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AMERICA

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America the Beautiful

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*To my family,
who understand and respect
my dedication to my work.
Most of the time. <g>*

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“IF I CAN FIND the ammunition—and it’s looking good that I will—what I want to know is just how far we’re prepared to go in using it.” Kate Rosen looked around at the people gathered in the penthouse suite of a Dallas hotel. “I know we want to win, but—” she turned to face the most important person in the room—“this could get ugly.”

Emily Benton, with a term as governor of Virginia under her belt and nearly a lifetime in politics before that, stared in obvious disbelief at her best friend and political manager, the person who had helped engineer her many previous successes.

“Of course it’s going to get ugly, K.” Emily pushed her honey blonde hair over her shoulder in a characteristic gesture. The shade, as well as the style, had been carefully calculated for maximum public appeal. Feminine but not fussy. “This is politics. Not just any politics either. This one’s for the White House.”

“Exactly,” Kate said. “When this thing is finally over, the last candidate left standing is going to run this country. I intend for that person to be you. But I also want you to have the moral authority to do the job well. As my father always said, ‘You can’t take the high road if you insist on playing in the gutter.’ If the campaign gets too dirty, it’ll undercut everything we’re trying to achieve once you’re in office.”

“Maybe you have a point, but as *my* father always said, ‘If you don’t play to win, you won’t win,’” Emily said. “I intend to be the first woman president of these United States, to go down in the record books as the woman who broke the gender barrier to the highest office in the land. And I’ll do whatever it takes to succeed.”

That’s nothing new, Kate thought. Emily always played to win. It was her signature strength, something she’d learned as a baby on her father’s knee, sitting not in the family living room but in the smoky power centers where old-time politics had lived—in boardrooms, in back rooms, and in hotel rooms far less well-appointed than this one.

Kate knew such old-fashioned images lingered in the minds of the American public. They believed politicians still forged their deals in smoke-filled back rooms over good single malts and a couple of Cubans. But knee-deep in the twenty-first century, the big decisions were far more likely to be made over Chinese takeout in a smoke-free room of a business-friendly hotel.

Today’s politicians realized the importance of mobility and access. Not like the good ol’ days, when news releases had to be timed to take advantage of printing press schedules and personal appearances were positioned to make the six o’clock news, when all of America stopped what they

were doing to watch. In today's world, the latest information and gossip circumnavigated the globe in nanoseconds, news channels ran around the clock, and virtual newspapers didn't need to wait for print runs.

Today, Dallas. Tomorrow, Denver. The next day, Des Moines.

One hotel room looked pretty much like another to this crowd of political experts, advisers, and operatives, but all of their lodgings had to have the minimum of creature comforts—ergonomic desk chairs, excellent cell phone reception, in-room faxes, high-speed wireless Internet, twenty-four-hour room service, and a gym with unlimited access. And, of course, room enough to accommodate a candidate's inner circle of advisers, who could be called up at any time for a powwow just like this one. In fact, two key members of Emily's kitchen cabinet, Dozier Marsh and Chip McWilliamson, were there representing the broadest spectrum of politics: Dozier, from the old school, brought a sense of history and experience as a political adviser, and Chip, a Silicon Valley whiz kid, engineered their campaign in virtual arenas—MySpace, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Second Life, and of course, EmilyBenton.com.

But both of them remained silent as Kate and Emily hashed out the current battle of political philosophies—restraint versus going for the jugular. Undoubtedly neither wanted to get caught in the cross fire. Since Kate and Emily had been having discussions just like this one since they were teenagers, Kate actually enjoyed the debate. She knew Emily was the best person for the job—and had known it for nearly twenty years. But she and Emily still had fundamental differences in their approaches for achieving that goal.

Everyone watched Emily as she rose gracefully from the desk chair and walked over to the window to stare at the city beyond. Reunion Tower was putting on a light show in the night sky, looking like some giant electronic dandelion. Kate reached over, snagged a four-dollar bottle of water, and opened it. She might as well kick back and get comfortable as she watched Emily perform. She cracked the seal on the bottle and thought about how much time it had taken her to suppress her inner cheapskate, who insisted that tap water was good enough for slaking her thirst.

After six months of preprimary positioning, hotels like this one had become her natural habitat, and part of that nature included not thinking twice about guzzling four-dollar bottles of water. Kate had been away from her home so long and so often that even her dog, Buster, had trouble recognizing her when she finally got back for a change of underwear and to pay bills. The campaign was taking its toll on Kate. Yet Emily thrived on the pressure. Kate supposed it was because she was born to it.

While Emily paced back and forth, talking about her vision for the campaign and how much she wanted—and America needed—her to be the next president, Kate thought about how well suited Emily was for the job because of her background, because of her vision, and because of her aptitude for governing.

But only a person who'd lived under a thick layer of rock would fail to recognize the Benton name and associate it immediately with politics. Emily's family had been big in government for three generations, with Emily representing the fourth. Over the years, the Bentons had spawned three large-city mayors, five state representatives, two gov-

ernors—including Emily, three senators, four members of the House, and one president. The Bentons shared not only a successful political platform but a proclivity to identify and expose their opponents' biggest weaknesses, thanks to surgical strikes of spin and political intelligence that would have made the air force proud.

And Emily was no different.

Kate sipped from her water bottle, then cleared her throat. Time to get Emily focused back on the issue at hand. "We're going to make this happen, Emily. As per your instructions, I've had our people out digging on Talbot for months. They've got leads on a couple of good stories that are panning out well. If you're prepared to use what we find, repercussions and all, I'm pretty sure it will bring him down. But Talbot's got people doing the same thing to you. Remember, playing cutthroat politics can rebound on us, in the polls and in salvos from the other candidates. The competition's worried about you. No, not worried. Running. Running scared. They're slowly realizing you just might win this election, so they're arming themselves with every sling and arrow they can find. If we start lobbing cannonballs at them, there's no telling what they'll fire back."

"Let them. It's not like my life isn't an open book. I grew up in the