.

And I had a date with Will. Sort of.

The door swung open, and I stared up at him. He was dressed casually—worn jeans, another faded Harvard T-shirt, this one a dark gray, his feet bare. His hair was wet around the ends as if he'd just gotten out of the shower. He smelled like soap, and man, and it took everything I had to keep from reaching out and hauling him toward me.

His gaze raked me over from head to toe, his eyes widening as a smile cracked on his lips.

“Do I need to give a secret password, Mata Hari?”

I groaned. “The hat was too much.”

His smile deepened. “If you were going for a sexy spy role-playing game, you nailed it.” He reached out, his finger trailing the trench coat collar. “Is it too much to hope you’re not wearing anything under there?”

I batted his hand away. “I took the Metro to get here. I’m wearing clothes.”

His dimple winked at me. “If I’d known the Metro was the only impediment to you coming naked, I would have sent a car.”

“You think you’re so adorable, don’t you?”

He laughed. “Sometimes. I think you think I’m adorable.”

I rolled my eyes. “Are you going to let me in? Standing outside your front door having a five-minute conversation is the antithesis of discretion.”

He wrapped his arm around me, pulling me through the door, closing it with a thud.

“Are you hungry?”

“A bit. I ate at the office.”

“Diet Coke and pretzels at your desk does not a dinner make.”

Apparently he’d noticed more than I’d realized. “I’m busy. Sometimes I forget to eat.”

“Good thing I got us dinner, then.” He looked nervous, which was so cute it wasn’t even funny. “You like Italian, right?”

I smiled, remembering it was his favorite. “Yeah, Italian’s good.”

I followed him to the dining room, surprised to see the table set with a feast—lasagna, garlic bread, salad. A nice bottle of red wine sat beside the food. The lights were dimmed but for a few candles spread out. The Civil Wars played from the speakers.

Oh god, there were roses sitting on the table. Big fat roses, their heads the size of a man’s fist. I’d never had a guy buy me flowers. No one had ever bought me flowers. And while he wasn’t exactly giving them to me, they were there on the table, their presence speaking volumes. They hadn’t been there Sunday, so at some point he’d gone out and bought roses and candles.

“You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble,” I sputtered. “What is all this?”

Will shoved his hands into his pockets, his eyes dancing in the candlelight. “This is romance. Earlier was . . . mind-blowing. But I’m not typically—not ever, really—a bathroom-sex kind of guy. I wanted you to know there was more.” His voice dropped to something low and seductive. “I wanted to give you more. Although, full confession, this is takeout from my favorite Italian restaurant in Alexandria. I told you breakfast was the sum of my culinary skills.”

I jerked my gaze from the roses and candles, their presence giant warning signs screaming at me to run.

“Sit. Eat. Don’t freak out. It’s just dinner, not a marriage proposal.” Something sparkled in his eyes, and suddenly he’d done it again—pulled

the rug out from under me. I'd come here expecting hot sex, and I'd gotten red roses and garlic bread instead.

I sat. I ate. I struggled not to freak the fuck out.

I sort of thrived on order, logic, and control. My mother was a total disaster. When I was a kid—and later—she forgot to pay bills, didn't buy groceries, disappeared with her various boyfriends, leaving me to fend for myself. It didn't allow a lot of time for me to indulge. I hadn't been a saint, but everything, even sex, had been carefully weighed and considered. *Would it ruin the friendship? Was it likely to be good enough to make it worth it? Could we just keep things casual between us?*

Before Will sex had been good, occasionally great. It hadn't been irresistible. And this? The roses, and the candles, and the music? The feeling that my heart was falling through my stomach? He called this romance; I called it the scariest fucking thing that had ever happened to me. He should have come with a warning label—

Caution: Seems harmless, will turn your life upside down until you don't know which way is up.

"Tell me about the tattoo."

I tore my attention away from the garlic bread I made love to. "Excuse me?"

Will sipped his wine, his tapered fingers stroking the stem. "Why that line? Why that poem?"

Of all the questions he could have asked, I hadn't predicted that one. My answer wasn't even a little guarded when it tumbled from my mouth.

"It spoke to me."

A flush crept up my cheeks. That sounded so cheesy. I didn't say cutesy things or act on my feelings, but here I was saying things like, "it spoke to me," unable to form more than a few words because the emotions swirling in my throat choked me.

Boys my own age, the boys I knew, would've said something about the design, or how its placement on my hip was sexy, or shown me theirs, or used it as an excuse to get my clothes off. But Will just stared at me like he was waiting for something, waiting for me to give him more. He coaxed the words out of me, and before I knew it, I was telling him all of it.

"Have you ever wondered what makes perfectly rational people do completely stupid things? I mean, take sex for example. We basically live in

the sex scandal capital of the world. It's in the air here and yet"—I struggled to gather my thoughts—"I don't get it."

I used to not get it.

"What don't you get?"

"Sex fucks everything up. People risk everything for a moment. For a feeling they get for an instant, for a rush of pleasure, for something physical."

"So you think sex is just physical?"

Not with you.

"Sometimes. And sometimes it's . . ." I didn't want to say the words that hovered there—words like "ugly" and "sordid." Didn't want to explain how it felt to know your whole existence was based off of an animal instinct that had nothing to do with emotion, or feelings, or even *love*.

I'd been a mistake. One my father regretted; one my mother probably regretted. She'd gotten money from him, but like everything with her, the money slipped through her fingers like water through a sieve, leaving her with a document she'd signed promising not to come back for more, and a daughter she didn't want.

"Sometimes it's disappointing." I shrugged. "I read 'I Knew a Woman' my senior year in high school. And the moment I read it"—the words slipped through me again—"it made me think there might be something I was missing, moments when sex wasn't just about ego, money, and power. That there could be beauty in it. Even if I didn't think I'd ever find it."

I didn't tell him the rest, that there was something about the poem that gave me hope. Hope that even though I'd been born from this ugly affair between two people who didn't give a shit about each other, that maybe there was something out there that was special—more—even if I was afraid to find it. Even if it sat across the table from me, staring at me like I was everything.

Silence hung between us, and I felt that awkward sense that maybe I'd over-shared, and I wished I could rewind the last few minutes, scoop up my words, and hide them back inside me. But then he spoke and I lost more than words. I lost my heart.

"First off, whoever told you sex was just physical wasn't doing it right." Will cleared his throat. "I see beauty every time I look at you."

I froze.

“Sometimes when I’m inside you, I feel like the breath has been knocked from my body, and I forget everything but the look in your eyes. There’s something about our bodies joining that feels right, like there’s nowhere I’d rather be. Like it’s exactly where I’m meant to be.”

He played with his fork, his gaze on mine. “When I enter a room now I look for you before I do anything else. And if you’re not there, I wonder where you are, and what you’re doing, and even though I’m not supposed to admit it, part of me wishes I were with you. And when you are there, I can’t take my gaze off of you.

“I watch you, waiting for you to smile, wishing that smile were for me. When you smile it lights up the room, and when you laugh I feel it rush through my whole body.” His voice cracked slightly. “I know you’re freaked out. I know you’ve never done this before. I like that you haven’t done this before. Like knowing that I’m showing you things no one else has ever shown you. There’s beauty here, whether you want to admit it or not.”

I couldn’t speak. I didn’t even know where to begin, how to explain to someone like him where I’d come from. I didn’t know how to make him understand that things like this were nearly impossible for me. No one had ever given me what he gave me now.

He’d grown up surrounded by love. The way he described his mother, his relationship with her, she loved him. He didn’t know what it was like to live your entire life never hearing the words, *I love you*; he didn’t know what it was like to always feel alone.

Will sat across from me, saying things I didn’t know how to process. I’d never let anyone in; never let anyone get close. But he didn’t seem to care. He pushed and pushed, sneaking through my defenses, and now my mind was full of him. He’d invaded me, and I had no clue how to handle it.

“I don’t want to screw this up.” I don’t know who was more surprised by the words coming out of my mouth. “I probably will. I don’t know what I’m doing. I’ve never had a boyfriend. I don’t even know what this is.”

“Don’t you?”

I shook my head.

“It isn’t just physical.” There was something in his voice—it wasn’t a question, but I heard the uncertainty, as if he needed reassurance.

I was becoming too good at giving him what he wanted. “No. It isn’t.”

As soon as I said the words, one knot unbound and another one tied.

I flailed a bit. “I know I suck at this.”

He grinned. “You do. It’s cute, though. You’re the girl who seems like she never takes a wrong step. Now you’re stumbling over yourself and it makes me want to catch you.”

“Just don’t give up on me,” I blurted out, my heart pounding so hard in my chest I could feel little else over my nerves and the urge to throw up. “I want to be better at this. I’m trying. I’m going to try,” I amended, unable to look up and meet his gaze. “Just give me a chance.”

I stared down at the plate, struggling to keep my face from heating, trying not to feel like I’d just put myself out there, waiting to see if he’d reject me. The silence became overwhelming, and suddenly I had to look up, had to know if my words had any effect.

The weight of his stare knocked the breath from me. He looked at me like a man who knew exactly what he wanted.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

I swallowed. “Good.”

I forced myself to eat another piece of lasagna and act like those four words weren’t everything; as though I hadn’t just given him my heart along with the unspoken, *please don’t break it*.

Chapter Sixteen

Rumor has it Will Clayton is off the market. Who's responsible for locking the handsome candidate down?

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

It took skill to date a girl without letting her know you were dating her. I started out gradually—I brought her things in the morning—coffees, muffins, donuts, her favorite croissants from a French bakery in Alexandria. Of course, in order to spoil her, I also had to spoil the entire office so no one would realize my relationship with Jackie was anything other than professional. Overnight I became everyone's favorite boss, and my Amex bill took a hit.

I was pretty sure she knew what I was doing—with the food, at least. Her lips curved every time I delivered another set of baked goods to her desk. But each time, her smile kept me in a good mood for hours. Definitely worth it.

The flowers were harder. Giving her flowers would have freaked her out, but for some reason I couldn't even begin to understand, I wanted her to have them. So I just bought them, filling my town house with roses until the place smelled like a florist and I began questioning my sanity.

"What time will your parents be here?"

Jackie stood in front of me, a clipboard in hand, my name written across her chest. She *would* make a white cotton *Vote for William Clayton* T-shirt look hot. It took me a moment to use my words.

I glanced at my watch, tearing my gaze away from her, conjuring up the least sexy thing I could think of. "They should be here any minute."

"Good. I emailed the itinerary so they should be clear on the schedule of events. Are you nervous about your speech?"

Today was a talk in front of the League of Women Voters. Jackie set it up last-minute; she'd been volunteering with them for a few years. It was good exposure for me, a chance to work on the ever-important female vote. My mother and father were in town visiting and had decided to stop by and hear me speak. I was more nervous about Jackie meeting them than I was about the speech.

"A little bit."

Jackie reached out, straightening my tie. Her gaze ran over me, her expression critical. As always, just being close to her was enough to make me want her. I kept waiting for this feeling to disappear, for the edge to abate. It'd been over a week since we'd first had sex, and I still felt the same rush I had in the beginning.

Despite the lust tearing through my body, we were firmly in candidate/campaign staffer mode. In a way, today was just as important for Jackie as it was for me. Mitch had let her take the lead planning the event. It made me even more determined to do well.

"Are you nervous?" I asked.

She grinned. "A little bit."

"I'll make you proud. I'll charm all the ladies, and I'll keep my hands to myself, and off of your gorgeous body." I shoved my hands into my pockets with a grin. "And I'll stop thinking about how cute you look in that T-shirt. Okay, that's a lie. But I will rock the speech. Promise."

The smile deepened. "Trust me, the last thing I'm worried about is your ability to charm the ladies."

"So you think I'm charming?" I teased.

"Fishing for compliments?"

"Only from you. Always from you."

She sighed. "You're incorrigible. I'm not worried. Everyone will love you."

The sad thing was, somewhere along the way I'd stopped caring about what everyone else thought, and only wanted to impress her. Easier said than done.

I lowered my voice. "What are you doing later tonight?"

"Mitch has me working on a ton of stuff with him." She shot me a look. "I've been cutting out earlier than normal lately."

"What about after that?"

She hesitated.

“What?”

“Maybe we should take a night off.”

“Why?”

“We’ve been seeing a lot of each other lately.”

“And the problem is?”

“Aren’t you sick of me?”

“It’s been three nights this week. We’re not exactly picking out china patterns.” I had friends who were commitment phobic, but they could have taken lessons from this girl. “Did I seem sick of you last night?” I whispered.

She flushed. “No.”

“So there you have it. We can grab a drink when you finish working. I’m going out for dinner with my parents. Text me when you’re finished and we’ll meet up.”

I walked off without giving her a chance to argue. I was beginning to learn you had to manage Jackie to get ahead. The trick was getting away with it.

Jackie

He was *maneuvering* me again. It was frustrating, and annoying, and strangely arousing. That he was good at it—and it worked—complicated things even more.

I leaned back in my chair, notepad in hand, listening to Will’s speech. He was, for lack of a better term, nailing it.

Today he wore a navy suit, light blue shirt, blue striped tie. It was elegant without being pretentious, and did amazing things for his tall, muscular frame and tanned skin. I definitely wasn’t the only one turned on right now. Women leaned forward in their chairs as he spoke, more than a few playing with their hair. He cracked a joke and giggles spread throughout the audience. Hell, I’d written the damned joke and even I had to fight the laugh from bursting out. He was a heartbreaker, and I didn’t think he even realized it. Or maybe he didn’t care. He had all of these weapons in his arsenal and he didn’t need to use them.

Mitch sank down in the empty seat next to me. “Our boy’s killing it.”

The burst of pride was unexpected and a little overwhelming. “He is.”

“You did a good job with the event. It’s the perfect audience. Great turnout, too.”

I flushed. Praise from Mitch was rare. I counted myself lucky if he wasn’t yelling at me, telling me I’d fucked up. He wasn’t an asshole; he was tough on everyone, but fair. And even though I knew he would never say it, Will was more than just a candidate for him. But that could be said for all of us.

There were candidates you worked for because it was your job; candidates you never really liked, but whose campaigns you ran because politics left little room for personal feelings. And then there were candidates like Will. We all believed in him, in his message, his campaign promises. He genuinely cared about helping people, and it inspired the staff working for him to give their all.

“Have you met his parents?” Mitch asked.

My gaze drifted to the elegant couple in the front row. “Briefly.”

I’d introduced myself when they first arrived, careful to make sure Will wasn’t around. I didn’t want to blur the lines between our relationship, working or otherwise, any more than we already had. Meeting the parents as anything other than campaign staff screamed blurred lines.

“They’ve thrown a lot of support behind his campaign,” Mitch mused.

I nodded in agreement.

They genuinely appeared to care about their son—seemed like the perfect family. His mother was the epitome of elegance, dressed in a suit that was probably St. John or something similar and wearing an engagement ring that could have doubled as an ice skating rink. Will’s dad was tall, the resemblance between father and son strong. Both his parents had been polite and showed absolutely no hint that they realized I was boning their son. Still, the whole thing felt weird.

The more time I spent with Will, the more I liked him. I thought about him during the day and at work. I liked spending time with him, in and out of bed. I cared about him. I just didn’t know where that left us. I’d say I was falling for him, but that was a complete lie. I’d already fallen for him and all I could think was—

Fuck.

Will

“Are we going to talk about it?” My mother asked.

We were ensconced in a table at Old Ebbitt waiting for my father to finish a business call.

“Talk about what?”

She rolled her eyes. “Really, William. Do I look like I’m blind? The girl.”

She brought out “William” when she was about to take me to task.

“What girl?”

“The blonde. The one you couldn’t stop staring at earlier.”

God. Jackie was going to kill me if I really was this obvious.

“Are you seeing her?”

I loosened the knot in my tie. It wasn’t that I was ashamed of my relationship with Jackie, or whatever it was, but at the same time, I didn’t want to discuss my sex life with my mother. And I really didn’t want to hear all of the ways Jackie was wrong for me.

“Sort of.”

“Define ‘sort of.’”

“I’m seeing her, she just doesn’t realize it yet.”

“I don’t understand what that means.” She frowned. “Is this some sort of new dating thing I’m not familiar with?”

I ran a hand through my hair, resisting the urge to pull it out.

“It’s more of a Jackie thing.”

“And what’s wrong with her, that she doesn’t want to see my son?”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the indignation in her voice. Pushy or not, I loved my mother.

“She’s scared. She’s young and she’s never had a boyfriend, and I think she’s afraid of how this looks—her working for me. It’s a tough situation.”

“It is. Some might even call it reckless. You’ve worked hard to get where you are. You have your whole future ahead of you, and now you’re risking that future for a pretty blonde? If the media learns about this—”

This was why I wanted to avoid this discussion.

“I know. Believe me, I know. It’s the worst possible time for something like this to happen. And yeah, she’s not exactly the kind of girl everyone expected me to fall for. It’s complicated with her. Everything just feels like *more*.”

My mother stared back at me.

“What?”

She shook her head. “You have that look in your eyes. The one you used to get when you were a little boy and you wanted to wear your Superman pajamas to school.”

“Mom—”

“You’ve been the perfect son. I know I’m not supposed to use words like ‘perfect,’ but it’s the one that comes to mind. I couldn’t be prouder of you.”

I was pretty sure my cheeks were bright red.

“You are kind, and smart, and you have the world in front of you. I wanted you to get into politics because I truly believed you could make a difference. You’re a leader. You always have been. I don’t want you to throw that away because of sex.”

God, this just kept getting worse. Hearing the word “sex” escape from my mother’s mouth was horrifying.

“It’s not like that. She’s the smartest girl I’ve ever met. She’s funny, and hardworking, and yeah, she’s sexy as hell, but that’s not all of it. There’s so much more with her. She’s . . .” I struggled to come up with the right words to describe Jackie. “She’s special.”

“You’re in love with her.”

“What? No. It’s been like two weeks since we met.” I scrambled to remember that night at the Hay-Adams and do the math. “Three weeks. It’s been three weeks. You don’t fall in love with someone in three weeks.”

My mother nodded. “Of course you don’t.”

My eyes narrowed. “Are you patronizing me?”

“Yes.”

Heaven help me, all of the women in my life were managing me.

“I’m your mother. I know you. Once you make your mind up about something, that’s it, there’s no changing it. You’re in love with this girl.”

“That’s ridiculous. You’re basing this off of what, a five-minute conversation at a bar?”

She smiled the same smile I’d seen flashed my way throughout my childhood. The one that came when I’d insisted that I hadn’t eaten cookies before dinner, even though my face had been smeared with crumbs, or tried to blame the broken glass on the dog, and not the baseball I was throwing in the house.

“No. I’m basing it on the way you couldn’t take your eyes off of her all afternoon. I’ve never seen you look at any of your other girlfriends the way

you looked at her. The conversation just confirmed it.”

I drained my glass, staring at my mother’s smug expression. My brain stumbled over her words, over the feelings inside me.

I’d known there was more than sex between Jackie and me from the beginning. I wasn’t an idiot. I wasn’t afraid of caring for a girl; I’d cared about all of my girlfriends. I wasn’t even scared of commitment. I wanted to get married, wanted to spend my life with just one woman. I just didn’t think I’d meet her at the bar at the Hay-Adams. And I didn’t think she’d have no interest in being my girlfriend, much less anything more serious. And I didn’t expect to fall in love with her in a mad tumble.

I laughed, the irony of how fucked-up this all was hitting me full blast.

“I’m in love with a girl who doesn’t even want to have a relationship. She’s not interested in being my girlfriend. And I’m supposed to what, somehow convince her I’m the one for her? How the hell am I going to do that?”

My mother smiled, a knowing gleam in her eyes. “You’re charming. Charm her.”

Jesus. “I’m trying.”

“Try harder. Girls need a little romance in their lives.”

“She hates romance. I’m using stealth tactics to not freak her out. I keep buying her flowers, but I can’t actually give them to her because that might scare her, so I just leave them around the house.”

She laughed. “You would choose a difficult one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Things have come easily for you your entire life. Don’t get me wrong, as a mother I’ve loved watching you sail through. But I’ve worried about you. Sometimes when things come easily for us, we don’t appreciate their worth. I’m not saying you take things for granted, but you’ve never had to take big risks. You’ve never put yourself out there. Maybe this girl will be good for you. Maybe you need her.”

That was what scared me the most. “And if she doesn’t want me after all?”

“Then she’s a stupid girl who never deserved you in the first place.”

“That’s your totally unbiased opinion?”

She laughed. “There’s no such thing as unbiased when it comes to your children. My greatest joy in life is to see you happy. I want grandchildren to

play with. I want you to find a wife who can give you the kind of marriage your father has given me.

“For what it’s worth, I liked her. She seemed like a smart girl, and she was polite without making any effort to impress us. There was nothing pretentious about her; she didn’t suck up to us because we were your parents. She just seemed to be herself. I respected that.”

I grinned. “With Jackie, what you see is what you get. Having money hurts me more than helps with her.”

“Good. But just be careful, okay? I know you; when you want something, that’s it, but think about your future. Be smart about this so you don’t throw everything away. It’s romantic to give everything up for love, but make sure you don’t end up regretting it. I don’t want you to realize the price was too high when it’s too late.”

I nodded like we weren’t already past the point of no return.

Chapter Seventeen

Spotted: A certain candidate for state senate getting very cozy at McGuire's.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

Will texted me to meet him at a bar in Alexandria. It was one of those moments when my brain screamed, “bad idea,” and my fingers typed, “okay.” I was having a lot of those moments lately.

He'd chosen an Irish pub in Old Town. It was the kind of place that favored more tourists than locals, so the odds of him getting recognized were low. Still, it made me nervous to be out in public with him. The Hay-Adams had been reckless, and that was before I'd realized who he was. Now I worried we were playing with fire.

I walked through the doorway, the scent of beer and the sound of loud music hitting me instantly. My lips curved. By the look of things it was a rowdy place, and totally not what I would have expected him to choose.

I scanned the room, searching for Will. And then I saw him, sitting in a corner, tucked away from the crowd.

He smiled at me as I walked over to his table, not the campaign smile, the one he flashed voters and his staff, but the smile he gave me in private, the one that started at his lips and ended in his eyes. The one that made my heart kick up a beat.

He'd removed his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his dress shirt, exposing his tanned, muscular forearms. At some point he'd taken off his tie. He looked adorable, and I couldn't keep the answering smile off of my face.

“Hi.” Will rose from his seat and held out my chair as I sat down next to him. The gesture pulled another smile out of me. He always did things like

this. Little by little I'd grown used to how polite he was, how these small gestures were effortless for him.

"Hi."

He gestured to the drinks on the table. "I ordered you a Jack and Coke. Well, Diet Coke."

"Thanks." It was so like him to remember my favorite drink and have it waiting for me when I arrived. I flashed him my biggest grin. "Your mother raised you right."

His smile deepened as he settled back into his chair. "Did she?"

"She did." I took a sip of my drink, studying him over the glass. I didn't know what I'd done to deserve him, for him to pick me out of all the girls who probably would have loved for him to stare at them like he looked at me. But whatever it was, I was eternally grateful.

"She likes you, you know."

I tried to swallow, but the drink got caught in my throat. I coughed.

"You okay?"

I nodded, struggling to get my breathing under control. "You talked about me with your mother?"

"More like she talked about you with me. She thought you were smart, and liked that you didn't give a shit about impressing her."

"You talked about me with your mother." I couldn't quite wrap my head around it. I'd never thought of myself as the kind of girl a guy brought home to meet his parents. I didn't come from a "good family." I could field questions about my background for about a minute before it became obvious that I was pretty much a hot mess. And he'd talked about me with his mother.

Will reached across the table, taking my hand in his. Instinct kicked in, and I pulled back—tried to, at least. But he held me there, my hand in his, his grip surprisingly firm.

"We're in public," I hissed.

"Don't care. I want to kiss you."

Oh, god.

"You can't kiss me in public."

He laughed. "You really shouldn't dare me like that. Haven't you figured out by now that I never back down from a challenge?"

My eyes widened. "People will see."

"Do you think I give a shit about whether people see?"

“You should.”

His gaze held mine. “What would they see? That I’m kissing a beautiful girl with a mind that would make Machiavelli proud? Scandalous.”

I closed my eyes, drowning in his words. It was sad that out of all the compliments he gave me, the Machiavelli comment was probably my favorite. Of course, he knew that.

“Will . . .”

If it were only that simple, if things weren’t so complicated, if I weren’t afraid the truth would send him running in the opposite direction. *If*. I wasn’t lying to him because I was afraid I couldn’t trust him with my secrets. I lied to him because I was afraid that when he knew the truth he would leave.

“Don’t.” He leaned forward in his chair, his mouth capturing mine, swallowing my protests.

Compared to our other kisses, it was relatively chaste. And yet it wasn’t. It was the kind of kiss I felt through my whole body, all the way down to my toes.

With each kiss he taught me more. This kiss taught me that once again I’d underestimated him. There was a recklessness to him I never would have recognized before. Maybe that was the part of him that spoke to me. The part that pushed me beyond my comfort zone, that had me taking insane risks, the part that kissed him back like there was never a chance I wouldn’t kiss him back.

He broke away first, a satisfied gleam in his eyes.

I opened my mouth to speak, and then I heard my name—

“Jackie.”

Will

It took me a second to notice the guy standing in front of our table; after that kiss Jackie had all of my attention. But her gaze jerked away and then mine followed.

The guy standing in front of us was tall and skinny—fine, maybe not skinny, perhaps *lean* was a better word. He was dressed in black—grungy black T-shirt, black jeans—*tell me he wasn’t wearing skinny jeans*. His body was a patchwork of tattoos, all with various sayings and images—and

piercings, his eyebrow, his lip. We couldn't have been more different if we tried, the contrast between his tattoos and my suit jarring.

His arm wrapped around Jackie, his face too close to hers, and something inside of me snapped. I hadn't lied when I told her I wasn't the jealous type—it wasn't my style. But seeing this guy with his arm around Jackie was enough for me to revise my assessment. Don't ask me how, but somehow I knew they'd slept together, and I didn't give a shit what it made me, I wanted to put my fist through his face.

I took another sip of my drink instead.

The guy pulled away from Jackie, his arm still looped around her waist, and nodded at me.

“Hey man, I'm Trap.”

Seriously? My eyes narrowed and I shot Jackie my, *are you fucking kidding me*, face. She flushed in return. I tried to remember our earlier conversation. There had been three guys. I doubted this was the high school guy, so process of elimination . . . one of the two guys before me.

Trap extended his hand and I had an out-of-body experience.

“I'm Will.” My tone was cooler than normal as I wrenched the words out. I wanted to tell him to take his arm away from my . . . and there was the problem. I didn't have an end to that sentence. Not the one I wanted anyway. She wasn't my girlfriend; she wasn't anything, and *fuck*, if she wasn't everything.

Trap spoke with Jackie before turning back to me.

“Nice to meet you, man.”

At least he was polite. I nodded, unable to actually form the words, *nice to meet you, too*. I couldn't say anything at all past the giant boulder lodged in my throat.

Jackie stared down at the table as he walked away. For a minute neither one of us spoke.

She lifted her gaze, meeting mine. “He's—”

“Someone you slept with.”

Jackie flushed, but didn't correct me. “This is awkward.”

“Why is it awkward? You told me you had guys in your past.” I shrugged. “You don't do relationships, right? So what, he's just another guy you've slept with? Like me.”

There was an edge to my voice, one I didn't recognize. I wasn't this guy, petty and mean, spoiling for a fight. And yet the words kept coming

out of my mouth.

Anger flared in her eyes. “Because you were what, a virgin when we met? You’re telling me that if we were in some country club in Greenwich, we wouldn’t run into six girls with Chanel bags and pearls who you’d banged? Bullshit.”

It was the word “banged” that brought me back.

I glared at her across the table, frustration pushing me over the edge. “You drive me absolutely crazy. At least those girls didn’t make me question my sanity every five minutes.”

“You’re being an asshole,” she snapped.

I loved her fire, her strength. Loved that she wouldn’t be cowed by my mood. I *loved her*. And this back-and-forth between us, the way she refused to let me in, was making me crazy.

I reached across the table again, struggling to push through the emotions pulling me in five different directions.

“I know. But he put his arm around you . . .” My voice trailed off. “I hate knowing he was inside you, that he got to see that side of you.”

I hate the part of me that’s afraid what we have won’t stick, and you’ll just go back to him or move on to some other guy as if I mean nothing to you. I hate that you might walk away from me like this is nothing.

“You’re jealous.” There wasn’t judgment in her tone, instead there was almost a curiosity, as though it were the only logical conclusion she could reach, and she still wasn’t sure it was the right one.

“I’m jealous.”

I hated admitting it, but I couldn’t lie to her. She pulled things out of me I never intended to share.

She was quiet, and I felt that same panicked feeling telling me maybe I’d pushed her too far.

“I’d hate meeting one of your ex-girlfriends, too.” She said it like I’d wrenched the admission from her. “And I bet there were more than a few.”

“There were,” I admitted.

“And they probably looked nothing like me, and don’t say words like ‘banged.’”

I grinned despite myself. “That’s definitely true.”

“I get that it’s weird seeing Trap, but I was never with him. We hooked up, and he’s not a bad guy, but it was never a *thing*.”

“Is this a *thing*?” I asked the question casually, like it wasn’t one of the most important questions I’d ever ask.

A smile slid across her face. “Yeah, I guess it is.”

And just like that I had another piece of her.

“Let’s get out of here.”

“Okay.”

“Let’s go back to your place.”

Panic filled her eyes. “My place?”

“I want to see where you live.”

“I have a roommate.”

I should have cared, but I didn’t. We had sex, and we worked together, and yet I only got to see pieces of her. I knew her political views, knew her favorite drink and her favorite food, but that was about it. I wanted to see how she lived, wanted to peel back the layers she held so close to the vest.

It was an elaborate chess game with her. I had to move forward without risking too much, had to be aggressive and take chances when they presented themselves. It was a challenge, and frustrating as hell, and I was too hooked to walk away.

“Is she always there?”

“Well, no, she has a boyfriend.”

“See, so maybe she’ll be gone. And if she isn’t, we’ll sort it out.”

Jackie frowned. “I have posters on my walls, and dishes that don’t match, sheets I bought at Target. My mattress sags in the middle, and hot water is a commodity. My apartment is kind of a shit hole. Why do you want to come back to my place?”

“Because it’s yours.” I leaned forward, brushing a kiss to her cheek.

“Don’t worry. I’m not going anywhere. You can’t scare me away.”

She hesitated for what felt like forever, and then nodded, taking my hand and following me out of the bar.

Chapter Eighteen

Rumors of a campaign finance enquiry . . .

—Fourth draft, *Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

This was such a bad idea. One minute I was trying to smooth over the awkwardness caused by Trap’s sudden appearance, and the next I was agreeing to go back to my apartment. . . my shitty apartment.

As I slid my key into the lock and flipped on the light switch, I felt a rush of relief that my roommate was out.

“So this is it.” I gestured toward the tiny living room connected to an even smaller kitchen. “My bedroom is over there.” I pointed to a white door across from the living room, embarrassment flooding me.

The location was decent and convenient for work, but I paid a huge premium for that. There wasn’t much of a budget left over for frills.

Will stood in the entryway, his gaze surveying the room. He walked over to one of the bookshelves, studying the contents while I stood there awkwardly, trying to figure out how to handle this. I’d had guys over, but they were all college students like me. Given the way college boys lived, I hadn’t been worried my place would seem messy or cheap or, oh shit, I left clothes on the floor in the bedroom.

“I’ll be right back.”

I sprinted past him, opening the door to my room. Thank god, it wasn’t as messy as it usually was. Sometimes I worked so late that by the time I got home, it was all I could do to take off my clothes and get into bed. Hence the piles. I grabbed a pile, opening my closet door and throwing the clothes in. I assessed the room quickly, searching for anything embarrassing, anything that would make him head for the hills. It wasn’t great, but honestly, it could’ve been a lot worse.

I tried to imagine my apartment through his eyes. He'd been in college once, years ago, and yet somehow I figured that experience was totally different from the way I lived.

Will walked into the bedroom behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist, pulling me against his body.

"I like your place," he murmured against my neck.

I flushed.

His lips traveled higher, teasing my earlobe. My breath caught.

"It's small and a little messy. I haven't had a lot of time to clean lately."

His teeth grazed my lobe, tugging slightly.

"I like it. It looks lived in. Comfortable. Quirky. It looks like you." He bent his head, pulling my hair to the side, giving himself better access as he pulled me tighter against him. His hands moved upward, resting under the curve of my breasts. He brushed against me and I felt just how turned on he was.

"The bed's not very comfortable." I wished we were back at his place, wished it were his secrets lingering around us rather than mine. "And it's loud in the morning. We can go somewhere else—"

His hand moved higher, cupping my breast through my clothes. He tweaked my nipples, tugging gently as pleasure shot through me, building, desperate for release. My hips swayed, my ass rubbing against his erection.

He groaned and spun me around, his mouth coming down on mine. My protests disappeared along with my fear, and all thoughts save one—

More.

I looped my arms around his neck, plastering my body against his while he maneuvered me back until I hit the bed.

Will leaned over me, pushing me down onto the mattress, his body on top of mine. He reached between us, tugging my shirt over my head, moving for my bra next, undoing the hook in an easy motion, stripping the lace from my body.

My hips rocked against his, already desperate to have him inside me. He bent his head and his lips brushed the tips of my breasts, his stubble scraping the skin there. A shiver ripped through my body.

My back arched, pushing my body up, offering myself to him. He took what I offered, his mouth coming down to cover my breasts, his tongue grazing my nipple, a whisper of touches that made me want more.

I fumbled with Will's clothes, desperate for his bare skin against mine. He bent down, unzipping my jeans, tugging them from my legs. We worked in tandem, our limbs part of an intricate dance, a race to the finish.

His elbow accidentally hit my side. I laughed, the sound filling the air between us.

"Sorry."

"It's okay." I pressed my lips to his, our breath tangling, the feel of his mouth slanting over mine, familiar now.

"I love your mouth."

Will grinned. "I'm pretty partial to yours, too."

He ran his hands through my hair, fisting my locks while his gaze devoured me.

"What?"

He stroked my hair, pulling it forward, laying the strands out so they covered my breasts, the edges teasing my nipples.

"It's like liquid gold." He flashed me a crooked smile. "Sunshine."

I laughed, fighting back a blush. "Way to be sensitive."

Something wicked flashed into his eyes. "I can be sensitive."

He reached out, his gaze intent, his fingers grazing the underside of each breast, stroking down and back again, tracing each swell. Another shiver tore through me. His fingers drifted higher, drawing patterns on my skin, pushing my breasts together, stroking them, teasing them. His caress was little more than a whisper on my skin, and my hips jerked at the sensation. With each touch he purposefully ignored my nipples, his fingers getting closer and closer without giving me what I wanted. It was a delicious sort of agony that had me growing wetter with each touch.

That same devilish grin spread across his face. "See, sensitive."

"Cute." My breath hitched as he reached out, his thumb rubbing my nipple. *Finally.*

"I love watching you like this." His voice unraveled something within me. "I'll never get tired of looking at you. I love your eyes. The first time I saw you, I noticed your eyes. They're just like the ocean."

As far as lines went, it was a cheesy one, but my heart didn't get the message. It skipped and stuttered at the words leaving Will's mouth, and the desire in his gaze, and the magic in his hands.

I reached up, grabbing his biceps, pulling him closer.

"Come inside me."

He laughed, the sound throaty. “What about foreplay? I just began touching you. I could touch you all night.”

I shifted my hips until he settled between my thighs, rocking myself against him.

He kissed me, his lips teasing another moan out of me, his hard arousal at odds with his casual words.

“I think we’re past the point of foreplay.” I broke away from his mouth, reaching down, gripping his hips, pulling him closer as if I could take him into my body by sheer force of will.

Our gazes locked as he pinned me to the bed. There was something about having the weight of a hot, aroused man on top of me. Something utterly delicious.

Will reached down, fingering my lace underwear, ignoring my haste. Whether I liked it or not, he was setting the tone tonight.

“Have I ever told you how much I love your lingerie?”

His head bent, kissing my stomach while he hooked his fingers under the lace boy shorts, sliding them down my legs.

Anticipation filled me.

“You have the sexiest lingerie. Every time I see you in it, I imagine you dressing up for me, parading around in those high heels you love to wear.” The visual was enough to bump my arousal into a whole other level. “I love you in satin and lace.” He ran a hand down my hip. “You’re so fucking sexy. I noticed it that night at the Hay-Adams. You were in that skirt, and all I could think was that I wanted to strip you naked and have you right there on the bar.”

Goose bumps spread across my skin.

Will pulled back, his voice hoarse. “You have me tied up in knots. I know I’m not supposed to say it. I know we’re supposed to keep dancing around it, flirting with it, but when I look at you I can’t hide it. I don’t want to.” He captured my mouth in another devastating kiss.

It was as if something tied me to him, something that pulled me toward him and marked me as his. After everything tonight, he made it impossible for me to imagine being with a guy like Trap. Made it impossible for me to imagine wanting anyone else. He’d claimed me ever since that first night at the Hay-Adams. I was his whether I liked it or not, for as long as he would have me.

Passion crested in the air between us. It filled our bodies, simmering, surging, bringing us crashing into each other. There was no more laughter, no more teasing, no more words. Our bodies spoke a language all their own.

Will settled between my legs, pausing to remove his pants before climbing back to join me on the bed, hooking my leg high above his shoulders, opening me wide before him. I closed my eyes, my head falling back on the pillow, giving myself over to the heady sweetness of his body. And then I felt him, pressing against me, thick and hot, teasing me as he rubbed over me.

“Please.” My voice shook with need.

Will pushed inside me, filling me in one long, slow thrust.

Our gazes locked, and for a beat, emotion swelled, leaving my heart raw. He looked at me like I was everything, as though he saw inside of me, past all of my fears, all of my bullshit, all of my attempts to push him away. He looked at me like he wanted to spend the rest of his life looking at me.

Will’s hands reached out, clasping mine, our fingers linked as he pushed into me, as our hips undulated. Our bodies moved together as we stared into each other’s eyes. When I came, when he came inside me, it was the look in his eyes that rocked me the most. The knowledge that I’d put that look there, and the hope that it would stay, long after my secrets came undone.

Will

I woke in the morning with Jackie’s arms around my waist, her naked body against my side, her hair spread out on the pillow. Her eyes were closed, her torso curled up while she slept, the sheets pooled around her waist, her legs sprawled out across the bed. I looked at the nightstand, struggling to make out the alarm clock.

It was just after ten in the morning.

I stretched my body, my feet hanging over the edge. She hadn’t been kidding; the bed was anything but comfortable. I was too tall, my limbs too long. My neck had a crick in it that made me wince as I sat up.

Jackie groaned at the movement, throwing her hands over her eyes to block out the sun before turning onto her side. She wasn’t a morning person under the best of circumstances, and neither one of us had gotten much sleep last night.

I rolled out of bed, grabbing my boxers off the floor, sliding them on and walking toward the bathroom, needing a moment to feel more human. I cleaned up and headed to the kitchen in search of coffee, hoping to hell Jackie's roommate hadn't come home.

The kitchen was small, and by the look of it, neither girl did much cooking. I found a couple of clean mugs and the coffee pot, then scrounged around for coffee. No wonder Jackie existed off of pretzels and Diet Coke. It looked like she barely remembered to eat.

There was a grocery store up the road. I wanted to buy her food, wanted to cook for her, even if it was just an omelet.

I was, once again, out of my element. Something had changed between us last night. It felt like she'd opened up to me, like she was finally giving me the chance I wanted. On one hand, I didn't want to take it too far, didn't want to scare her off. At the same time, I wanted to spoil her, wanted to give her everything. I was stuck in between where I was and where I wanted to be.

I'd always been a generous boyfriend. There wasn't much of a point to having money if you couldn't share it with the people you cared about, if you couldn't make their lives better. But it was different with Jackie. The shit with her mother affected her, and I didn't blame her, but at the same time, I didn't understand how she could possibly think I was anything other than utterly, completely hers.

My cell rang from the bedroom. I walked back to the room, Jackie still sleeping, and grabbed the phone out of my trouser pocket, staring at the screen.

Mitch.

I moved out of the room, shutting the door behind me as I answered.

"Hey."

"Where are you?"

"Out. What's up?"

Mitch sighed on the other end of the line. "Do I even want to ask?"

"Probably not. What's up?"

"Have you seen the latest *Capital Confessions*?"

I groaned. "No. What now?"

"You're in it. There's mention of you and a girl."

Fuck. "Did they name Jackie?" She was going to freak out.

“No. But it’s only a matter of time, isn’t it? Tell me you aren’t at her place right now.”

“This all-knowing thing is getting a little creepy, Mitch.”

“As far as you’re concerned, I might as well be. That’s why you pay me the big bucks, remember? This *Capital Confessions* stuff is a pain in the ass. They have someone feeding them this shit. Someone on the campaign. We need to call a meeting and figure out what’s going on with your staff. There’s no way a blog of *Capital Confessions*’s size is this interested in a state senate race. They’re building up for something bigger.”

“Maybe.” I hesitated. “I’ve been out in public with her, so maybe they saw us. At the benefit or something.” I didn’t add, or *last night at a bar in Alexandria*.

“Jesus. I can’t deal with this right now. For the love of god, lie low this weekend. Do not go out in public with her. Keep your dick in your pants.”

Mitch ended the call with a click before I could even respond.

I ran a hand through my hair. Okay, this was bad. I had no idea how Jackie was going to react. What if they did name her in *Capital Confessions*? Then what?

I realized asking her to be part of my lifestyle, to live her life so publicly, might be asking too much. If I won the election, I’d be under even more scrutiny, and she’d be right there next to me.

I grabbed her laptop sitting on the table, flipping it open, trying to pull up the blog page. The screen flashed in front of me, the last thing she’d been working on staring back at me. I moved to minimize the page, not wanting to lose her work, when two words caught my eye—

Capital Confessions.

It took me a moment. I scanned the screen, my mind struggling to process the words on the page in front of me. It was a draft of a blog post—a draft of a *Capital Confessions* blog post—on Jackie’s computer. Jackie’s post.

The bedroom door opened, my head jerking up at the sound. Jackie stood in the doorway, wearing a short white robe. Her eyes twinkled, a smile lighting her face. I watched with morbid fascination as her gaze dropped from me, to her computer, and back to my face again. The smile slid away as horror filled her eyes. Her reaction was all I needed, the final confirmation and twist of the knife.

I’d been falling for her, had fallen for her, and it had all been one big lie.

Chapter Nineteen

Senator Reynolds was the first person to speak out—quite loudly—against allegations that Congressman Johnson solicited prostitutes. You know what they say, “methinks he doth protest too much.”

—First draft, *Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

I’d wondered how it would feel when Will stopped looking at me like I was special, when I watched the magic die out of his eyes. Now I knew. It felt like the air had been sucked from the room, like I’d been punched in the chest. It felt like I’d just lost everything.

“Will.” I moved toward him, a thousand apologies, explanations, pleading words pushing to get out. “It isn’t what you think.”

It was the lamest thing I could possibly say, the worst sort of cliché, but it tumbled from my lips before I could hold it back. I was desperate, and I struggled to fix what I feared I’d broken.

“Really? What the fuck is it, then? Because it looks exactly like what I think.”

There was no warmth in his tone now, only anger, and disdain in his eyes.

“I’ve never blogged about you. Ever.”

He didn’t speak, just stared at me with that harsh gaze. With each second that passed, I felt him slipping through my fingers, and suddenly the hold I kept on my emotions, the wall I used to keep everyone away, came crashing down.

“It wasn’t about you. It was never about you. That first night we met at the Hay-Adams, I didn’t realize who you were. I didn’t even recognize you.” I gestured toward the computer. “That’s my pen name on the draft. It’s never shown up on any posts about you. I’ve never written an article about you, never sold a story about you. I would never do that.”

His jaw clenched. “But you’re part of *Capital Confessions*.”

I nodded.

“For how long?”

“Since the beginning. Since my senior year of high school.”

“Are you feeding them information about me?” His voice cracked. “Is this—the sex, all of it—just a chance for you to get close to me, to gather dirt on me?” His words lashed like a whip. “Is this what you do? Screw guys so you can exploit them later?”

I paled. Of all the things he could have said to me, that was the worst.

My voice broke in time with the cracks spreading through my heart. “Is that what you think of me? Really? After everything?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore.” Bitterness filled his voice. “I trusted you. And now I find out you’re part of a *gossip site*, one that’s been damaging my career. How am I supposed to understand? How am I supposed to understand any of the choices you’ve made? Forget about me, do you realize how much this can fuck up any career you hope to have in this industry? Or is political consulting just your cover for exposing people’s secrets? Is everything about you a lie?”

Yes and no.

“It was never about you.” My voice rose, perilously close to begging. “I never wrote about you. Ever. When they started blogging about you, I went to my editor and asked him who his source was. He wouldn’t tell me, so I asked him to let me take the lead. He said yes, but I guess he lied. I never wrote about you. I wouldn’t have done that to you. I . . .” My voice trailed off.

“What? You *what*? What am I to you, Jackie? Because you give me this shit about not wanting a relationship, and I’m standing here, waiting for you to grow the fuck up. I’m waiting for you, and I don’t know what to do anymore.

“How am I supposed to trust you with this between us? I know what it’s like to be with women who want me because of my family, my money, because of everything that comes with it. I thought you were different.”

Will turned away, and I moved forward without thinking, wrapping my arms around his back, pulling him toward me.

“I swear to you. This is different. I’ve been trying to keep you out of *Capital Confessions* from the beginning.”

He evaded my grasp. We faced off across the tiny living room, my apartment too small to contain the storm brewing between us. Will crossed his arms in front of his chest, studying me, his expression impossible to read. For a minute neither one of us spoke, and when he finally did speak, I couldn't decipher the emotions in his gaze.

"Why didn't you just tell me from the beginning? Why didn't you explain any of this to me?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't understand. And I was embarrassed. I'm a political gossip columnist. It's not what I wanted to do with my life, but it pays the bills, helped with college."

"Why didn't you just tell me that? Why all the lies? Why didn't you trust me?"

"I couldn't tell you. I didn't know if I could trust you." I sank down onto the couch, the anger and fear winding through me giving way to exhaustion. "No one besides my editor, Sean, knows about my work for *Capital Confessions*. At least, I haven't told anyone else. I think my mother figured it out; I get a lot of my leads from her. But I don't talk about it with anyone; everything is anonymous. You don't think I know that Price would dump me if they found out?"

"Then quit."

"I've been planning on it. I just thought I'd wait until I graduated, until I got an actual job. The money isn't easy to walk away from. It's complicated."

I didn't know how to explain to him what it was like to fight for everything you had. I could have chosen other jobs, but it would have been tough to come up with one that afforded me the same flexibility with my class schedule, and the same kind of money. That was what I told myself, at least; that was what I could have told him. But the truth was so much worse.

I was pissed off. I'd lived my life watching my father lord around this town, seeing his face on TV, hearing his voice lament the loss of family values. He had the perfect family, two beautiful daughters, the proper wife, the long, distinguished political career everyone admired. He was always the first to speak out against politicians embroiled in scandal, always the loudest voice on the Senate floor. He looked down on the world from his little Camelot, and everyone watched and worshipped as he did.

And then there was me.

Maybe I should have been above the muck and the filth; perhaps I should have been better than all that.

But I wasn't.

I wanted to expose them all, all of their secrets, all of the scandals like me, hidden in the shadows. That was the worst part of it, the part someone like Will would never understand. It would have been easy if I just did it for the money. I could explain that. But I couldn't explain liking it. Not to him.

Will

I stood there, listening to her, trying to read the emotions on her face. I wanted to believe everything she said. Wanted to trust her. But like always, there was a part she held back.

Mitch had warned me, told me she had a past. I didn't have anyone to blame but myself. But I wasn't upset about the fact that she had a past; I wasn't even upset about *Capital Confessions*. I was pissed she'd lied to me, that she wouldn't let me in. Angry that she didn't trust me. We were stuck in limbo. I wanted more than she was willing to give, and I wondered if it would always be like this, me with my heart on the line, worried she would crush it.

"You have to give me more." I sank down onto the couch next to her. "You have to trust me; you have to let me in. If we're going to be together, then I have to know you. You're not the only one risking everything here. Mitch called because there's mention of me and a girl in *Capital Confessions*."

Jackie paled.

"Mitch told me you had secrets. I said I didn't care, that I wanted to hear it from you. But you won't give me that chance. We can't move forward, can't try to have a relationship, when you're constantly putting this shit between us."

I wanted to know how to make her trust me, wished I had the solution. I thought about telling her how I felt about her, thought about saying the words, but fuck, maybe I was scared, too. I'd never been in this position before; never felt like I was practically begging a girl to be with me. So I pushed, because I needed to know she'd meet me halfway if I put myself out there.

“What’s in your past? It’s not just *Capital Confessions*, is it? There’s something else. Tell me. Whatever it is, we can work through it together. I want to be with you. I’m not going anywhere. So trust me so I know what we’re dealing with, and can figure out how to move forward.”

I sat there, waiting for her to say something, waiting for answers.

“Jackie, please.”

“My father isn’t dead.” She said the words in a rush, her cheeks coloring. She wouldn’t look at me.

Finally. Something.

“Okay. Why did you say he was?”

“I’ve never spoken to my father. My parents weren’t married. My father was—is—married to someone else. He has a family.”

As far as secrets went, it knocked me back a bit. It wasn’t that scandalous, it just wasn’t what I’d been expecting. Sure, it wouldn’t be great if the press got wind of it, but it wasn’t the end of the world. So she didn’t know her father? The story would die down quickly. Who cared?

I didn’t give a shit if her parents were married, and all I could think was she must have been incredibly tough to go through life the way she had. I’d met her mother; she didn’t seem like the most responsible person. I could only imagine how Jackie raised herself. And her talk of money and her reasons for taking a job at *Capital Confessions* made a little more sense. She’d been surviving.

I felt the same overwhelming need to take care of her, to give her the kind of life where she didn’t have to worry.

“Come here.”

She shook her head. “Wait. That’s not all of it.”

“Okay, but I don’t care about your parents, Jackie. I get that it’s been tough for you. I can’t imagine what you’ve been through. But your parents aren’t going to change the way I feel about you.”

She laughed, the sound completely devoid of any humor or joy. “You will care.”

I waited, and then something else clicked into place—

“Wait, why does Mitch know about your father?”

“Mitch is probably one of the only people who knows about my father. He was his campaign manager years ago.”

The last puzzle piece slipped into place with an awful click. It all made sense now, her disdain for politicians, her fear that she was turning into her

mother. *Fuck*. I had a feeling this was going to be bad.

“Who?”

“Edward Reynolds.”

Chapter Twenty

I quit.

—Letter of resignation to Sean Dell, editor, *Capital Confessions*

Jackie

“Christ.” Will’s eyes closed. “I need a minute.”

“Thought you might.”

I leaned back against the sofa, struggling not to freak out. Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything. I could have explained things without giving him a name. But I didn’t want to keep lying to him, not when he deserved more.

“Did you know about my connection to . . .” he seemed to struggle for the right words. “To Senator Reynolds?”

“I saw the picture of the two of you the night we went back to your place. That’s why I stopped things. I realized who you were, and I knew you guys were connected. I try to stay away from anyone even peripherally affiliated with my father. There’s a lifetime of bad blood there.”

“We’re not close at all. He knows my grandfather, and I met with him a few times when I was thinking about declaring my candidacy. He was one of the party members who convinced me to run. He did it as a favor to my grandfather. I know his daughter, Blair, the best. She and my sister, Monica, went to college together and are close.”

So he did know my sisters. I wasn’t surprised by the political connection between his grandfather and my father, but I still didn’t like it. But I liked Will too much for it to make a difference.

“That’s why you don’t get involved with politicians, isn’t it?”

I nodded. “Partly. But there’s more to it. My father is merely one in a long line of politicians my mother’s been with. There’ve been some decent guys, but most have been exactly like my father: married, seemingly

upstanding citizens with perfect families, who keep a mistress on the side. I didn't want to be a part of that. I didn't want some guy to think he could make me that. If I'm with a guy, it's on my own terms. I don't let anyone use me. Not like she does.

"My background makes it impossible for any politician to get involved with me. It would be political suicide for them, and it would kill my consulting career. So, yeah. That's why."

"I'm sorry." Will shook his head. "I'm so sorry you had to deal with this. I had no idea." Again he seemed to struggle to find the right words. "I never thought—I mean he just seemed to be—"

"Everything he pretends to be?"

Will nodded.

"Yeah, he's not. I doubt my mother was the first woman he fooled around with, and I don't think she was the last. His perfect family is built on a tower of lies, and my existence is the piece that could bring it all crashing down."

Will stood up from the couch, pacing around the living room. "And you've never talked to him? He's never acknowledged his responsibility to you? Never taken care of you? Are you sure he even knows?"

"He knows. There was money when I was younger, a fixed sum he gave my mother. But that ran out pretty quickly, and she signed away any rights to come back for more."

"He could have paid child support. Something."

"He would have ruined her if she pushed for more, if she went public with my paternity. Plus it would have definitely cramped her style. What politician would have gotten involved with her after she single-handedly brought down a man's career? It would have been ugly, and messy, and in the end, what would it have accomplished, really?"

"He probably paid more than what she would have made in child support. It wasn't his fault that she has a taste for the finer things and a poor grasp on reality."

"And you never demanded more from him?"

"Like what? Went after him for money? Blackmailed him?" My voice dripped with scorn.

"I'm not saying I think you're capable of that, it just seems wrong that he got away without taking responsibility for what he did to you."

I shrugged. “I was angry with him for a long time. I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that part of my motivation for joining *Capital Confessions* was a chance to expose some of his lies. I’ve leaked enough to take some of the shine off of his reputation.” And enjoyed every minute of it.

“But I’m not going to risk my career because of my father. I think we both know not to antagonize each other too much. He’s left me alone. I doubt he’ll blackball me because I’m sure he realizes if he does, I’ll hold a press conference exposing his secrets. And I’m not going to out him because the second I do, my career will be over. It’s not worth it. He’s not worth it.”

“And what about you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you okay? It has to hurt.”

“Not anymore. This isn’t a new development for me. This is my life. When I was a kid, I would ask about my father occasionally, but it wasn’t like I missed him. And then when I realized who he was, realized the kind of person he was, I hated him.”

“Do you have any interest in the rest of them—in your sisters?”

“No.”

“I’ve known Blair for years; she’s a good person, Jackie. And Kate’s nice.” He hesitated for a second. “She’s your age.”

I laughed bitterly. “What, we’re all going to be one big happy family? Please. Do you really think they’re going to accept me—their father’s bastard? I’m pretty sure I’m the last thing they want.”

“You could try.”

“I don’t need them. I’m fine without them. Fine on my own.”

“So where does that leave us? Are you afraid that if we go public, all of this will come out?”

“You know it will. Someone like me will dig it up. It’ll make a huge splash in the press because of who my father is. As soon as it happens, your name will get dragged through the mud. People will wonder about you. You’ll start to look questionable—they’ll say you aren’t stable. And your reputation will end up in shreds.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“I don’t want to screw things up for you.”

“You won’t.”

“You can’t seriously believe that.” I gestured toward the computer. “This *Capital Confessions* stuff isn’t going away. And they don’t even have anything concrete yet. It’ll get worse. Right now it’s just a blog, but when pundits, and TV, and radio, and newspapers pick it up, it’s going to affect your campaign.

“As soon as they start digging into my past, they’re going to use everything they can to attack you. This is what we do. We exploit our opponents’ weaknesses to win at all costs. It doesn’t matter who gets hurt.”

“It’s a fucked-up game.”

“Probably,” I admitted. “But it’s D.C. It isn’t going to change. People love a good scandal, and *this* is the kind of story that’s going to get airtime. Sex sells—the illegitimate daughter of a moral authority? My mother—the professional political mistress? The handsome young candidate engaged in an affair with one of his staffers? It’s the kind of story the media will joygasm over.

“And once it’s out, I don’t know what the hell my mother would say. Do you want them to drag her past into it? To comment on all of the men she’s slept with? It’ll be a matter of time before they start drawing parallels between us, planting the seed that I’m exactly like her. Especially when we look so similar.” I grimaced. “The more publicity this thing gets, the more it has the potential to ruin more than you. Price will dump me the second any negative press comes my way. I’m supposed to be behind the scenes pulling the strings. They don’t want a consultant ending up as front page news.”

Will bent his head, running his hand through his hair. “What are you suggesting?”

I knew he wasn’t going to be thrilled with the idea, but I hoped he would understand it was the best solution, as much as I hated it.

“I think we should take a break until the election’s over.”

Will

“No.”

I knew she was going to suggest it the second she started talking about what would happen if our relationship got out. I knew she was going to suggest it, and it was the last thing I wanted.

“You know it’s the smart thing to do. A scandal while you’re in office is a hell of a lot easier to deal with than while you’re getting elected.”

“The election is two months away.”

“I know.”

The sane part of me knew she was right. It would be easier for me to bounce back from this if I were already in office. But that still didn’t fix the effect this would have on her career if word got out.

“What about you?” I asked.

“What about me?”

“What are you going to do if this leaks? Dating or not, it’s going to cause problems.”

Even if we somehow spun it, and lied and said things developed after my campaign, after she worked for me, she was still risking her secrets being exposed. Her father’s identity could be a big problem for her, especially if he blackballed her.

Anyone linked to me would be under scrutiny, and this was just a state senate race. What happened if I took things further? What happened if I wanted to run for a bigger office? Then what?

Jackie sighed. “I’d be lying if I didn’t admit I’m concerned. I can’t afford to throw everything away. I have bills to pay, and student loans, and I need to have a job lined up when I graduate. I don’t have a safety net. I have a little money in savings from *Capital Confessions*, but it’s not enough. And I’ve worked my ass off to get here. I can’t throw it all away.”

I didn’t want to let her go, not now, not ever. But what she did was a part of her. It made her who she was. She wasn’t the kind of girl who would be happy just being next to me. She was too smart for that, too driven. There was no way she could turn it off, and I didn’t want her to.

Jackie sighed again, her expression pleading. “I need time to figure this out. I don’t know where this is headed, and I wasn’t expecting it. I like you, a lot. But you’re right; being with someone high profile is tricky for me. I need time. And in the meantime, the best thing we can do is pause things until after the campaign.”

“What if I pulled out of the race?”

“Absolutely not.”

I shook my head. “Just hear me out—”

“No. We’ve all been working too hard on this for you to consider dropping out. Don’t you get it? People believe in your campaign. They’re

here working for you because they believe in you. You're two months out from the election. You have a shot at this thing. Don't make an impulsive decision and throw it all away."

"You're not an impulsive decision."

"I am. You are. It's been a few weeks. People don't meet and change their lives in a few weeks. I'm trying to make room for you in my life, but it's tough. Let's cool things off and figure out what we're doing here. It's just a break."

I didn't know what to do. My brain told me she was right. My dick and my heart told me something else entirely.

I nodded like I agreed, like I wasn't afraid the time she needed would take her away forever. I was all for pulling her toward me, but I wasn't going to push her away from her dreams. Not when her ambition was one of the things I loved most about her. As much as I hated it, maybe she was right. Maybe we needed time to figure out how to get around this, because I definitely wasn't giving her up without a fight.

"I'll head out. Mitch wants to talk about the *Capital Confessions* post. We need to find out who's leaking information."

Her gaze was uncertain. "You know it's not me, right? You believe me?"

"I know. I'm sorry I overreacted when I saw your computer." I hesitated. "This is new for me, too. I've had girlfriends before, but the way I feel about you is different. I guess I got scared." I tried to smile. "You aren't the only one figuring this out as we go along."

Jackie stood up, looping her arms around my waist. I gathered her close, burying my head in her hair, holding her against me like I never wanted to let her go. I loved her, and no matter what, I was going to keep her.

I pulled back and met her gaze. "We're going to take care of this. We'll figure out a way to make it work."

"I know." She leaned up on her toes, kissing me softly. "I'll see you Monday at the office. I'm going to *Capital Confessions* before work to hand in my resignation. I'll see if I can figure out anything about their source. I'll let you know."

"Are you sure you can handle quitting right now? If you're worried about money—"

"It's fine. I was always planning on quitting; I just thought I'd stick it out until graduation. But the way things are going with Price, I don't want

to risk anyone finding out about my blogging. Better to lose the extra income now, than a shot at a full-time job. I'll sort it out. It's the smart thing to do."

I hated that she had to worry about money. Somehow we'd figure something out. "Good luck. If you need to talk, just call me, okay?"

"Okay."

I dressed quickly and walked out, feeling like I was leaving everything behind me as I closed Jackie's apartment door. I could give her time, but that didn't mean I was going to sit by and do nothing. I pulled out my phone and started making calls.

Jackie

He was gone. I stared after Will, my gaze trained on the closed door as I wondered what the hell came next.

On one hand, a weight had been lifted off of me. I'd done the right thing; telling him about my father and *Capital Confessions* took away the gnawing fear that he'd discover I wasn't who he thought I was. Somehow he hadn't run.

I'd asked for time to think, to figure things out, but the truth was, I didn't know what time was supposed to do. I tried to think of it like I would any work problem.

Problem one: If anyone at Price found out I was having sex with Will while working on his campaign, they would fire me.

Solution: Stop having sex with Will until the campaign ended. Easier said than done, but simple enough. I just had to figure out how to keep my hands off of him for the next two months.

Problem two: If anyone found out I worked for *Capital Confessions*, finding a political consulting career in D.C. would be next to impossible.

Solution: I needed to quit the blog as soon as possible. I'd been putting it off for a while now, but even though the money was good, I couldn't afford the risk anymore. Not when I was tied to Will.

Problem three: If anyone found out who my father was, it would cause a short-term scandal for Will and me. Maybe he could bounce back from it, though likely not during his campaign, but it was going to be a big problem for me.

Solution: I could deny my paternity. My father sure as hell wasn't going to confirm it. But what proof existed that I didn't know about? And my mother was always the wild card in everything. Denying it if the truth came out anyway was the worst thing I could do. I was just going to have to focus on damage control. Somehow.

Problem four: I was definitely in love with Will Clayton.

Solution: No fucking clue.

Chapter Twenty-one

Will Clayton was seen brunching at POV on Sunday with Blair Reynolds. Could we be witnessing the beginning of a new political dynasty?

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

“Thanks for calling.”

I looked up from my phone to see Blair in front of me, a smile on her face. I stood, enfolding her in a hug, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

“Thanks for coming.”

Blair sank down in the seat opposite mine. “Trust me, anytime I can get out of the house is a total win.” She gestured toward the huge black sunglasses obscuring a good part of her face. “Although, thanks to the media, these have become a necessity.”

I winced. “We could have gone somewhere else—somewhere more private.”

She shook her head. “Nope, I was in the mood for one of their pizzas. And I’m sick of hiding out at home. My mother’s been on a rampage lately.”

“The wedding?”

She nodded. “Apparently my decision to not go through with the wedding was the biggest mistake of my life.”

“Your fiancé turned out to be gay. How were you supposed to do anything about it?”

“Fuck if I know.”

My jaw dropped. I’d known Blair for a few years and I’d never heard her say “fuck.”

Blair set down her menu. “Where’s the waiter? I seriously need a drink.”

I closed my mouth, my eyes narrowing as my gaze ran over her appearance. When she'd first come over to the table, she'd seemed like her normal self—elegant, poised. But now that I looked at her, really looked at her, I saw the cracks. Her hands shook slightly. Her nail polish was chipped, the absence of the enormous ring that had sat there for as long as I'd known her even more glaring. There was a thread hanging from her sleeve, and it looked like she wasn't wearing makeup. There wasn't anything wrong with it, but it wasn't Blair. Not the Blair I knew.

I waited while she ordered a Bloody Mary—I could practically feel Mrs. Reynolds disapproving from their home in McLean—and then reached out and squeezed her hand as soon as the waiter left. I'd called her here to try to handle the situation with Jackie, but maybe Blair needed me, too.

“Are you okay?”

She buried her head in her hands and horror flooded me. I'd never been good around crying women.

She pulled her sunglasses off, tossing them on the table. Her eyes were red-rimmed. “Don't be nice to me, Will. I can't handle it.”

The waiter delivered our drinks while Blair looked down at the table.

When he left, I took her hand in mine again. “Talk to me.”

Blair was one of those girls who I loved like a sister. I'd met her through my own sisters years ago, and had instantly liked her. She'd been engaged to Thomas Wyatt—Thom, to his friends—for as long as I'd known her. It had ended a few weeks ago.

I'd been at the wedding the weekend before I'd met Jackie, sat in the church waiting for a bride who never came. Her father's campaign manager had announced that there was an illness and the wedding would be postponed. A few days later, Blair's face was plastered all over the tabloids as details began leaking out. I'd only heard the rumors, but now, looking at how upset she was, I wondered if the rumors were fairly close to the truth.

“I walked in on him having sex with his best man in the changing room of the church.” She delivered the news as calmly as if she were discussing the weather.

I choked on my drink as she took another sip of her Bloody Mary.

“I think I'm going to want another one,” she announced.

“Me, too,” I sputtered. “God, I'm so sorry. That's just—”

“If it wasn't so horrible, I'd laugh. I was in my dress—”

“Jesus.”

“And there they were going at it.” Her voice cracked a bit. “I just thought—we’d been together since we were fifteen—I thought we loved each other. Apparently, I was wrong.”

I squeezed her hand again. “It sounds like you dodged a bullet, if you ask me. You don’t need that shit. He was wrong to treat you like that, wrong to cheat.”

She sighed, and suddenly she looked so much older than twenty-three. “Tell that to my parents. My father’s freaking out because this happened during his reelection campaign. I think he purposefully planned the wedding to be during campaign season and now it’s a total wash. Missed photo op.” Bitterness seeped into her tone. “My mother keeps telling me I’ve ruined my life by not going through with the wedding. It’s a fucking mess.”

“And Kate?” I asked, wondering how Blair’s—and Jackie’s—younger sister was taking all of this.

“You know Kate. She wants nothing to do with his campaign or any of it. She graduates soon and I think she just can’t wait to get the hell out. Not that I blame her.”

“What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like I have a lot of skills. Trained to be a wife looks pretty shitty on a resume. My father wants me to go to law school. I don’t know what I want anymore.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Me, too.” She grimaced. “Honestly, I didn’t come here to bitch. I just haven’t really talked about it and”—a wobbly smile spread across her face—“I’ve always been able to talk to you.” She waved her hand in the air, fixing a very Blair smile on her face. “Enough about me, though. You definitely didn’t call this emergency brunch to talk about my aborted engagement. What’s up with you? What do you need?”

I hesitated. When I’d originally called Blair, I’d planned on asking her to help me get a meeting with her father. I needed to talk to him about Jackie, needed to try to fix everything he’d broken.

I wanted to know if he would stand by her and help do damage control if news about her paternity leaked. He was possibly the only person who had enough power to keep her career intact if the news did come out.

But seeing Blair like this, talking to her . . . the media was hounding her. She was in the middle of one of the biggest shitstorms of her life. She

needed to know another one might be just around the corner. And as much as Jackie said she was fine, she needed someone. I wanted her to have a family, to have someone besides me who would stand with her. Blair was one of the best people I knew.

“We need to talk.”

Worry filled Blair’s eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“I’m trying to get a meeting with your father. I called his office, but his secretary gave me the runaround about how busy he is right now, and said she couldn’t fit me in for a couple of weeks. I need to talk to him sooner rather than later.”

“Sure. Consider yourself invited to dinner. You can talk to him then. I’m not sure when he’ll be home, but I’ll make sure you know when he is.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry to bring all of this up with everything going on right now.”

“Don’t worry about it. But somehow I don’t think that’s everything.” Her gaze narrowed speculatively. “What’s up?”

God, this was tough. On one hand, Jackie never said anything about not talking to her father or her sisters, but on the other hand I knew this was going to piss her off. But she was so stubborn on this topic, and loving her meant it was nearly impossible to resist the urge to help.

What the hell.

“I met someone.”

A slow smile spread across Blair’s face. “Okay, I need details. Now.”

I laughed. “She’s funny, and smart, and gives me a hard time. She’s beautiful, and challenging, and nothing I ever expected. You’d like her.”

As soon as I said it, I realized how much I wanted Jackie to meet her sisters. Kate was younger, and I didn’t know her as well, but in the past few years since I’d gotten to know Blair, I could easily see her and Jackie hanging out together. In a lot of ways they were different, but I could also see the similarities between them. They were both loyal, and intelligent, and funny.

Looking at Blair now, I could even see some resemblance between them—Blair’s hair was dark where Jackie’s was blonde, Blair’s eyes brown where Jackie’s were blue, Blair’s skin pale where Jackie’s was tanned—but they had the same height, the same slim build. There was something about their faces, their bone structure, maybe, that seemed similar. I never would

have pegged them as sisters if I didn't know to look for it, but now that I did, I saw it.

"You didn't just meet a girl, *you met a girl.*"

I laughed. "Excuse me? I'm a guy. Sorry if I don't know the difference."

"You're serious about this girl."

"Yeah, I am."

"Is she the one?" Blair's voice rose with excitement before she seemed to remember we were in public. She snapped her mouth closed, glancing around us. Luckily, we had one of the more private tables.

"I've only known her for a few weeks, and things are moving really fast, but honestly . . . I figure eventually, yeah."

"I can't believe this. I'm so happy for you."

"Thanks."

Her gaze narrowed. "Okay, so if you're in love and possibly, one day, getting married, why do you look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Worried."

I sighed. "Because things are complicated with her."

"Complicated how?"

I didn't know what to do. I wanted to tell Blair, wanted to give her a heads-up so she didn't end up finding out about Jackie when reporters shoved a microphone in her face and caught her reaction on camera. I didn't trust Senator Reynolds to do it, and there was no way her mother would—that woman couldn't stand even the mention of impropriety, much less talk about it. I wanted to give Jackie a sister, someone who would be there for her if this shit broke. I weighed the wisdom of what I was about to do, listened to my gut, and said a little prayer that this wasn't the worst mistake of my life.

"It involves your father."

"How? Is that why you wanted to speak with him?"

I nodded.

"What did he do?"

"I don't want to add more to your plate right now. I know you're dealing with a lot, but I'm worried things are going to get worse. Jackie's already been alluded to in *Capital Confessions* a few times."

Blair groaned. "I hate that fucking blog. They keep feeding this story between me and Thom."

I said another silent prayer that Jackie wasn't involved in that one. It didn't seem like her style, but I'd given up predicting what anyone was going to do anymore.

"Well, they keep talking about me and a mysterious blonde. And I'm worried if they dig too deep, they're going to find out more about her past."

"What does this have to do with my father?"

"He had an affair with Jackie's mom. Twenty-one years ago. I'm sorry, Blair."

She didn't speak. She just sat there, her expression blank.

She'd always been one of her father's favorite tools in his campaign arsenal. She was stunning, she was smart, and more than anything, she was the most self-possessed person I'd ever met. I'd seen veteran politicians fold in the face of Blair's composure; she'd win any game of conversational chicken. It was what made her reaction to her broken engagement even more shocking. It was also what gave me the confidence to tell her now.

My parents had this tree in their yard in Greenwich—when it stormed the winds would blow the branches around, wreaking havoc on its limbs, but no matter how much it bent, it would never break. That was Blair. She was one of the strongest people I knew.

She took a sip of her drink, and I wondered what she was really thinking; she had no visible reaction other than a slight tremor in her hand. It was a while before she spoke.

"She's my half sister?"

"Yeah. She is."

"Does she know?"

I nodded.

"Does he know?"

"He's never acknowledged her, never spoken to her, but he knows. He had an affair with her mother; apparently it was a temporary thing, and she got pregnant. I guess it ended after that."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-one."

Blair's eyes closed. "So she's Kate's age."

I nodded.

"He's such a bastard."

There wasn't much I could say to that. I reached across and squeezed her hand again. "I'm so sorry to tell you like this. Jackie would probably

kill me if she knew. I just didn't want you to find out from someone else. I'm worried this is going to get ugly."

Blair shook her head. "I appreciate you telling me. I'm glad someone did." She drained the rest of her Bloody Mary. "This is a fucking disaster."

"Your mother's going to be upset."

"If it gets out, yeah. I don't think him cheating will come as a huge shock to her. They've had an 'open marriage' for as long as I can remember."

"I never knew. I never would have guessed."

"He's very good at keeping up appearances. They both are. Up until recently we all were."

"I'm sorry."

"You shouldn't be sorry. I appreciate you telling me. Seriously."

"Are you going to tell Kate?"

"Yeah . . ." Worry filled her eyes. "I'm not sure."

"Is everything okay with her?"

"Things are really bad with her and our parents right now. I don't know how she's going to take this." Blair looked unsure of herself. "So Jackie—does she hate us?"

"She's angry at him. And I think she's hurt. It's hard to tell with Jackie, though. She doesn't really talk about how she feels. She doesn't let a lot of people in."

That was another thing they had in common. Jackie used her attitude and sass to keep people at bay, and Blair used her manners.

"What has her life been like? It can't have been easy for her."

"I think it's been hard. I don't get the impression that her mom was really much of a stable presence in her life. No father figure. She works hard. She didn't grow up like we did; she's had to fight for everything she has."

Shock filled Blair's gaze. "He didn't even help out financially?"

"From what I got it wasn't a lot. And I think her mother ran through whatever there was."

"What does she do?"

"She's a senior in college. She's interning at Price. That's how she started working on my campaign."

Blair's eyebrow rose. "She's working on your campaign?"

I took a sip of my drink. "I know. I didn't plan it."

Blair was quiet for a beat. She'd grown up around politics; she understood how bad this would be if word got out.

"You know you're playing with fire, right?"

I laughed, not a trace of humor in the sound. "Figured that one out. Thanks."

"I want to meet her."

I winced. "That might be easier said than done. Right now she doesn't want anything to do with your family. I'm hoping that'll change, but she can be stubborn. I'm working on it."

"I'm not my parents. She's my sister. I want to meet her."

"I know. She's just going to need time. She's going to freak when she finds out I said something. Things are complicated."

Blair sighed. "Fine. I can be patient." Her eyes welled up and a laugh escaped. "I can't believe I have another sister." Her eyes narrowed. "So you said you thought she might be the one. Are you talking marriage? What kind of a timeline? Months? A year?"

I burst out laughing. "Are you seriously going to give me a hard time over this?"

"Just making sure you're good enough for my little sister."

I smiled so hard my face hurt. I'd always adored Blair, but I'd never loved her as much as I did in that moment. It was classic Blair to just accept Jackie as if it were nothing.

If Jackie were going to need someone in her corner other than me, I'd just given her the best champion I could think of.

"I'll make you a deal. You can vet my relationship with Jackie as long as you let me do the same for you. You deserve a really good guy, Blair. You deserve everything."

She smiled—a real smile, the one she gave her friends, a million times brighter than any of her perfect, political smiles.

"I've always wanted a brother."

Chapter Twenty-two

Blair Reynolds and Will Clayton were seen embracing at POV. Do I hear wedding bells in their future?

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

I walked through the *Capital Confessions* offices, my nerves on overdrive. It was early; I only had an hour before I needed to show up at the Clayton campaign headquarters.

I wasn't sure how Sean was going to handle me quitting. He had to know I wasn't planning on working for him forever; he knew I wanted to be a consultant. And at the same time, I was one of his biggest sources . . .

I knocked on his office door, my hand trembling slightly.

"Come in," he barked.

Well, at least he was in a good mood. Fuck.

I turned the knob, stopping short as his gaze pinned me.

"Where the hell have you been? You don't respond to emails or phone calls anymore?"

"Sorry. It's been crazy."

"Crazy? Crazy is having my best fucking blogger go AWOL. You owe me two posts now. I should fire you."

I winced. "Yeah, about that." I set the letter on his desk. "I'm quitting."

"You can't quit."

"I have to. Things are getting out of control, and I can't keep this secret identity forever. I was eighteen when I started working for you. It was never meant to be a permanent thing. I can help out until you find someone to replace me, but as soon as you do, I'm out."

"Are you crazy? Replace you? You're my best blogger. Do you have any idea how much money is at stake for me if you leave?"

“I’m sorry. I don’t want to leave you in a lurch, but this isn’t working. Price would fire me in a heartbeat if they found out. We knew I would eventually have to quit. I can’t keep doing this.”

“So that’s it. You’ve worked for me for three years, and now you’re just out.”

“I have to be.” I hesitated. “Besides, it’s not like you need me all that much.” I gestured toward his computer. “I saw the mention in *Capital Confessions*. You’re getting plenty of dirt on Will Clayton without me. Your source must be turning up some pretty good intel.”

I was fishing, but it was the best I could do without coming out and asking who he had on the Clayton campaign.

Sean’s eyes gleamed. “You were wrong about him, by the way.”

“What do you mean?”

“He is seeing someone.”

Dread filled me. This was bad—very, very bad. “Excuse me?” I squeaked.

“I told you there was dirt there. We got it.” He grinned like a man who’d just bagged big game. “You’ll never believe who it is. Guess we now know the real reason behind the broken engagement. She was probably doing Clayton the whole time. It’s always the quiet ones you have to watch out for.”

I blinked, my brain struggling to comprehend the words coming out of his mouth. “What are you talking about?”

“Take a look. Will Clayton and Blair Reynolds. If that’s not fucking political royalty, I don’t know what is. It’s a smart move for someone like him; Senator Reynolds can make his career. Not to mention Blair’s fucking gorgeous.”

I walked behind his desk, staring at the *Capital Confessions* page on his screen. The top headline was a picture of Will and Blair, his arms around her, her body plastered against his, with the headline—

A New Camelot? Blair Reynolds And Will Clayton In Love

I stared at the screen, my body growing numb as I took the mouse and scrolled down. There were more pictures—images of them sharing a cozy lunch . . . him holding her hand . . . of them staring at each other, love in their eyes.

My heart fucking broke.

The picture quality wasn't great, but it was enough. I read the post, each word a knife stabbing me in the heart.

Apparently they'd shared a pizza, drinking and talking for over an hour. Witnesses said they'd picked a secluded table and spent the lunch in hushed conversation. They looked perfect together. She was blinding in her beauty—delicate, classy, everything I could never be. Will looked so protective . . . so golden.

My eyes blurred with tears. He'd tried to talk to me about her yesterday; he'd just never mentioned that they were more than friends, that he loved her. Maybe he was the reason she'd broken her engagement. The wedding was, what, over two weeks ago? Right around the time he'd met me.

And the whole time he'd been in love with her.

"I have to go."

"Okay, but I need you for another week or so. It'll take me a bit to find someone to cover you."

"Sure." I had to get out of there before I broke down in tears. I left his office, shoving my sunglasses on my face, my head bent as I walked toward the elevator. With each step, I came that much closer to losing it.

It was a smart play for Will. An alliance with Reynolds would take his career to new levels. And Blair was the perfect person to be seen on his arm. She was as close to royalty as you could get in America. She was used to the attention, to the media pressure, knew her way around campaigns. Besides her broken engagement, I'd never seen her take a wrong step. She was flawless. Perfect.

I walked out to the street, my heart racing, pain filling me as the first tears began to fall. No wonder he'd been so accepting when I'd said I wanted time. Finding out who my father was, my connection to Blair, probably hit too close to home.

Blair was his future; I was the girl he fucked in the bathroom at work.

. . .

I'd stopped crying by the time I got to the office. Part of me wanted to go home, put on sweats, get drunk, and eat a carton of ice cream, but fuck if I was going to fall apart over this. There was no crying in politics.

New plan: I was going to do my job, tell Will I knew about him and Blair after work, and end this thing. And then at the end of the day I would go home, put on sweats, get drunk, and eat a carton of ice cream.

My resolve wavered a bit as I walked through the front doors, taking the elevator up to the main floor. I didn't know how I would handle facing him without breaking down. I couldn't cry at work, couldn't risk my future more than I already had. It'd been a mistake to fall for him, to get involved with him, a mistake to think things could be different.

It was still early, early enough that hopefully I could avoid seeing too many people before I got to my desk. I wanted to hide out in my cubicle, needed the privacy and sanctuary of those walls to shelter me from prying eyes.

The elevator pinged and I stepped off at my floor . . . and froze.

Mitch walked toward me, talking to the man beside him. "He should be in soon. You can wait, if you'd like."

I didn't hear the man's response, didn't hear anything. My entire world stopped at the sight of *my father* walking through the office, talking to Mitch. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide. They were on a straight path toward me, and there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

Mitch looked up, his gaze meeting mine, and he stopped in his tracks. Horror filled me as my father's attention shifted from Mitch to me. We all stood there, staring at each other like deer caught in the headlights. It was the first time I'd come face-to-face with him since that day at the Hay-Adams, thirteen years ago. I'd always been careful to avoid having to speak with him, careful to avoid catching more than glimpses of him—and now this.

The office was quiet, but there were still people here. I couldn't afford to make a scene, couldn't afford for the whispers to start. So I plastered on my fakest "don't fuck with me" smile. I nodded at Mitch and walked past them.

My legs shook as I walked the rest of the way to my desk, barely resisting the urge to turn around.

Why was he here? Was he here because of Will and Blair? Did he recognize me? Did he know I was his daughter?

I hated him, and I had too low of an opinion of him to really care what he thought, and yet he was *my father*. And he'd looked through me as though I was invisible.

I sunk into my chair, putting my elbows onto my desk, holding my head in my hands. What else was waiting for me today? Locusts? A biblical plague?

We'd had sort of a truce in place—at least I had. I stayed away from political firms affiliated with my father, made sure to keep that part of my life separate.

Why would he show up here? Did he know I worked here? Did he even fucking care?

“Are you okay?”

I looked up. Mitch stood in the entryway of my cubicle, concern in his gaze.

His voice lowered. “I didn't know he was coming today. He just stopped by looking for Will. I would have warned you if I'd known.”

I shook my head like it was nothing, like my insides weren't a jumbled-up mess. “No need. I'm fine.”

“You really do have steel balls, don't you?”

I laughed despite the horribleness of today. “God, I hope not.”

His expression sobered. “If you need a moment, you could run and pick some stuff up from the printer. I was going to send someone else, but you look like you could use some fresh air.”

“I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine.” He hesitated. “I saw *Capital Confessions* this morning.”

I didn't have a response for that one.

“For what it's worth, I think it's a bullshit story. You know him. He wouldn't do that. It's not his style.”

I was close to tears again. I could deal with jokes, could handle casual conversation. I couldn't talk about the thing currently splintering through my heart. I couldn't talk about Will. My father was an old wound, one I'd dealt with years ago. But this thing with Will . . . I couldn't brush it off. Not yet.

“I'm fine.”

Mitch sighed. “Go to the printer.”

“I'm fine.”

Mitch leaned in closer to me. “We don't need a scene here. Go to the printer. Get yourself together. Give me a chance to get ahold of Will.”

Fuck. “Fine.”

“Good girl.”

• • •

I came back to the office an hour later feeling a little bit calmer. The fresh air had helped. Not seeing Will helped more. Now I just had to keep my composure for the rest of the day.

I kept going back and forth on whether I wanted to confront him or not. Sad disappeared somewhere between leaving the office and buying myself a donut on the way to the printer. Now I was just pissed off and spoiling for a fight. And yet part of me didn't even want to give him that.

I walked back into the office, my head ducked, dropping the mailers off on Mitch's desk. I didn't see Will anywhere. I tried to remember his schedule, if he had any morning meetings or anything, but I came up blank.

I went over my mantra in my head. *He's not worth it. He's not worth it.*

I sank down into my chair, staring at my computer screen, and caught sight of a muffin sitting on my desk, a Starbucks coffee next to it.

I saw red.

Chapter Twenty-three

Rumor has it there's discord at the Clayton campaign offices. Was it insults that were thrown around? This blogger has it on good authority it was actually baked goods.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

My office door slammed open.

Jackie walked in, dressed to kill in a red dress and heels. I grinned.

“Hey—”

A muffin sailed past my head, nearly grazing me, hitting the wall behind my desk.

“Fuck you and your fucking muffin.”

My jaw dropped. “What?” I bent down, picking the muffin up off the floor, turning back to face her. Pissed off would have been a mild way to describe her expression. The fury in her eyes was ball-shriveling.

“Is everything okay?” I walked around my desk, moving toward her, muffin in hand, feeling like I was in a bizarre comedy.

Who threw muffins?

“Don't touch me.” She pulled away from me. “Don't you ever touch me again. I know exactly what you've been doing. I've figured out your game. You pretend to be this nice, trustworthy guy, and in reality you're just another asshole lying to get what you want.” She moved forward, shoving me slightly against the desk. “I can't fucking believe I trusted you after everything.”

I grabbed onto her wrists, holding her in place, struggling to keep up with the words coming out of her mouth. I couldn't catch up.

“What's going on?”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Are you really going to ask me that? You know perfectly well what's going on.”

I stared at the baked good sitting on my desk. “Are you pissed I bought you a muffin?”

“This isn’t about the fucking muffin.”

Frustration filled me. “Well, you’re the one who came into my office raving about a muffin, so how the hell am I supposed to know what you’re pissed about? I’m not a mind reader, Jackie. When I left your place on Saturday I thought things were okay between us. What happened?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You haven’t seen *Capital Confessions* or talked to Mitch?”

I shook my head, panic filling me. “Did they leak your name? God, I’m so sorry. I know it’s horrible, but we’ll fix it—”

“They didn’t leak *my* name.” She stalked toward my desk, moving over to the computer. I walked over to where she stood, watching while she pulled up the *Capital Confessions* site . . . and froze.

My lunch with Blair was all over the front page.

Shit.

“Do you still think I’m pissed about a muffin?”

I’d planned on telling her about the lunch, planned on convincing her to give Blair a shot. I’d hoped to try, at least. By the look on her face, my odds seemed pretty dismal.

“I was going to tell you.”

“Really? When?”

“Tonight.” I ran a hand through my hair, struggling to fight the rising fear that I’d betrayed her trust.

“Bullshit. You’re just saying that now that you’ve been caught.”

“No. I was going to tell you tonight. I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“Talk to me about what?” Her voice cracked. “How we can fuck on the side, as long as Blair doesn’t find out? How we have to be discreet, because nothing can screw up your relationship with your future father-in-law? Save it. Believe me, I know *exactly* what being a political mistress entails, and I want no part of it.”

I stared at her, flabbergasted, each word out of her mouth confusing me even more.

“What are you talking about?”

She glared at me. “I’m talking about the fact that the whole time you’ve been fucking me, you’ve apparently been fucking my perfect half sister on the side.”

“I have not been fucking Blair!” I didn’t mean to shout, but I’d lost control of this conversation, of her, long ago. “Sit down.”

“You can’t just order me around.”

“Yeah, I think I can. Last time I checked, you do kind of work for me. Sit down.”

“No.”

I closed my eyes, the beginnings of a migraine coming on. “Jesus, Jackie. Give me a fucking second. Sit down. If you want to have a discussion about this like adults, then fine. But I’m not going to sit here and listen to you yell at me if you won’t give me a chance to defend myself.”

“There’s no defense to what you did.”

“I didn’t have sex with Blair! I’ve never had sex with Blair. I’ve never even wanted to. Not even a little bit.”

She pointed at the computer. “The pictures suggest otherwise.”

I sank down in my desk chair, burying my head in my hands. “She’s a friend. She’s going through a rough time and I tried to make her feel better. Nothing happened at lunch. Come on. You work on campaigns; you know how this works. They wanted a story so they chose pictures that made it look like there was more to my lunch with Blair.”

“I don’t believe you.”

That was the problem. I saw the doubt and anger in her eyes, and I didn’t know how to erase them. And it pissed me off that she could think I was that guy, that I was capable of cheating on her or lying to her.

Maybe it had been stupid to have lunch with Blair in the first place; maybe I should have run it by Jackie first. I could understand her being mad about the lunch, but I couldn’t understand her questioning who I was or how I felt about her. I couldn’t understand her not trusting me.

I met her gaze across the desk. She sank down into the chair opposite mine, staring down at the floor.

“It had to be her.” Jackie looked up at me, pain in her voice, hurt in her eyes. “Maybe I could have handled seeing those pictures if it were someone else; maybe we could have worked through that. But not her. Not Blair. My father was here earlier. Did you know that?”

Shit. “No, I didn’t. Did you see him?”

“Yeah, I did.”

I hated that he’d come here, hated that I hadn’t been here for her.

“Why do you think he was here? Do you think it was a coincidence? Or do you think he saw *Capital Confessions*, and found a chance to gain some political capital and create a dynasty of his own? He never had a son, what better than to marry you to his perfect daughter? The one he actually acknowledges.”

“Who gives a shit why he was here? Nothing he can say is going to change a damn thing. Do you think I’m such a coward that I would let someone tell me who to love?”

She laughed, the sound broken, hollow, a shell of the laugh I adored.

“I think he can be very persuasive when he wants to be.” She rose to her feet. “You’re a smart guy, Will. A smart guy with a big future. You’re not going to throw that away because we’re good in bed. I wouldn’t either.” Her voice cracked, and I watched, horrified, as a tear slid down her cheek. “It doesn’t matter if there was something between you and Blair. It doesn’t matter, because the reality is, Blair’s your future. She’s your ticket to getting ahead.”

“It fucking matters to me.” My jaw clenched as anger and hurt wound their way through me like twin snakes. “It matters to me whether the woman I love thinks I’m some kind of asshole who would lie and cheat to get ahead. It matters to me that you’ve held my fucking heart in your hand for weeks now, and you don’t even know who the hell I am. So don’t tell me it doesn’t fucking matter, Jackie. Maybe nothing matters to you, but don’t you dare act like it doesn’t matter to me.”

She went pale, the blood draining from her face with every angry word I hurled at her. I struggled for calm, trying to harness the emotions raging through me. The quieter she got, the angrier I became.

“I’m sick of this. Sick of you freaking out, of you trying to pretend there’s nothing between us. Sick of you treating me like I’m just some guy you screw around with, like I’m your fucking father. I’m not your father, and you’re not your mother, and it’s time for you to grow up, and stop acting like this is simply history repeating itself. It’s not. I love you. I’m not another thing for you to fucking compartmentalize—sex with Will, fine. Anything else, not a chance in hell.”

She let out a strangled noise, sinking back down into the chair.

I couldn’t stop, couldn’t turn it off. She sat there, putting this bullshit label on me, every word another knife in my heart. I loved her—and what?

If she loved me, then she would trust me. She would know I'd sooner cut off my own arm than betray her.

Any hope I had of her loving me back died with the accusation in her eyes. She never even gave me a fucking chance. Maybe it was my fault for letting her set the tone of our relationship from the beginning, my fault for not trying harder to make it more.

I'd been arrogant; I'd assumed she was falling in love with me just like I was falling in love with her. I'd never considered the possibility that maybe I was someone she could never love. Someone she would never trust enough to let inside.

I shoved my hand in my trouser pocket, trying to get my temper in check, struggling to figure out what to do next. But my hand grazed the velvet box in my pocket, and the last nail drove into the coffin.

"Do you want to know where I was this morning?"

She didn't answer me. She just sat there, her face pale.

I pulled the box out of my pocket, setting it on the desk between us.

I watched as the rest of the color simply slid from Jackie's face. Panic filled her gaze as she looked first at the box and then at my expression.

"Open it."

Her voice shook, her hands gripping the arms of the chair. "No."

I continued, too far past the point of sanity to let go. "It was my grandmother's. She would have liked you, I think." I rubbed a hand over my face. "I wasn't planning on proposing anytime soon, of course. I knew we were on a break until the election, and I knew you'd need time, figured I'd ease you into it."

Ever since my lunch with Blair, I'd been unable to get the idea of marrying Jackie out of my head. I knew she wasn't there yet, but I'd wanted the ring so that when she was, everything would be perfect.

"I wanted you to have the ring when I did ease you into it. It seemed right to save it for you. I went to see my mother and told her I was going to marry you—eventually, after I'd convinced you." I laughed, the sound bleak. "Maybe that was my mistake, to think I could convince you to do anything."

"Will—"

I shook my head. "I can't keep doing this anymore. I'm tired. The sex is great and all, but you were right from the beginning. I'm not that guy. I'm not looking for a fuck buddy. I'm twenty-six, and maybe I'm staid and

boring, but it's who I am. I thought if I gave you time, you'd realize there was more to us than just sex. I thought you'd love me back."

"Will—"

"I'm done."

Jackie

When the word "love" came out of his mouth, all rational thought fled. When he put that velvet box on the desk, my heart fucking stopped. And now, listening to the words "I'm done," he'd just ripped my heart out of my motherfucking chest and laid it down next to that terrifying little velvet box.

I wanted to open it. Some masochistic part of me wanted to slide that diamond onto my finger. I wanted to believe he loved me; wanted to be with him. I wanted it all, and felt like I deserved none of it, and didn't know how to trust him when he'd turned my entire world upside down.

I never would have predicted he would propose, not in a million years. And he just sat there, hurling his anger my way, not giving me a chance to catch my breath or figure out what I wanted.

I'd hurt him. I could see that now. Could see that by not trusting him, I'd called his integrity into question, and for someone like Will, that was everything. But those pictures—seeing my father here in the office after seeing those pictures of Will with Blair—it hit too close to home. Maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe I should have trusted him; maybe I should have asked him about the photos before flying off the handle.

"I'm sorry if I jumped to the wrong conclusion."

"If?" His eyebrow rose.

I flushed. "What would you have thought if you saw pictures of me with some guy? How would you have felt?"

"I'd like to say I wouldn't have cared, that I would have trusted you, but you know what, you're right, I probably would have felt the same way. That's the problem. From the beginning, this thing between us has been—what, exactly?"

"We said we were exclusive."

"For sex. And in the same breath, you told me it was fine for me to date a woman for appearances' sake. And then you get pissed off because there are pictures of me and Blair, totally innocent pictures, but still.

“You don’t get to have it both ways. You tell me we need to slow things down, tell me we should take a break, that things are just casual. And then you come in here like a jealous girlfriend. You’re jerking me around.” He gestured toward the ring box. “My cards are on the table. I’ve told you what I want. What do you want? Because for the life of me I can’t figure it out.”

That was the problem. Neither could I.

“I don’t know, okay? I don’t know what I want. This is all so easy for you. You’re handsome, and rich, and charming, and everyone fucking fawns all over you, and you can’t take a wrong step.

“I don’t know what I want, and I can’t afford to screw my life up. I don’t have a safety net. So excuse me if at twenty-one, I’m still figuring my shit out. Excuse me if I didn’t plan on getting proposed to before I even graduated college. I didn’t even know you a month ago, and now you’re looking at me like I’m your future, and I’m trying to catch up.”

Will

Maybe I was the crazy one. Maybe we were just at different points in our lives. Or maybe the problem was that I was in love with her, and she wasn’t in love with me.

She spoke as though things were easy for me, dismissing me as if I didn’t know what it meant to ache, to crave something just out of my reach. Didn’t she get that what I wanted—*needed*—most sat across from me, slipping through my fingers with each minute that passed? She clutched my heart in her fist, and yet she acted like she was the only one taking a risk.

I closed my eyes, exhaustion filling me. “This was a mistake. You’re right; we don’t want the same things. I can’t keep doing this. Maybe it’s unfair for me to ask for more; maybe I never should have tried to push you into something you weren’t ready for.” I couldn’t help feeling like I’d just overplayed my hand.

I knew it seemed crazy to fall in love this quickly, but I had. And I didn’t want to lie about it, or pretend that the love I felt for her wasn’t real. I couldn’t.

“I love you. I’m in love with you. I’ve been in love with you from the beginning, and I . . .” I struggled for the words, but I had no clue what I even wanted to say. She’d taken everything I had—my heart, my pride—

and I had nothing left to give. I couldn't sit here, begging her to love me, and I couldn't stand looking at her, being around her, with this pain in my chest.

I rose from the chair. "I'm going to get out of here." My voice sounded hollow, each word an effort to push out. "I'll see you around."

She lurched up in her chair. "Will—"

I shook her off. I needed to get away, needed space.

I rarely lost my temper, rarely got emotional. And here I was with a gaping, bleeding hole I couldn't fill. Maybe she was right; maybe I was just the spoiled rich boy for whom life came easily. Honestly, right now I didn't even give a shit. I just needed to breathe.

I didn't bother letting her respond, didn't look at her. I simply headed for the door, abandoning her and my heart in the office behind me.

Jackie

I sank back down in the chair, my legs shaky, my gaze on the box he'd left on the desk, its presence taunting me.

What the fuck just happened?

A tear slid down my cheek, and then another one. My shoulders shook as the sobs poured out, my gaze blurry as I stared at the box that could have held my future.

Did I love him? Yeah. But so what? What did that mean in the face of everything surrounding us? I'd stopped believing in fairy tales a long time ago. Love plus orgasms did not equal happily ever after. Not with the obstacles we faced.

I didn't see how he could love me, how he could choose me. He could have had anyone. I could understand sex, could understand him wanting me. I wasn't stupid; we were amazing in bed. But beyond that?

Besides, I'd never envisioned myself getting married. I wasn't that girl. I didn't dream about big white dresses or wedding cakes. I didn't even think I wanted to have kids.

With one little box he'd painted a picture of a life I'd never considered, and then with the closing of the door, he'd yanked that picture away. Part of me wanted it back, and part of me didn't know what I wanted anymore.

That was the dangerous thing about Will. He took what I'd originally thought would just be a one-night stand, and leveraged it to forever. I was still somewhere back at the Hay-Adams, wondering what the hell had happened. And I worried that if I didn't catch up soon, I would lose him for good—

If I hadn't already.

Chapter Twenty-four

Get your computers ready for our juiciest scandal yet. Certainly our hottest . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

We spent over a week tiptoeing around each other. I stayed out of the office as much as possible, going out on impromptu campaign events, avoiding Jackie like she had the bubonic plague. It was supposed to be easier that way, but somehow it was anything but.

I missed her. Missed talking with her, laughing with her, missed waking up beside her. By the following Thursday, I was ready to crack.

It had been a little over a month since that night at the Hay-Adams, and she'd completely changed my life.

Mitch walked into my office. "Got a minute?"

"Yeah. What's up?"

He sat down in one of the empty chairs in front of my desk. "We need to talk."

"Okay."

"You look like shit."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You look like shit. Are you sleeping at all?"

Not really. "Some."

"You guys broke up?"

I stared at him, shaking my head in annoyance. "Are we really going to have this conversation? Do you really want to talk about our fucking feelings?"

"I can't think of anything I'm less interested in talking about. But when your *feelings* are screwing up my campaign, then you bet your ass we're going to talk about them."

I arched an eyebrow at him. “Your campaign?”

He snorted. “Please. I’m the one busting my ass for this campaign while you’re worried about getting laid.”

My eyes narrowed. “Has anyone ever fired you for being insubordinate?”

Mitch laughed. “Yeah, Jackie’s father, and in case you haven’t noticed, he’s a real asshole.”

“I’ve noticed,” I muttered.

“She wants to quit.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Jackie wants me to tell Price we don’t need her anymore. She wants off the campaign.”

“Since when?” I knew how much the internship meant to her, how important her career was. What would happen at Price if she left my campaign? And what would happen to us? Was that it?

“She told me today, but I’m guessing your little fight last week spurred it on.”

I winced. “You heard that?”

“The whole fucking office heard it. Luckily, no one could make out what the two of you were saying.”

“Can this get any worse?”

“Yes,” Mitch answered bluntly. “You both need to lock this shit down before everyone figures out the two of you were having sex with each other. . . if they haven’t already.”

“I don’t know what to say to her,” I muttered.

“I don’t really care what you say, but whatever it is, I don’t want her to quit. Not this close to the election. We need her—she’s become my go-to person. And she shouldn’t throw away her future. Talk to her.”

“She doesn’t want to talk to me.”

“Then apologize.” Mitch stood up, disgust dripping from his voice. “You need to contain this before you both end up on the front page of *Capital Confessions*. We’re close to the election, and you’re neck and neck in this race. A scandal right now would be the death of you.”

I nodded like I cared, like the biggest thing to come out of this conversation wasn’t my fear that Jackie quitting the campaign meant I wouldn’t see her again. I didn’t want to let the people around me down,

didn't want to disappoint Mitch and all of my campaign contributors, didn't want to screw over my staff.

But right now, my biggest concern had nothing to do with the campaign, and everything to do with the girl who had stolen my heart.

Jackie

I couldn't take it anymore. It was awkward as hell having to see Will every day, having to pretend his presence didn't affect me. I was beginning to worry that someone would figure it out, that the tension between us would give it all away.

It was time to move on. I knew Mitch was pissed, but hopefully he could sell my departure in a way that wouldn't totally ruin my chances at Price.

I probably should have cared more than I did.

I'd spent the last week fielding media calls and dealing with the reaction to Will's lunch with Blair. Nobody had expected how big it would become, least of all, Will. It likely had less to do with his notoriety and more to do with Blair's, but still. The press salivated over the pictures, and each day a new story, more ridiculous than the last, emerged. At this point I was surprised they hadn't suggested Blair was pregnant with Will's love child, and that was the reason her engagement with Thom ended.

Each day the media circus highlighted all of the reasons why being with Will was a bad idea, and every day I was around him, I fell more in love with him. Quitting became less of an option and more of a necessity.

I gathered my stuff, staring at the clock on the wall. It was five o'clock, way earlier than I normally left work, but screw it. It was my last day; if there were ever a time to duck out early, it was today. I hadn't wanted to do the big good-bye thing with the staff, hadn't wanted to draw attention to the fact that I was leaving. Mitch could tell everyone I got called back to Price later. He said he'd sorted things out with James Morgan, so hopefully I hadn't thrown away my career along with everything else.

I hesitated in the entryway of my cubicle. It felt weird leaving without saying good-bye to Will, but I didn't know what to say. We hadn't spoken to each other all week, and the idea of going back to his office after our fight was about as appealing as a trip to the gynecologist. Besides, Mitch

had to have told him today was my last day. If he'd wanted to say good-bye, he'd had his shot. And it wasn't like I was moving far away; I'd still be in D.C.

Screw it.

I grabbed my stuff, heading toward the elevator, trying to tell myself I wasn't running away.

I hit the elevator button, my heart pounding as I waited for the doors to open.

I'd never been here before, never had my heart broken. I didn't know how I was supposed to act or what I was supposed to do. I worked all the freaking time, so it wasn't even like I had girlfriends I could talk to. I was totally out of my element. Part of me wanted to go out to a bar and get drunk, and pick up some random guy whose body would make me forget Will's. And even as the thought entered my mind, I knew it would be a while before I could imagine touching anyone else, kissing anyone else.

It had been a week and a half since we'd last had sex, and the absence of it had left me edgy and miserable. I was a hot mess.

The doors slid open, the elevator empty. I walked in, turning back and taking one last look at the office, my heart stuck in my throat. I moved forward, punching the button for the ground floor, and when I looked up, I saw Will stalking toward the elevator, anger etched across his handsome face.

My gaze ran over him like he was a tall glass of water and I hadn't a drop to drink. He was dressed in one of my favorite suits—navy, and impeccably tailored—white dress shirt, silver tie. His eyes were hooded, his mouth—the lips I loved and missed—a harsh line. His face was covered in sexy stubble; it looked like he hadn't shaved in days. I ached to kiss him, to stroke his cheek, ached to touch him. I curled my hands into fists at my side, desperately wishing I were strong enough to break the contact between us, too weak to do anything but devour him with my eyes. He kept walking toward me, practically taking out Wanda who worked in the mail room as he closed the distance between us.

The mature thing would have been to step out of the elevator and say good-bye like a grown-up. I stabbed the button to close the doors. He moved forward, disbelief in his gaze as the doors began sliding shut. I didn't know what to say, or what to do, so I literally did the only thing that

came to mind—I gave a little, “I’m sorry” shrug, all the while relief coursing through my body.

We stared at each other, watching as the doors closed. And then, just as I tasted freedom, a tanned hand, long tapered fingers that had teased orgasm after orgasm out of me, slid into the tiny gap between the two elevator doors. The doors opened, and suddenly Will was in the elevator with me, punching buttons until the doors closed, trapping us together.

Chapter Twenty-five

We have exclusive video of a certain young candidate for state senate in a very compromising position . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

I couldn't speak. The ridiculousness of all of it, that she'd run from me like I was someone to avoid, considering I'd been inside her, destroyed whatever calm Mitch had attempted to instill with his little chat.

Fuck calm. Fuck her.

I hit the emergency stop button, bringing the elevator to a halt. Jackie's eyes widened, moving back into the corner opposite me, as if putting distance between us was enough.

"What are you doing?"

"Were you seriously going to leave without saying good-bye?"

She looked down at the floor. "I didn't know what to say."

"How about good-bye? How about something to explain why you're doing this? Why I had to hear about you quitting from my campaign manager, rather than the one person who should have talked to me about it?"

"I'm sorry."

"Jesus, Jackie. It's not enough that you're sorry. You're treating me like we're fucking strangers, like I'm as important to you as the girl who works in the mailroom."

"Her name's Wanda," she snapped.

My eyes narrowed. "Are you trying to piss me off?"

"Oh, get over yourself." She moved toward me, blue eyes flashing.

"You haven't talked to me. You don't even look at me. You look through me like I don't exist. You don't think I know what you've been doing, that

you're avoiding me? Punishing me because you didn't get exactly what you wanted?"

"That's not fair."

"You want to talk about fair?" Her voice rose. "You ask for way too much—that's what's not fair. You push, and you push, and then when things don't work out the way you planned, you freeze me out. And now you have the audacity to come in here, and what, give me a hard time for not coming and saying good-bye? Fuck you."

Inches separated our bodies. Fury came off of her in waves, her temper filling the space around us. She was stunning when she was angry, and each word out of her mouth took the tension raging through my body and transformed it into something else entirely.

She reached out, her hands connecting with my suit jacket, pushing me back against the elevator wall. "You've been ignoring me for over a week; you don't get to be angry now. I needed time; I needed a little patience. I never said I didn't want to be friends anymore, never said we had to act like strangers. That's on you."

"If I've been ignoring you, it's not because I'm punishing you, it's because it hurts to look at you. It hurts to hear your voice, and see your smile, and know that I've lost you. I can't be friends with you; I can't be around you right now. I'm not punishing you; I'm trying to breathe."

Jackie stared down at the floor, her voice tight. "Then why are you here? Why didn't you just let me go?"

"What do you want, Jackie? That's why I'm here. I'm trying to figure you out. So what do you want from me?" I asked the question, struggling to make my tone casual, acting like my heart wasn't on the line, like I wasn't one step away from pushing her up against the wall and finding the release I craved. I asked the question like my sanity hadn't gone out the window a long time ago, and as if her answer weren't everything.

"I don't know." Jackie's voice shook slightly. "Maybe things were better when they were casual, without all of this stuff between us—"

"When it was just sex?"

She flushed. "Yeah."

I didn't know how to tell her the truth, how to make her understand what she didn't want to see, what she couldn't see.

It had never just been sex.

What I felt every time I looked at her was infinitely more complicated. I was a fucking mess, and she reduced us to nothing more than just a fling, while I stood here, completely and utterly in love with her.

I was sick of her having the upper hand, sick of her managing me, sick of waiting around for whatever scraps she threw my way. She wanted things to be casual between us? She thought it was possible for sex to be casual between us?

Fuck that.

Jackie

My back hit the elevator wall before I even had a chance to register that he'd moved. I jerked my head, staring up at Will. He was hard, his hips pressing against mine, sending sparks throughout my body.

My brain told me to release the emergency button and get out of the elevator. My body rocked back, rubbing myself over his cock, desire pooling between my thighs.

“What are you doing?” I asked. The words came out, lost somewhere between the moans that escaped as he ground himself against me, giving me every inch of how badly he wanted me.

My nipples tightened. It had only been twelve days since we'd been together, and he'd created a monster. My emotions were strung together by want and need, and I was horny as fuck.

Will moved closer, his muscular chest brushing against me. He didn't answer me. He took a fistful of my hair, pushing it to the side, exposing my neck and the skin hidden by my shirt collar. His mouth closed down on me—hot, wet—as his teeth grazed my flesh. My hips bucked.

There was nothing playful in it; this was no teasing nip. It was hard enough that I had no doubt he'd leave a mark; no doubt he wanted to. This was primal, wild, something I'd never experienced before. It was as if his mouth were saying, *pay attention, you're mine.*

He pulled back slightly, the cool air hitting my skin, a stark contrast to the heat in his touch. A tremor ran through me, my nipples pebbling.

“We're in an elevator. We can't have sex in an elevator,” I murmured, my words at odds with the way my hips moved against him, the friction between us sending another wave of pleasure through me.

My body was ready to take exactly what it wanted, even as my brain scrambled to catch up.

Will leaned forward again, his size blocking everything out. His mouth drifted up my neck, his lips and tongue caressing me, sending wave after wave of desire ripping through my body. His mouth closed over my earlobe, biting down, drawing it into his mouth. I gasped.

Fuck it. I was about to have sex in an elevator.

He released the lobe, his mouth hovering near my ear.

“You want to pretend this is just casual? That any guy could touch you and make you moan like I do?” His hand slid down between us, stroking me through the fabric of my dress, his touch sending sparks through me. “You want to pretend you aren’t dying for me to slip a finger inside you? That if I did, I wouldn’t find you soaking wet?” He shifted his hand higher, stroking my clit through the layers of clothes. His fingers moved over me expertly, providing just enough pressure to have me biting back another moan. He touched my body like he knew exactly how to get me off; as if he knew everything I liked, every secret desire, every part of me that responded to his touch.

I was losing it, falling apart in his arms, and in contrast, his voice was calm, his hands confident. I loathed his control; hated my lack of it.

His lips grazed my ear. “I’m going to fuck you here. And it’s going to be so good you won’t want anyone else but me. I’m going to ruin you for other men, and you’re going to like it.”

Jesus.

He reached down between us, his hands moving to the tie of my dress. I looked down, watching as he undid the knot. The dress opened, exposing my bare skin, the fuchsia lace bra and boy shorts I wore underneath. Will’s eyes darkened. I waited for him to pull the dress off, but he left it on, his hands stroking my stomach, moving higher—

“Beautiful.” He trailed a finger down the edge of my bra, teasing a shiver from me.

“Please.”

“What?”

“Touch me.”

“I am touching you.”

“More.”

He slid the dress from my shoulders, the fabric falling to the floor. His hands reached behind my back, unsnapping my bra, peeling the lace from my body in one easy movement. He tossed the bra to the floor.

His hands came forward, cupping my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples, squeezing, pushing my flesh together. My back arched, giving him everything he wanted. I gripped the wall, struggling to support my weight as my legs trembled, my body flooded with need.

Will's head bent, his lips brushing against my nipple softly, teasing my flesh. His stubble scraped my skin, the contrast with the gentleness of his mouth sending another shiver through me.

"Please." I bit back a moan, desperate for more, for his tongue—
Ohmigod.

His mouth came down around my nipple, his lips and his tongue creating a deep suction, his teeth adding the faintest hint of pain that wound its way around the pleasure.

I grabbed onto his hair, pulling him against me, greedy for more, wanting him to take me in deeper, suck me harder. I moved forward, yanking Will toward me, until he was flush against me again. I fumbled with his shirt, struggling to pull the fabric out from the waistband of his pants. My hand lowered, cupping his arousal, stroking his hard length, his cock jerking against my palm.

Will moved away, his mouth leaving my breast. His gaze narrowed. I didn't know what he wanted, couldn't read the expression in his eyes. There was heat there, heat and desire. But I saw anger where I'd previously seen emotion, and I wondered if I'd pushed him too far; I was so desperate for everything else I didn't really care.

He continued to stare at me, his gaze penetrating, that look somehow more intimate than anything else. He was right, of course. All he had to do was touch me and my body responded. He'd proven that easily enough. I craved his touch in a way I'd never wanted anyone, in a way I'd never want anyone.

"I need you." It was the most honest thing I'd ever said, and even though it was unspoken between us, I knew he knew I wasn't just talking about the mind-blowing orgasm building inside me, or the touch of his hands, or the feel of his lips. I needed—wanted—it all.

"I know." He delivered the statement matter-of-factly, as if I weren't standing there practically naked, my nipples begging for his hands and

mouth, my body wet and ready for him.

There wasn't a trace of arrogance in his tone, and yet we both knew there was no need for arrogance. He had the real power here, the kind that didn't need to be advertised.

Will reached out, his hands stroking my sides, moving up my stomach, dragging his knuckles over my flesh, his fingers following behind in lazy strokes. I bit down on my lip, the tenderness of his touch almost unbearable.

The contrasting sensations were too much. It was fast and furious; it was heady and sweet. As soon as my body caught up, he changed his touch, leaving me a mass of confusion and a bundle of desire.

His gaze never leaving mine, Will knelt down before me, his hands drifting lower, his fingers hooking under the top of my boy shorts. He pulled the lace from my hips, dragging the fabric down my legs, yanking them off over my heels.

He leaned forward, his mouth on me, his head between my legs. His tongue stroked me, moving upward, finding my clit.

I moaned.

"Oh my god. Yes. Will. Gah." My voice became an incoherent jumble of words, phrases, sounds. Absolute nonsense. Everything I had was shattered by his mouth, his lips, his tongue. He played with my body, pushing me to the brink of orgasm, and then holding me back, need vibrating through me, my body strung tight like a bow.

His fingers slid inside me, diving into my wetness, his hands bringing me closer and closer, finishing the job his mouth started. I was so fucking close.

I watched him, unable to tear my gaze from the sight of his hands manipulating me, heat filling me at the wink of cufflinks on his wrist as he fucked me with his fingers.

And then I felt it, my orgasm building, a flash of heat ripping through my body. I came with a scream, all that pent up frustration and arousal finally releasing. I came with him kneeling in front of me, perfect suit, golden hair, knowing gaze, stripping away my control until I had nothing left but the pleasure he gave me.

Will

The second Jackie came around my fingers, her arousal covering my hand, my control snapped. I pulled back, rising to my feet on shaky legs. I'd never been more turned on in my life. Maybe I'd been the one to seduce her in the elevator, but from the moment I touched her, I became the one who was seduced.

I fumbled with my trousers, a tremor in my hands as I unbuttoned my pants, dragging my zipper down. Jackie reached forward, her hand stroking me, her fingers curving around my cock as she pushed the opening of my boxers aside. My heartbeat skipped and sputtered as my dick throbbed in her hands.

I grabbed her hips, lifting her legs and wrapping them around my waist, pushing her back against the wall, gripping her ass.

She reached between us, taking me in her hands again, guiding me toward her. The head of my cock rubbed against her slick warmth and I bit back a groan. *So fucking good.*

I slid into her slowly, loving the feel of her body clenching down on me as I thrust deeper inside. I lifted her up, shifting slightly, and then I was filling her completely, a moan tumbling from my lips.

I moved slowly, holding her against me, her legs wrapped around my waist, her feet digging into my back. She clutched my shoulders, her naked breasts rubbing against the front of my suit jacket. I fucked her slowly, struggling between my own need and my desire to leave her with a memory that would show her that sex was never just sex between us.

I felt my own orgasm building, the time without her making it even more difficult to maintain control. I moved back slowly, working a hand free to gather her hair, pulling her head back until our gazes met. My hips pumped into her, her body throbbing around me, wresting the last vestiges of restraint.

"You're mine." I half spoke the words, half growled them, the savage part of me taking over. "Only mine."

I couldn't hear her response over the roaring in my ears as I plunged into her, over and over again, finally grasping the release I needed. But I saw the look in her eyes, watched the awareness flicker, saw the understanding before I gave myself over to pleasure and lost everything else.

Jackie

I could barely stand. After Will gave me my second orgasm in under fifteen minutes, the orgasm of a lifetime, he slid out of me, turning away to fix his clothes. We didn't speak. My legs shook, my muscles weak, my body sore. My heart ached.

He'd been out to prove a point. Mission accomplished. I barely knew my own fucking name after that.

I grabbed my clothes from the floor, struggling to dress, hysteria bubbling up inside me. I was too raw for words, too rocked by him to know which side was up. I loved him. And I wanted him. And I didn't have answers beyond that.

He was still angry. I could see it in his stance, could feel it when he was inside me. I'd hurt him—we'd hurt each other. And once again, I had nothing. I was confused, and exhausted, and still somehow turned on. And suddenly it felt like all the air had been sucked out of the elevator.

Will turned to face me, his pants zipped, suit jacket buttoned, his rumpled shirt the only sign he'd been inside me a few minutes earlier.

He looked at me, his jaw clenched. "You okay?"

I nodded, choking on emotions I was afraid to speak and sensations I couldn't help but feel.

He hit the emergency button, the sound of the elevator whirling to life breaking into what had felt like our secret world. I couldn't look at him, so I focused on the little numbers lighting up as we descended floor by floor. I was embarrassed. I was torn. Part of me wanted to go home with him, wanted to spend all night in his arms. Part of me needed space like I needed air.

I snuck a peek at his profile, the mussed hair, the clenched jaw, the strong body I loved. Nothing had been resolved between us. There was still want and an impossible barrier I wasn't sure we could cross.

The elevator stopped on the ground floor. I opened my mouth to speak, but Will turned to me, crushing his mouth to mine, his hands plundering my hair. He released me just as quickly as he'd kissed me, leaving me no time to catch up or adjust to the desire raging inside. He pulled back, his gaze meeting mine.

"It was never just sex. It will never be just sex. You can tell yourself whatever helps you sleep at night, tell yourself whatever you need to feel

okay about walking away, but we both know you'll never want anyone as much as you want me. You'll never feel for anyone what you feel for me. It'll never be as good for you as it is with me. Think about that when you can't sleep tonight, when you're lying in bed, your nipples sore and aching, your body dying for my mouth, and my hands, and my cock."

I couldn't speak. He leaned forward again, his lips brushing against the curve of my cheek, his hand tucking my hair behind my ear, the fingers grazing my lobe sending a tremor through me.

"Good night, Jackie."

I sagged against the elevator wall, watching him walk away, wondering what the hell I was supposed to do next.

Chapter Twenty-six

. . . with the illegitimate daughter of one of the Senate's most illustrious figures.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Will

I woke to the sound of a ringing telephone and the pounding in my head brought on by a truly awful hangover. After I'd left Jackie, I'd come home and gotten drunk on a bottle of scotch. My head was so fucked it wasn't even funny.

I'd thought having sex with her would prove how right we were for each other, figured it would convince her not to walk away. All it had done was convince me I would wait for her, for however long I had to. She was it for me, even if she didn't know it yet.

After all was said and done, I'd still seen confusion in her eyes, and the kind of panic I didn't know how to erase. I'd used up any tricks or tools I might have to convince her to take a chance on us. I didn't know what else to do. She was afraid of the unknown, of what would happen if this leaked, but I didn't know how to guard against maybes. I was powerless, and for someone like me it was a new and entirely unwelcome sensation.

The phone continued to ring, the shrill sound ripping through my head. I was getting too old to drink like I was in college. When I was twenty-one, hangovers had been manageable. Now it felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to my brain.

I rolled over, reaching for my cell on the nightstand. Mitch's name flashed on the caller ID.

The last thing I wanted to do was talk campaign strategy at . . . I searched for my alarm clock, barely making out the neon letters . . . nine a.m.

I groaned, answering and rolling to sit on the edge of the bed, my feet planted on the floor. Even that motion had my stomach rebelling.

“What’s up?”

“Get on your fucking computer. Now.”

I blinked, the fury in Mitch’s voice filling the line.

“What’s going on?”

“You fucking tell me. *Capital Confessions*.”

Dread filled me. I flipped open my laptop, typing the blog address into my browser. It didn’t take a genius to figure out that this was going to be very, very bad. I waited while the page loaded, nausea rolling around my stomach like a pinball machine. When it finally did, it took a minute for the words and images on the screen to actually register . . . and oh, dear god, the video.

The headline screamed:

Sex Tape!!! Virginia Senate Candidate Caught On Tape With
Senator Reynolds’s Illegitimate Daughter

Holy fuck.

I scrolled down, everything growing worse by the moment. There were pictures—of me, Jackie, her father, her mother—pictures of the entire Reynolds clan. The article mentioned Jackie’s internship at Price, her work on my campaign. The article called her mother a “professional girlfriend.” Jesus. And then there was the video.

The phone slipped out of my hand.

I hit play, horror filling me as I watched me move toward Jackie in the elevator. I watched as her dress hit the ground, and suddenly I couldn’t take it anymore.

Nausea and bile rose. I grabbed the trash can under my desk, vomiting, last night’s scotch and this morning’s crisis emptying my stomach. Sweat pooled on my brow. This was so fucking bad. So fucking bad.

I grabbed my cell from the floor.

“Are you still there?”

“I take it you saw the video. You want to explain to me how this happened?”

I closed my eyes, sinking down into my desk chair. “It’s my fault. Completely my fault.”

“Is that the elevator at work?”

I felt like a little kid again—oh god, my parents were going to see it.
“Yeah.”

“And what about this seemed like a good idea?”

I held my head in my hands. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was impulsive, and stupid, and I shouldn’t have put her in that position. I didn’t think about the cameras. They never even crossed my mind.”

I felt like the biggest idiot on the planet.

“This could end you.”

I knew he was right, and strangely enough, as soon as he said it, I realized I hadn’t even thought of myself when I saw the video. I’d thought of her—her secrets exposed, her career ruined—her naked body on the Internet—all because of my careless mistake.

“I have to fix this.”

“Good luck with that one. This is going to haunt you for a while. Comedians are going to joke about it; constituents are going to watch the video. And Jackie?” He sighed. “Jackie’s fucked. Price will drop her. Senator Reynolds is shitting a brick. As soon as she got on *Capital Confessions*’s radar they did a little digging and realized who she really was. The story exploded after that.”

“I have to fix this,” I repeated, my panic giving way to deadly calm. “I need to go see Jackie.”

“Absolutely not. That is the last thing you need to do. Call her on the phone. Send me in your place, but under no circumstances are you to go near her. Do you understand me? There will be reporters camped out in front of her apartment, and if they catch sight of you, this thing will only grow. You want to fix this, listen to me. You’re only going to hurt yourself and her if you act impulsively.”

Shit. “Fine. What do you suggest?”

“Call her. I’ll go over there and touch base with her soon. You’re going to need to hold a press conference. Figure out what you want to say, and how you want to handle it.”

I was definitely going to call her and beg her to forgive me. “I’m going to get in touch with my attorneys. I’ll see what I need to do to get the video taken down.”

“If you can do it, that would help. But if you can’t, we’re going to have to spin it. Something about being single and entitled to a personal life.”

Mitch sighed. “I can bring you out of this, maybe. But you have to get on board with what I tell you. No more acting impulsive, no more public sex.”

This was my worst motherfucking nightmare.

Jackie

I woke up late, hitting snooze a few times before finally rolling over and getting out of bed. I had to be at work in an hour, was heading back to Price and the database, and starting my first day of Will Clayton detox.

I should have been more excited about going back to Price, should have been more grateful they’d agreed to take me back at all. But I’d miss Mitch, the Clayton campaign, the easy camaraderie. I’d miss feeling like I was part of something where I was really making a difference. I was such a small fish at Price; it was tough to feel like the work I did really mattered, not after working on Will’s campaign.

I headed to the bathroom, brushing my teeth and taking a quick shower. Today was definitely going to be a no-makeup day. I threw my hair up in a messy bun, grabbing the first outfit I could find in my closet. At least one of the benefits of working at Price was no longer obsessing about my appearance. There would be no one to impress, no one whose opinion mattered.

I grabbed my purse and cell, heading for the door. I tried to be positive, tried to tell myself it was what I needed to get clarity on the situation with Will. And I’d loved Price. It was a chance to go back to my dream job.

It was going to be a good day.

I walked down the stairs, heading for the front door. I clutched the knob, turning it as I pulled open the door, and suddenly my world exploded.

“Has your father ever acknowledged you?”

“Does Senator Reynolds know he’s your father?”

“Are you dating Will Clayton?”

“Did you steal him away from Blair?”

“Have you seen the video?”

I came to a dead stop. A handful of reporters stood on my apartment doorstep, microphones poised, cameras ready—holy mother of god. A flash bulb went off, shocking me out of my frozen stance.

They hurled more questions at me, but the roaring in my ears drowned everything out. I stepped back into the building, slamming the door shut behind me, my heart pounding.

I wasn't sure if twenty-one was too young to have a heart attack, but the shooting pain in my chest suggested otherwise.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I grabbed my phone out of my bag, staring at the ridiculous number of missed calls. I'd had the thing on silent yesterday at work, and with everything that happened after, everything with Will, I'd been so distracted I forgot to turn the ringer back on. My hands shook as I pulled up *Capital Confessions* in the browser on my phone.

Holy shit.

I blinked at the screen in front of me. This had to be a dream, or more accurately, my worst nightmare.

I sank down to the ground, not caring that I was in my apartment lobby, not caring about anything else but my naked body on the Internet, my paternity exposed for the world to see, and the knowledge that I'd just wrecked every dream I'd ever had, and in the process, destroyed the career of the man I loved.

. . .

Somehow I made it up to my apartment. As soon as I closed the door behind me, I rushed to the bathroom and promptly vomited twice.

I couldn't stop shaking. I didn't cry; I was too shell-shocked for tears. I just sat there on the floor, wondering how I'd been so stupid to throw my future away. I'd had everything—a chance at a job I'd dreamed of for most of my life—and I blew it. And the worst part was Will. This was going to ruin his campaign.

I grabbed my phone, dialing his number, my heart in my throat as my fingers trembled. What would I even say to him?

He answered immediately. "I'm so sorry. So fucking sorry. Are you okay?"

Relief filled me at the sound of his voice. I hadn't realized just how much I needed to hear from him until he answered. Despite how awkward things had been between us yesterday, it all disappeared in the face of the shitstorm swirling around us.

“Yeah. Reporters are outside my apartment building.”

“Mine, too. I’m so sorry, Jackie. I wanted to come over, but Mitch was worried that me showing up would only give them a bigger story. I’m trying to do damage control.”

“I get it.” I closed my eyes. “I’m so sorry you got involved in this. If I were a normal girl, with normal parents, this story never would have gotten as much attention as it has. This is on me.”

“No. It isn’t. I was the stupid one who thought elevator sex was a good idea. I should have seen the camera. I should have never put you in jeopardy like that. It was reckless, and now you’re paying for it. I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t think of it, either.” I didn’t think, period, when he was around.

“I’m going to fix this.”

I loved that he wanted to try, but this was beyond him. My father’s reaction would be everything. He had the power to transform this scandal into something more manageable, something that could clear Will, but whether he would choose to do so was another thing entirely.

“What does Mitch say?”

Will sighed. “He’s worried about the campaign. We have a strategy meeting in a few hours. I’m more worried about you.”

“I’ll be okay.” Total lie. “I knew what I was doing, knew what I was getting myself into. It was my risk.”

“I’m so sorry.”

My phone beeped and I stared at the caller ID. Shit.

“I have to take this. It’s Price. I’ll call you later.”

“Okay. Jackie?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

My heart lurched at those words, at the pain in his voice. It amazed me that he could still feel the same way about me when I’d just ruined his life.

I hung up, dread filling me as I answered the call.

“This is Jackie.”

“This is James Morgan. We’ve seen *Capital Confessions*. There are reporters here and the phone keeps ringing off the hook. We can’t have this kind of a scandal tied to us. Your involvement with Price has already been mentioned. We’re going to have to let you go.”

I'd known it was coming; I didn't even blame them for their decision. I'd do the same in their position. My throat clogged with unshed tears as I watched my dream die.

"I understand. Thank you for the opportunity," I offered weakly before I heard a click on the other end of the line.

My phone rang again. My gaze narrowed at the name that flashed across my caller ID. I stabbed "accept."

"What the fuck was that, Sean? After everything, you couldn't even give me a heads-up?"

"I called you when it came out. I've been calling you. You haven't answered."

"I had my phone on silent." My eyes closed as another wave of nausea assailed me. "I'm ruined. He's ruined. Did you think about how many people you destroyed with that post? Did you care? We've worked together for almost four years. Did that mean nothing to you?"

"Come on, Jackie. You know the rules; know how the game is played. This is what we do. This story landed in my fucking lap. What was I supposed to do? You want to talk about loyalty? Where was your loyalty when you quit?"

"I gave you two weeks' notice! I didn't leave you in a lurch; I even offered to stay on until you hired someone new. Is that what this is? Retaliation because you were pissed that I quit?"

He laughed. "This wasn't personal; this was business. This was money and politics. This is what we do. This is D.C. You played the game and you lost. You're no different than the hundreds of secrets you've exposed over the years. Next week it'll just be a different politician, a different girl, a different scandal. Welcome to the game."

He was right. I'd told myself all along that I was doing important work, making a difference. I'd told myself I was exposing the scandals of people who deserved to have their lies unveiled for the world to see. I'd been so focused on the guilty, I'd ignored how my actions hurt the innocent. People like Will. People who didn't deserve to get dragged down into the muck and slime.

I'd thought I knew so much about D.C., politics, thought I understood the game. But I'd just been a stupid girl, playing deeper than I could afford, my own arrogance highlighting how little I actually knew. And now I'd gambled with everything—my future and Will's—and lost it all.

Will

I hung up with Jackie, frustration filling me. I wanted to be with her, wanted to be there to help her through this. I hated that she was dealing with everything on her own.

I was holed up in my town house. Reporters camped out on the front stoop with cameras and microphones, ready to pounce on anything I gave them. I wanted to go out and tell everyone to fuck off.

My phone rang. *Mitch*.

“What did you find out?” I asked as soon as I picked up the phone.

“I know who our mole is.”

“Who?”

“Wanda from the mailroom. She offered the security guards money for the camera footage. They gave me a description of the girl who bought it from them, and I checked it against the staff. It’s her. *Capital Confessions* employed her as well. She saw you going into the elevator and noticed it was stuck on one floor for a while. She nosed around and stumbled across the video purely by accident.”

“Fuck.”

“I fired her, of course.” Mitch sighed. “I’m sorry this got past me.”

“You didn’t know. I don’t blame you. It’s on me, and it’s my responsibility to fix it.” I hesitated, knowing how much he was going to hate this idea. I’d thought about my options for a long time. I didn’t see another way out. My political career was the only obstacle to my relationship with Jackie. Politics or Jackie? It was an easy choice when I looked at it that way.

“I’m calling a press conference.”

“Okay, but how do you want to spin this?”

“We’re not. I’m pulling out of the race.”

“Absolutely not.”

“The decision has already been made, Mitch. I can’t do this anymore. Bouncing back from this scandal is going to take a miracle. Jackie isn’t comfortable with this life, and I can’t ask her to give up everything for me. She’s already given up enough.”

“You’re making a mistake.”

“No, I’m not. Letting her walk away would be the mistake. My mind’s made up. I’m choosing her.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

Senator Reynolds, his daughter, and Will Clayton all appear to be in hiding. We've contacted both the Clayton campaign headquarters as well as Senator Reynolds's campaign. Both declined to comment.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

The sound of knocking on my door was met with dread. I'd been stuck in my apartment for two days, my roommate long since fled to her boyfriend's place to avoid the media circus. Maybe it was cowardly, but I didn't know what to do. The reporters had left, but my naked body had gotten plenty of airtime; going out and facing the world wasn't exactly something I relished.

I padded over to the door, peeking through the peephole. Relief filled me at the sight of Mitch on the other side.

I opened the door. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. His clothes were even more rumpled than usual, his eyes bloodshot, his hair a disheveled mess. He carried a grocery bag in his hands.

He walked over the threshold, his gaze taking in my apartment as I shut the door behind him. I offered a silent prayer he hadn't actually watched the video. Poor video quality or not, the last thing I wanted was to think about Mitch Anders seeing my naked body.

He set the bag on my kitchen countertop.

"Groceries from Will. He was worried you were stuck here hiding out. He said something about you never remembering to eat and having bare cupboards." I flushed. "He wanted to come himself, but I have him under house arrest until we sort this out. I think he feels badly for everything that's gone down, so he's trying to play by the rules." He gestured toward the living room. "Can we sit and talk?"

I nodded, leading him over to the sofa.

I didn't know what to say, could barely look at him with the shame coursing through me. "I'm so sorry. I never meant to ruin his campaign."

"I know. They fired you, didn't they?"

I nodded.

"I figured they would. Price has a zero-tolerance policy."

"It makes sense. I deserved to get fired."

He studied me for a minute. "What are you going to do now?"

It was a simple question, but it felt like the scariest thing anyone could have asked me.

"I don't know."

It was the first time in my life I'd ever been unsure of my next step.

"You fucked up. Spectacularly so."

I couldn't help but laugh. Even in a crisis Mitch didn't sugarcoat anything.

"Yeah, I did."

"This thing between you and Will, it's different right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean you aren't going to make a habit of fucking political candidates in elevators, correct? This was just a onetime thing?"

My cheeks heated. "Yeah, it was just a onetime thing."

"And *Capital Confessions*?"

I winced. "I quit. How did you find out?"

"Let's just say it's always a good policy to keep an eye on people. I had a talk with your former editor, Sean. He signed a nondisclosure agreement, so no one will ever find out you were blogging for them."

I closed my eyes, relief filling me. "Thank you."

He smiled. "You're welcome, but I didn't just do it to be nice. That news would have screwed Will over, too. I'm assuming your gossip column days are over?"

I nodded.

"Good. I'd like to hire you."

My jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"I'd like to hire you on as a consultant. You can intern full-time for me through December, and then part-time until you graduate in May. Unpaid, of course. In May, we'll switch you over to full-time paid work. Don't get too excited. The pay is going to be shit compared to what you would have gotten from Price. And my office doesn't have paintings of sailboats on the

wall, or Turkish rugs, or any of that crap. But you'd work under me. I'd teach you what I know. After a year, we can renegotiate your salary."

This couldn't possibly be happening. This had to be a dream.

"Why?"

"Because you have a gift for this. You're one of the best I've seen in a long time. You made a huge mistake, but I know a little something about making mistakes, and someone took a chance on me when I needed it. I'm giving you the same chance.

"You'll get a clean slate, but you'll have to prove yourself. You'll work long hours. I rarely give out compliments, and you'll probably get stuck doing a lot of grunt work. But I only pick the best campaigns to work on, and I promise you, you'll get your shot."

"Are you sure?"

"Always. I don't do charity or feel-good bullshit. I wouldn't offer you the job if I weren't completely sure you could handle it. It's my name on that firm. If you fuck up again, it's on me. So don't."

I couldn't believe this was happening, couldn't believe he was giving me this opportunity. Hope poured through me.

"Understood. Yes, I want the job. Definitely. Thank you so much. I promise I won't let you down." I wanted to hug him or something, but I was pretty sure he would expire of a heart attack if I did. I settled for a smile instead.

"Good. You can start tomorrow. The hiding out has gone on long enough." He rose from the couch. "I should get back to Will's."

"How's he doing?"

"Not good. He set up a press conference. He's ending his campaign."

My jaw dropped. "Since when?"

We'd talked a few times the last few days, and he'd filled me in on the leak, but he'd never mentioned plans to end his campaign. There was no way I was letting him give up.

"He thinks the only way to keep you is to step down from public life. He's worried his campaign will only fuel this story. He wants to spare you that."

"That's ridiculous. He can't step down. It would be a huge mistake."

He had a shot at winning, and more importantly, he would make an excellent state senator. He had the ability to change people's lives. He couldn't throw that away because of me.

“Agreed, but he’s not listening to me anymore. The boy’s thinking with his heart, not his head.” Mitch delivered the words like they were blasphemy.

“I’ll talk to him.”

“That would help, but I’m not sure it’ll be enough. He needs something to give him an edge to weather this. He needs to win. We both know there’s only one person with enough power to save Will’s campaign. His grandfather isn’t enough. He’s a family member; of course, he’s going to defend Will. He’s older now, out of the game. He has respect, but his power doesn’t have the kind of teeth we need for something like this. Your father is the problem, and the best solution.”

He was right, of course. I just hated what would come next.

“Have you reached out to his campaign?”

“I have. His campaign manager alternated between telling me to go fuck myself and telling me to fuck off. They’re pissed, they’re in damage-control mode, and I promise you they are digging up whatever dirt they can to shift the focus off of him.”

I closed my eyes. “I have to go talk to him, don’t I?”

“I don’t see another way. You’re the only one with enough leverage to make your father play ball.” Mitch sighed. “I know it’s a lot to ask. I know you’re estranged from him, know just how shitty he’s been to you. But no matter what I do, I can’t see a way around this for Will. Not without your father’s involvement.” He walked toward the door.

“It’s up to you. Will’s young, there will be other elections for him. Maybe time is all he needs to bounce back from this. But I really believe in his political future, in the good he can do his constituents. I’d hate to see him throw that away. If you want to be with him, I can sell the two of you as a couple. We can move past this, the worst is already out. But we have to defuse this scandal, and I’m worried that unless we get your father on board, he’s going to throw both of you under the bus.”

• • •

When I was eight years old, walking away from my father’s table at the Hay-Adams, I made myself a promise. I vowed I would never acknowledge him publicly or privately, and any time I saw him, I’d treat him as though he were beneath my notice, just as he’d done to me.

It was time to break that promise.

I dressed to kill today: bright pink suit, high heels, and my one designer bag, every detail meticulously planned. I spent nearly an hour on my hair, did my nails, obsessed over my makeup. I was going into battle, and there was no way I'd leave a chink in my armor.

My walk I borrowed from my mother. Each step, each thrust of my hip, each extension of my mile-long legs, said, *watch me*. I held my head high, my eyes ice.

I was done being the dirty little secret.

I rode the elevator up to the top of the building that housed my father's campaign headquarters. I'd be lying if I didn't admit that being in an elevator again, even a different one, had me simultaneously turned on and embarrassed. I sought out the camera with the little red light and barely resisted the urge to flip it off.

The doors opened with a whine, and I stepped out into the plush offices that represented the seat of my father's power. He had the kind of view of D.C. reserved for a king looking down on his little kingdom.

I walked through the rows of cubicles, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. I heard the whispers, the buzz growing louder with each step I took. They should have made me nervous, but instead they lit a fire in my blood. My father's biggest scandal was coming home to roost.

I stopped in front of the large office in the back. His secretary jerked her head up at the sound of my heels against the hardwood floor. Annoyance filled her eyes, and then recognition dawned, and her jaw dropped.

I flashed her my most lethal smile, also borrowed from my mother.

"I'm here to see Senator Reynolds."

She didn't speak, her slack-jawed expression seemingly frozen on her face.

"I'm assuming he's in his office."

"Do you have an appointment?" she sputtered.

I flashed the smile again. "No. Is he in his office?"

She nodded. "But he won't see you without an appointment."

This time the smile that flashed across my face was all mine. "Oh, I think he will."

She blinked. "One minute."

I waited while she knocked on the giant wood door, slipping inside his inner sanctum. I could feel the weight of dozens of eyes on my back, could

hear the voices that were now much louder than whispers, wondering what I was doing here. I blocked it all out, my attention focused on the man behind that door. All of my attention gearing up for battle.

His secretary came back, her face pale. “He’ll see you.”

“Thank you.”

I pushed my shoulders back, took a deep breath, and entered the lion’s den.

• • •

Neither one of us spoke. We faced off like a pair of gladiators, my father sitting behind his Louis XIV desk, me in front of it, refusing to sit, refusing to give him even the slightest power advantage.

I wasn’t fucking around.

I studied him as I would any opponent. Fine, that wasn’t entirely true. There was a part of me that couldn’t resist the urge to notice the similarities between us. We still had the same face. Strangely enough, despite the thirteen years that had passed since that day at the Hay-Adams, he didn’t look much older. Either we had amazing genes, or he had an excellent plastic surgeon.

He was a handsome man, even in his fifties. He had that same golden, wealthy look I so often gave Will shit about, and yet they couldn’t have been more different. Nobility was in Will’s bones, in the way he carried himself, in his smiles, how he treated everyone like they mattered, in the light in his eyes. My father was cloaked in nobility, as if it were something he could put on and take off when it suited him. He was good—very, very good. But there was no light in his eyes, no kindness in his smile. Only power. He played a good man, whereas Will was one.

“What do you want?” he barked.

I didn’t bother responding with anything other than the truth. I figured I got my low tolerance for bullshit from him, which was fine. I had no desire to turn this into a social call.

“I want you to back Will Clayton in the election. I want you to hold a press conference saying you support him. I want you to call in every favor you have, every piece of blackmail you’ve amassed, every inch of political capital at your disposal, and I want you to get him elected.”

There was a pause, and then he laughed, the sound chilling. “I’d wondered about you. Wondered if there was more there when I learned you were working at Price. But you really are just as stupid as your mother. Little more than a whore, selling yourself to the highest bidder with the biggest checkbook. Throwing your whole fucking career away for a man who will never take you seriously. Please. You come in here with this fairy tale. That will never happen. Will Clayton made his bed, he’s going to have to lie in it.”

His words were pointed arrows, each one designed to wound with deadly accuracy. I understood now how he’d gotten where he was, how he played dirty and destroyed anyone who blocked his path. He didn’t just beat his opponents; he annihilated them.

Mitch had been right; I was my father’s daughter. But he was also wrong. My father fought for his own personal gain and for political power. Now I fought for love.

My face was a blank mask as he hurled insults at me. I would die before I gave a motherfucking inch, before I let him see his blows had any effect on me at all. I let him finish his little speech, and then my lips curved as I dropped my nuclear bomb.

“It’s funny that you would mention making your own bed. The way I see it, you made yours twenty-one years ago. You have two choices. You can publicly support Will, and you can privately harness momentum for him within the party, or you can watch everything you’ve worked for, your little kingdom of bullshit promises and backroom deals, wither and die before your very eyes. I’m not my mother. I’m not stupid, I’m not emotional, and I’m not easily defeated. I will fucking bury you.

“I will call every single media outlet I can think of from the fucking Georgetown University newspaper to *People* magazine, and I will sell my story. I will be on every TV show, every radio show. I will whore myself out to any interviewer who wants to hear all of Senator Edward Reynolds’s secrets. I will write a book. I’ll sell my story to fucking Lifetime. I’ll make it a family affair. I’ll get my mother involved. I bet she has some fascinating stories about the private side of one of our country’s most esteemed senators.”

I paused, watching as his skin changed from tanning-bed gold, to red, to purple.

“I will make it my mission to bury you, so that when I’m done you’re such a fucking joke that you can’t get a job as a small-town mayor, much less run for the Senate again. And just when you think you have a shot at reviving your career, I’ll come back and do it all over again. I will do whatever it takes. I will lie, I will tell the absolute truth; I will dedicate my entire life to ruining you. You do not want me to be your enemy.

“You think I’m just a stupid girl because I look like my mother? I’m a beautiful girl, with a sad story, and nothing but time. The media will love me. I have money and power behind me now. Not to mention I have your old campaign manager, Mitch Anders.

“Did I mention I’m going to work for him? I’m sure he knows where the bodies are buried. And if he doesn’t”—I pulled a file folder out of my bag and tossed it onto his desk— “I have these. I’ve been gathering dirt on you since I was a kid, and if you don’t believe I have enough ammunition to take you down, read them.” I smirked. “Copies, of course.

“It’s an election year. You’re chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee. Do you really want to lose everything because you wouldn’t play ball? You’re too smart for that.

“You’re going to call a press conference and back Will. We’re going to make up a bullshit excuse about how you made a mistake early in your marriage, one your wife forgave, you found God, wanted to shelter me from the public eye, blah blah blah. We’ll smile and pose for pictures, and we’ll take the story out of the media’s hands. You’ll keep your seat and your power, and Will gets elected to the Virginia Senate.”

I tossed a piece of paper onto his desk. “Here’s my cell number. Text me when you’ve made up your mind. But do it fast because I already have four interviews lined up for tomorrow. What I say depends on you, *Senator*.” I turned away, heading toward the door. Then I stopped in my tracks, looking back at him.

“And in case you were thinking of doing what you wanted to do twenty-one years ago and killing me, I’ve written a statement, and left very detailed instructions. Have a nice afternoon.”

Checkmotherfuckingmate.

Chapter Twenty-eight

Rumor has it a series of press conferences are being called by all parties involved in Elevatorgate. We can't wait to hear the next installment . . .

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

I power-walked my ass into Mitch's offices, *Eye of the Tiger* blaring on my iPod headphones.

I felt like I'd just won an Olympic gold medal, which, translated into political terms, I sort of had. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, and I felt ready to take on the world.

I fucking loved the game.

He would agree to the deal; it required little to no effort for him, and it saved his ass as well as Will's. No matter how deep my father's loathing ran, or how hard I'd hit his ego, he loved himself too much to jeopardize his career.

I pulled out the headphones, heading into Mitch's office.

His consulting practice was housed in a much smaller, less modern building than Will's headquarters. It hadn't been professionally decorated; everything was just a bit *off*, not quite right. The furniture didn't match, a few of the paintings were hung askew; it was completely different from Price and totally Mitch.

He looked up from his work, his gaze expectant. "How did it go?"

The grin I'd been holding back slid onto my face. "He'll go for it. I'm just waiting for confirmation."

Mitch smiled, the first real smile I'd ever seen on him. "You gave him hell, didn't you?"

"Yeah, I did."

His smile widened. "I'm proud of you, really fucking proud of you. Bravest fucking thing you could have done."

My smile wobbled slightly, tears filling my eyes. I felt the adrenaline crash coming, my legs shaking as I sank down onto one of the overstuffed chairs in front of Mitch's desk.

I'd somehow just faced the man I'd spent my life hating, and walked away unscathed. He couldn't touch me. Not anymore. I had no more secrets, no more shame. For the first time in my entire life, I felt really and truly free.

My phone vibrated, and I pulled it out of my bag, staring down at the message that flashed across the screen.

Have Mitch coordinate with my office.

Tears slipped down my cheeks. I'd done it. I'd fucking done it.

I looked up at Mitch. "He's going to do it. He's going to issue a statement and back Will."

"Thank god."

We both sat there, relief filling Mitch's office. I alternated between wanting to laugh and wanting to cry. Another tear slipped down my cheek.

Mitch nodded toward his door. "You did good, kid." His voice was gruff. "Go set up your new office. We'll work out your schedule with your remaining classes, and come up with something that suits us both before your graduation in May."

I nodded as I got up on shaky legs.

"And Jackie?"

"Yeah?"

"Pull it together. There's no crying in politics."

"Got it."

• • •

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Jackie Gardner."

My head jerked up at the sound of my name. A stunning brunette who looked like she'd walked off the pages of *Town & Country* stood near the office entrance talking to one of the assistants. I recognized her immediately. Apparently today was the day for me to meet the Reynolds family.

Our gazes met across the office. Any other week, meeting my secret half sister would have been momentous. Today it pretty much felt like par

for the course. I was too numb, too overwhelmed by everything that had happened to feel much more.

She walked toward me. "I'm Blair."

I nodded. "I recognize you from your pictures. I'm Jackie."

Awkwardness filled the space between us as nerves filtered through me, eclipsing some of the calm.

"Sorry to bother you at work, but could we talk somewhere privately?" She hesitated. "If you're not too busy."

I didn't know what to say to her, didn't know why she was here. My ass-kicking quota had been met for the day, and now I wanted to crawl under the covers and hibernate for a week. And yet there was nothing hostile in her expression or in her voice. She seemed as uncomfortable as I was. And Will called her a friend.

"Sure. We can sit in my office."

I walked ahead of her, catching sight of Mitch watching us. He raised an eyebrow at me, and I flashed him a reassuring smile. I closed the door behind her and invited Blair to sit in one of the chairs.

"Sorry to just show up. I didn't have your number, and I didn't want to bother Will with everything going on."

"No worries."

I studied her across the desk, my curiosity getting the best of me. I couldn't really see myself in her, didn't think we looked that much alike. I wondered if she did the same thing with me.

She laughed nervously. "This is a little awkward."

I cracked a smile, struggling for normal. "Yeah, it is."

I'd had this image of my sisters in my head for years. Perhaps unfairly, I'd imagined Blair as snobby and cold, envisioned her rejecting me. The reality was something else entirely. For the first time, I wondered if there could be more.

She sighed, folding her hands in her lap. "I've been wanting to meet you ever since Will told me about you. He explained that you probably needed time before you'd be ready to meet us, but with everything going on, I wanted you to know that you can count on me for anything you need. If you want me to release a statement of support or anything, just tell me. I'd be happy to, same thing with our sister Kate. She wanted to meet you, but I was worried it would be too overwhelming with both of us here."

It was the phrase, *our sister*, that did it. I didn't know what it was about those words or her presence here, but the second she said them, my eyes filled with tears. Jesus. I hardly ever cried, now twice in as many hours.

"Sorry." I grabbed a tissue from my desk, my face flaming. "It's been a bizarre day."

Blair reached across my desk, grabbing my hand and squeezing. It was the strangest thing, but the second she touched me, I felt a sense of calm. She had presence; a sort of gravitas about her that said shit did not go down on her watch. She was two years older than me, and yet those two years felt like so much more in the face of her calm.

Part of being in politics was learning to read people quickly, to trust your gut. I liked her. And something told me to give her a chance.

Understanding flickered in her gaze. "Are you okay?"

I struggled to get my emotions under control. "Yeah." I offered her a watery smile. "I'm normally a little more together than this. I just—I fell in love, lost my dream job, had my boobs exposed to the entire fucking country, and am now talking to a sister I never expected would acknowledge me. My emotions are a roller coaster."

"I know what you mean. You feel like your life's falling apart, and it's the scariest thing, and yet you're starting to realize you're becoming someone you like even more than the person you were?"

I nodded. "Something like that."

"Trust me, I know how you feel. The rumors are true. I caught my fiancé screwing his best man in the dressing room at the church on our wedding day. I get it."

My jaw dropped. I hadn't given much credence to the rumors, but *whoa*. "I'm so sorry."

She shrugged. "It feels good to not have to pretend to be perfect anymore."

"I can imagine."

The more she talked, the more I liked her. I'd always had this image of her in my head, maybe it was the one she presented to the media, but the girl in front of me seemed down-to-earth and cool. She seemed real, and I got why Will liked her and trusted her.

"Do you want to get a drink sometime?" I asked, surprised by the words coming out of my mouth. I didn't have a ton of friends, didn't let many people in. But I wanted to know her—wanted to know *my sister*—better.

Her easy acceptance was an invitation I didn't want to reject and a chance I didn't want to throw away.

She smiled. "That sounds perfect."

Will

"Are you sure this is the right decision?" my mother asked, worry coming through her voice on the other end of the line. My parents were in Paris, but they'd already gotten a few calls from reporters asking for their comments on the story with Jackie.

"I am."

"You've worked so hard for this, William."

I had worked hard for it. Lots of people had. And there was a part of me that couldn't help but feel like I was letting them down. But there was one person I *couldn't* let down.

"I love her, Mom. I want to make her happy. I want to do what it takes to make this work. She's the thing that makes me happy, more than politics, more than anything. I know it's sudden, and I know it means I'm going to have to sacrifice some things, but I'm okay with that. I can find another job; I won't ever find anyone like her."

She sighed. "My baby's growing up."

I laughed for the first time in days. "Mom, I'm twenty-six. I think I've been 'grown-up' for a while now."

She sniffed. "Just you wait and see. One day you'll have kids, and you'll watch them grow up, hoping you've given them the right foundations to make good choices, to find their own happiness."

Emotion filled me. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you, too, William. I'm so proud of you."

"Thank you."

"What's your plan? Do you still have the ring?"

I stared at the black velvet box sitting on my dresser. "Yeah."

"Are you going to propose to her?"

A knot tightened around my heart. "When she's ready. I don't want to rush her. It may take some time."

"When I was single, most girls were eager to lock a good man down."

I laughed at that one. “Jackie’s not most girls. She’s been through a lot; hasn’t really had a family. Hasn’t ever had a boyfriend. I think it’s going to take her a bit to warm up to the idea of marriage and kids, and the kind of commitment that comes with ‘til death do us part.”

“Well, that’s fine and good, but I’m not getting any younger, and I need a grandchild to spoil. Lord knows your sisters aren’t interested in settling down. So you might tell her to hurry up a bit.”

I laughed. “Will do. You’ll like her, Mom.”

“I’m sure I will. You have excellent taste.”

The doorbell rang.

“I need to go. Mitch was going to stop by to talk about the press conference.”

“Tell him I said hello. I love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I disconnected the call, and pulled open the door, expecting to see Mitch standing on my doorstep. My heart lurched—

Jackie stood in front of me, a smile on her face.

Chapter Twenty-nine

Is it true? Are wedding bells in the air?

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Jackie

It had only been a few days since I'd seen him, a few days since we'd been together in the elevator, and yet I drank in the sight of him.

He looked tired, and worn-out, and somehow still like the best thing I'd ever seen.

"Can I come in?"

Nerves filled me and my voice trembled slightly. I was going for an emotional trifecta today.

He nodded. "Of course."

I walked past him into the entryway, shades of our first night together flashing back to me. We stared at each other, the events of the past few days between us. And then I was moving forward, and he was, too, and his arms enfolded me, and his lips engulfed me, and everything else melted away.

He kissed me like it had been months; kissed me like he was desperate for my mouth, like he searched for something only I could give. He kissed me like I was everything, and finally I believed it.

We stayed like that for a while, our hands, and mouths, and bodies getting reacquainted. And then I pulled back, my lips puffy, my heart bursting with everything I wanted to say.

I couldn't pinpoint the moment when everything changed between us. There had been moments when it felt like a slow burn, and others when it came on quick like a wildfire. However I'd come to this point, whether it snuck up on me, or presented itself in a dazzling smile and an innocent touch that night at the Hay-Adams, it was here to stay.

"I love you."

In typical me fashion, I blurted the words out with more exuberance than finesse.

He froze, his eyes widening.

“Sorry. I probably should have led up to that or something.” I walked into the living room, Will trailing behind me, and sank down onto the couch. I needed some kind of support considering how much my legs shook.

“Let me try again. I love you. I don’t know when or how, I just know that I do. You’re right. I wasn’t paying attention earlier. Maybe it snuck up on me, maybe I knew you were meant for me in some secret, not-yet-grown-up part of my heart, the night we met. I’m sorry it took me longer to figure it out, but I know now. I love you. I’ve never said those words before, never felt this way. So I’m sort of figuring it out as I go.”

I struggled to calm my racing heart.

“Don’t drop out of the race. I talked to my father.”

“Jackie.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine, really. He’s going to throw all of his support behind you, and we’re going to feed the media some bullshit story about being one big happy family.” I winced as the word “bullshit” left my mouth. God, I couldn’t have been further from the Jackie Kennedy political mold if I tried. Whatever. I plowed on. “Mitch and I think it’ll be enough to get you elected.” I grinned. “And Mitch hired me to work for him.”

Relief flashed across Will’s face.

“Good. I’m so happy for you. And I want you to think about this campaign thing,” he replied. “Seriously. It’s asking a lot for you to deal with.”

I shook my head. “I have giant lady balls, remember? I can handle it. I was scared before, but the worst is out. We can do this together.”

“And what do you mean by ‘together’?”

This was the scary part. But I’d gotten through *I love you* with relative ease.

“I want it all.” The truth of how much terrified me. “I can’t imagine spending my life with anyone but you. I’ll admit I never saw this happening at this point in my life—ever, really—but I want you, more than anything. More than my career, although I’m not going to say no to having my cake and eating it, too.” I sucked in a deep breath. “I want you. I love you. I’m done pushing you away; I’m done running. I know things are complicated

for your campaign, and we can wait and just date for however long you think is appropriate. I'm in this for the long haul. I'm in this for forever."

Will's eyes closed, and for a moment I couldn't read him, and then he opened his eyes, and the love I saw there, blasting back at me, rocked me.

"Wait here." His voice was hoarse. "I'll be right back."

Will

I took the steps two at a time, nerves running through me. Maybe I was pushing; maybe this was impulsive. I didn't even know anymore. We'd been impulsive from the beginning. I wanted her, and she was sitting in my living room, and she loved me, and this felt like one of those moments when you had to seize life by the balls before you lost your chance.

I opened the bedroom door, grabbing the box and stuffing it in my pocket, my heart about to beat out of my chest, and hurried down the stairs again.

Jackie sat on the sofa, her hands folded in her lap, looking a little nervous, a little lost, and I wondered if she was ready for this. But she'd said she wanted forever, and I was more than happy to oblige.

I sat down on the couch next to her, struggling for calm when I felt anything but. I cleared my throat.

"So here's the thing. You know how there are some guys who are afraid of commitment, guys who just want to have sex, and have fun, and aren't looking to get married? Guys who pale at forever, and say things like they don't want to get tied down?"

Jackie nodded, the motion jerky.

"I'm not that guy. I want forever with you. I want to wake up next to you every morning and go to bed beside you every night. I want to wear a ring on my finger every day of my life marking me as yours.

"I want to make you promises, and I want to spend every day of my life working to keep those promises. I want children with you." Her eyes filled with tears, and I figured it was a good sign, and I plowed right on.

"I know it freaks you out, and I'm not saying we have to have kids anytime soon; I know you want to focus on your career now—you should focus on your career—but eventually, yeah, I want to have kids with you.

“I want a little girl with your smile and your smarts. I want Christmases and birthdays and a chocolate Lab who wears an American flag bandana that you name after a political philosopher or something. We can even include him in the family campaign photos.” A tear slipped down her cheek as a laugh fell from her lips.

“I want forever with you. I want you to be my wife. If politics gets to be too much, I’ll figure something else out. We’ll figure something else out. We’re in this together.”

I pulled the ring out of my pocket, my gaze glued to her face. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“I’ve been yours since the first moment I saw you. All I want is for you to be mine. And you should know by now—I always get what I want.” I sunk down on one knee, the movement tearing a gasp from her lips. “Marry me. Please, Jackie. You said you wanted forever. Here it is.”

Jackie

He flipped open the ring box, an enormous diamond staring back at me. I wasn’t much of a jewelry girl, but that could change with a ring like that.

“It was my grandmother’s.” He smiled. “I figured you would appreciate wearing the ring of the Second Lady of the United States. I wanted you to have it. It feels like it was meant for you.”

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. My gaze darted from Will, to the ring, and back to Will again, as if one or both of them would disappear if I looked long enough.

I wasn’t the “happily ever after” girl. I was messy and complicated. I was sharp edges and a mouth that could rival a sailor’s. And Will loved me. Wanted to marry me.

My biggest reservation had always been the scandal of my illegitimacy and my father’s identity. But now that the secret was out, there were no more scandals, no more fear. I’d never be the kind of political wife who looked good on paper, but that didn’t matter. I was the wife Will wanted. And I got it now. He loved me, more than the campaign, more than politics, more than power. He loved me enough to stand by me, to give up everything for me. I felt the same way about him. I didn’t know how far he

would go, what his career held, but I knew that we would be a team, and we'd face it together.

I moved toward him, throwing my arms around his neck, pulling his body into mine, fusing my lips with his. I kissed Will with all of the love in my heart, all of the hope and gratitude pouring through me. I kissed him with the thank-you for the future he was giving me, for the children we'd have, the plans we'd make. Most of all, I kissed him for loving me, for smoothing out my sharp edges, for giving me peace.

I pulled back.

“Is that a yes?”

I nodded, dizzy from the kissing, and the diamond, and the excitement swimming through me, and most of all, the man.

I watched, unable to tear my gaze away, as he removed the giant diamond from its little box, slipping it on my finger, over my knuckle, until it found home.

He gathered me in his arms, pushing me back onto the sofa, his body covering mine, his hands working quickly, removing the layers of clothing between us, and it hit me—

Maybe I'd been wrong. Maybe princes did exist. Maybe it wasn't bullshit after all.

And then Will slid my skirt down my legs and I stopped thinking, period.

Epilogue

Will Clayton and his lovely fiancée looked like they had some celebrating to do on Election Night. Rumor has it Blair Reynolds was by her sister's side.

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Election Night

Jackie

“How do the latest numbers look?”

“Still too close to call.” Mitch grabbed his cell. “I’m going to make some phone calls.”

I nodded, my gaze glued to the TV in front of me. I didn’t smoke, but god I needed a cigarette right now.

“Obsessing?” Will came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist, pulling me back against him, nuzzling my neck.

“It’s so fucking close.”

The past two months had been a whirlwind, our lives dominated by damage control and the election. We’d called a press conference with my father and sold the story that we were all one big happy family. It had helped minimize some of the media firestorm caused by the *Capital Confessions* story. News of our engagement leaked—Mitch *might* have had a hand in it—and that had helped more.

My father was able to call in enough favors, which, combined with Will’s grandfather’s connections, gave Will powerful backing within the state of Virginia. But the biggest help had come in the form of a solicitation case featuring several high-profile politicians that had swept D.C. An elevator sex tape between an engaged couple paled in comparison to lurid tales of sex for money, and bondage, and all sorts of kink that titillated the public. Especially when there was photographic evidence.

The news cycle turned, our scandal passed, and we focused on the election.

I shifted in Will's arms, pressing a swift kiss to his lips. "Are you nervous?"

He shook his head. "Nope. It's just one campaign out of what I'm guessing will be a long line of them." He grinned. "If I know you, you'll have me running for office when we're retired. President of the condo board or something like that."

"You laugh, but those can be tough elections. Full of nepotism."

His smile deepened. "I fucking love you."

I swatted him. "Shh. You can't say things like 'fuck.'"

He laughed, the sound rolling over me. "But you can?"

"I'm strictly behind the scenes. You're the candidate."

"And you're the woman behind the man."

I beamed. "I guess I am."

"I love you."

My heart still skipped every time I heard those words. "Love you, too."

The "Breaking News" alert flashed on the TV, and we both watched as the announcer called the U.S. Senate race for Virginia.

"And Senator Reynolds will hold on to his seat."

I shook my head. "So he lives to fight another day." People like my father always did. But then again, he wasn't the only one who knew a thing or two about surviving.

I watched as the channel switched over to his campaign headquarters, watched as he took the stage, his wife by his side, but no daughters. Camelot had been reduced by two.

"So he won."

I turned at the sound of Blair's voice. I'd been surprised when she said she wanted to come here tonight. We'd spent the little bits of free time I had in the last two months together, hanging out with Kate, building a relationship I'd never imagined happening, and now I had sisters.

"It appears so."

Blair grimaced. "Does it make me a bad daughter that I almost wanted him to lose?"

I shrugged. "He's a hard figure to have much sympathy for."

"True."

We watched his speech, no trace of remorse or humility, no acknowledgement that the image of Camelot he'd created was falling down around him.

"We have results," Mitch shouted, coming toward us, turning my attention away from my past and pulling me into my future. His entire face transformed, his lips cracking into a smile the likes of which I'd never seen on his weathered face. "Congratulations, Senator Clayton."

I let out the most unladylike whoop ever, throwing my arms around Will's neck. He pulled me against his body, his lips finding mine. All around us the news spread—a low buzz turning into a cheer.

"I love you so much," he whispered against my mouth.

"Love you, too."

He pulled away from me, shaking hands, giving his parents and sisters a hug.

I stood next to Blair and Mitch, watching as Will walked up to the stage, the crowd cheering with each step he took. He began the speech I'd written, and the crowd went silent. My heart burst with pride as he rocked it—pride at the man he was and pride for the fact that I'd played a role in his success.

We made an unbeatable team.

And then I heard my name, heard him calling me up to the stage with a smile that blinded me. It was his "trust me" smile, the one that hooked me at the Hay-Adams, the one I believed in, the one I fell in love with.

I walked into the spotlight, my head held high, my heart bursting at the seams, and took my place next to him.

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If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review at Goodreads
or any reader site or blog you frequent.

Read on for a sneak peek at the next Capital Confessions novel

PLAYING WITH TROUBLE

Available July 2015 from InterMix

Jilted at the altar for the best man, and reeling from the revelation that her father has a secret daughter, rumor has it Blair Reynolds has enrolled at Hannover School of Law here in D.C. Is America's Princess trading in her tiara for a briefcase?

—*Capital Confessions* blog

Blair

I never hated law school more than I did at ten-thirty in the morning, Monday through Wednesday. There were plenty of reasons to hate law school—hundreds of pages of nightly reading, endless debates over a mythical property annoyingly referred to as “Blackacre,” the constant urge to vomit each time a professor called on me. The biggest one stood in front of me—tailored Canali suit, dark hair, dark eyes, darker soul.

“Ms. Reynolds.”

Oh god, he said my name.

I spent an hour, three times a week, mentally bartering with God to keep that man, that sadist, from saying my name. Each week he ignored me.

A collective sigh seemed to ripple through the room as my classmates realized they were spared the guillotine. Seventy-four pairs of eyes bore into me, waiting to see how badly I'd fail.

I rose from my seat awkwardly, my legs wet noodles as I pulled down the hem of my Burberry skirt, struggling to keep the flush on my cheeks from spreading all over my face. He was the only professor in the entire law school who made us stand when we answered a question. It was an old-school technique, one all of my other professors had abandoned, even for first-year students—1Ls—like me.

“Brief the case.”

Shit.

I'd read. I always read. But law school was the one place where that didn't matter. No matter how prepared you were, they always pushed you for more than you knew, more than you had, until you were left feeling like your clothes had been stripped from your body, exposing your every naked imperfection to seventy-four peers.

Crying after class wasn't uncommon; some students even broke down in class. We all sat on the precipice of an utter nervous breakdown, no more so than in our first-year torts class.

Your first year of law school was a hazing of sorts, an attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff. I'd heard all of the rumors, and figured they were exaggerated; after all, I was the daughter of one of the fiercest U.S. Senators. I'd grown up around scary. But there was scary, and there was scary, and unfortunately for me, law school was in the latter category.

If statistics were to be believed, about 20 percent of my classmates would drop out by the end of the first year. They'd be the lucky ones. The rest of us would push through, surviving on alcohol, junk food, and Valium. Just kidding about the Valium. The drug of choice here was Adderall, used to treat attention deficit disorder and to get 1Ls through three hundred pages of nightly reading. And not interesting reading with a large font, but less-interesting-than-watching-paint-dry, need-a-microscope-to-see-the-text reading. I'd never tried any kind of recreational drug in my life, but if anything pushed me to it, it would be law school.

The sadist stared back at me, an expectant smirk on his face. Fuck.

My language had considerably deteriorated since the first day of classes last month. My mother would have a coronary if she knew what went through my head now. This was what happened when perfect cracked and splintered. This was what happened when your life fell apart.

I started running through the facts, struggling to remember this one case out of the ten I'd read for his class alone. My hands itched to turn the page in my textbook so I could use it for reference, but our gazes caught across the large classroom, and the look in his eyes kept my hands still.

Weakness was his crack, and there was still enough of the old Blair Reynolds inside me to refuse to cede any more self-respect, beyond that which he took against my will.

I stood for fifteen minutes, an eternity, going through the facts of the case, the issue, the law, the conclusion. Stood while he fired questions at me in that voice of his—hard, cold, unflinching. Questions that led me farther

down the rabbit hole into an abyss of confusion. Each time I floundered, his smile deepened, as if he got off on my nerves.

He probably did.

When it was over I sank down into my seat like it was a life raft and I'd been adrift at sea for months. My legs never wanted to stand again.

"Nice job," my friend Adam whispered from the seat next to me.

"Thanks," I whispered back, twenty-three years of manners warring with terror over being caught talking in class.

"Ms. Reynolds?"

My heart stopped.

Fuck me, why? Not again.

"Yes?"

His eyebrow arched expectantly. Like a puppet, my body automatically rose to a standing position. He had us well-trained, me more than anyone. I was little more than a poodle under his command. There were seventy-five people in our torts class, and we'd all done the math, on average we should be called on three times per semester.

He called on me every fucking week without fail.

"Why don't you brief the next case as well?"

His gaze drifted to Adam sitting next to me, lingering there for a moment as if to say, you got yourself into this mess when you dared to speak during class. Technically, he should have called on Adam since he spoke first. I was only being polite by answering. That would have been fair. But the irony was, law school had little concern with fair or just. Ego ruled here, and none was bigger than Professor Graydon Carter's.

So many words ran through my head. So far I'd learned nothing about torts. My class time was typically divided into four activities that consumed me for an hour: begging and pleading with God for Professor Carter not to call on me, creating inventive and filthy names I hurled at him in my head, and devising elaborate fantasies where I told him exactly what he could do with his questions. But the absolute worst, the moments I hated in every corner of my preppy little heart, were the moments when I fantasized about that voice saying other things to me . . . those eyes undressing me, those hands on my body.

It was the cruelest irony that the man I despised, the man who tortured me from the front of the classroom three days a week, was the hottest fucking thing I'd ever seen.

His voice, those questions, those eyes that looked at you like they stripped you bare, had me shifting in my seat, edgy and unfocused—
And he knew it.

Gray

This was my penance—

Three days a week, first-year torts in the morning, a medical malpractice seminar for third-year students in the afternoon. Six hours of teaching a week for a year. One hundred and fifty hours, now reduced to one hundred and twenty-six. Not that I kept count. It was a chance to erase my sins. The professional ones at least. The others? Beyond redemption.

The only thing that kept me sane stood in front of the class, stumbling over the case I'd asked her to read.

I called on her way too much. I knew it, and based off of the way her eyes fairly screamed "go fuck yourself" she knew it, too. But I'd always had remarkably poor impulse control, and like everything that came before her and annihilated my life, she was another thing that tempted me.

I'd noticed her the first day of classes. She'd sat in the front of the room, right in the center. I'd walked in late, this classroom the last place I wanted to be. To add insult to injury, it wasn't even a good law school. I'd gone from the top of my law class at the University of Chicago, to a lucrative practice where I quickly made more money than my South Side background knew what to do with, to this. A shitty visiting professor job at a shitty law school, teaching a bunch of rich students who could afford to pay the school's ridiculously high tuition, but weren't smart enough, or motivated enough, to get into a good law school. But then again, I wasn't exactly the authority on good life choices. If I were, I wouldn't be here. It said more about my character than I liked, that at twenty-eight I'd already enjoyed a meteoric rise, followed by an even bigger crash.

I'd only found out about teaching the first-year class the week before school started. Visiting professors rarely taught 1Ls, but a professor had a medical emergency and Hannover was desperate. Currently ranking in the hundreds on the list of top law schools, they'd struggled to find a replacement with such short notice. So that was how I ended up walking into torts at ten-thirty Monday morning and seeing her.

That first morning I'd set my books down on the desk in the front of the classroom, looked up, and been knocked back.

The counselor my former law partners in Chicago made me talk to had said I had an addictive personality. He'd analyzed my behavior—racing my Ferrari down Lake Shore Drive until I lost control and smashed it into a pole, the marriage that ended to a wife who was colder than Chicago winters, the women, the partying—and said I had problems relating to others. He threw around words like “unemotional,” “cold.” All fancy words for saying what I'd known my entire life.

I was a bastard.

It wasn't exactly a shock; I came from a long line of bastards, drunks, and philanderers. The only difference between me and the rest of the Carter men? I'd gotten out of the hellhole I'd grown up in. Or so I'd thought.

But it didn't matter how expensive my suits were, how much I'd paid for my house in Georgetown, or the car I'd bought to replace the one I'd totaled—

I'd always be the boy from the rough neighborhood in Chicago. The one who got into bar fights, drove too fast, fucked girls with giant tits and curvy asses, knocked back too much scotch, and played way too hard. I'd tried to erase those parts of myself, or to push them down at least—

And once I saw her they came back up again.

Blair Reynolds.

They gave us a chart with all the students' names and pictures. The second I saw her in my classroom I'd stared at that chart like a little boy with a crush. Then I'd looked at her, really looked at her.

She looked like money. Not my kind of money. The kind I'd earned through brutal work, no small amount of luck, and sheer force of will. The kind that couldn't have picked a Picasso from a Monet, that dropped thousands of dollars at a strip club because those were the girls I was the most comfortable with. No, she looked like ponies, and ribbons in her hair, and cotillion, and ruffles.

She looked like a duchess.

And the bastard in me wanted her with a hunger that terrified me.

I wanted to consume her; I wanted to break her and put her back together again, because that's what I did—I broke things.

I couldn't, of course. This was the new me—my chance at salvaging the wreck I'd made of everything. So I stayed away from her. Except for the

times when I absolutely couldn't resist, and I had to call on her.

I figured I'd given up enough bad habits. I had to be able to keep one. And if I could only have one, then no fucking question, I wanted it to be her.

She stood in front of me, reciting the case, and it took everything I had to keep my body from responding to the sound of her voice. It was cool, and crisp, and elegant. Her voice danced over words and phrases, and I never could resist the urge to watch her mouth as she spoke.

I'd imagined myself kissing that mouth, fucking that mouth, capturing those lips. It was no wonder I operated in a constant state of near-arousal when she spoke. I ran through multiplication tables in my head to keep my body from responding.

Because it wasn't just her lips that tempted me. It was her skin, soft and creamy, like fine bone china. I'd dreamed about her skin enough nights, of her legs tangled with mine, her flesh bare, a thin film of sweat covering her body as I drove into her. Dreamed of bending my head and taking one of her nipples between my lips, making her moan and cry out. Imagined her pulling me closer, begging for me to suck her harder, begging me to fuck her. I'd dreamed of wrapping that long, brown hair around my fist as she took me into her mouth. Dreamed of the look in those big brown eyes when she came.

She filled my dreams and fantasies, had since that very first day. I was consumed by her, and I'd never even spoken to her outside of class, our sole interaction limited to these days when I fired questions at her, and she answered in that haughty tone that screamed "I am royalty and you are a peasant"—in that voice that only made me want her more.

Silence filled the classroom.

Shit, she'd finished.

"That's all, Ms. Reynolds." I gave her a curt nod, indicating she could sit.

She sank into her chair with a grace I felt in my bones, and a new tension filled the classroom as everyone wondered who would be my next victim. The silence dragged, students squirming in their seats imagining the tortures I was preparing for them.

I stared at her—I rarely let myself think of her as Blair—it seemed too intimate, too dangerous. She had to be Ms. Reynolds. But I couldn't resist

the urge to look. She held my gaze without flinching, her only reaction the slightest flush on her face.

I lived for her blushes.

Her eyes were completely at odds with her rosy cheeks. Her eyes blasted back defiance and anger. They came alive while the rest of her was composed—pearl necklace, perfect outfit, elegant hair, fake smile. For fifty-nine minutes out of the hour during each class, she was untouchable. She wore her perfection like a mask that shielded her from the world, the seemingly unbreakable wall that kept everyone at bay. But there was always a minute—I made sure of it—when the mask came off, when the wall tumbled down. And in that minute, someone else looked at me. In that minute I undressed her and stripped her of the facade she presented to the rest of the world. For a minute every single week, I unraveled her.

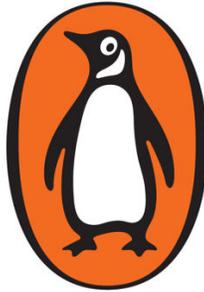
The bastard in me fucking loved it.

Romance novels and politics are two of **Chanel Cleeton's** greatest passions. What better than to combine them? Chanel received a bachelor's degree in International Relations from Richmond, The American International University in London and a master's degree in Global Politics from the London School of Economics and Political Science. She's also a graduate (survivor) of law school—she earned her J.D. from the University of South Carolina School of Law. A summer cruise in the Caribbean changed Chanel's life when she met and fell in love with a fighter pilot. One happily ever after later, she's currently living an adventure with her husband and three pups.

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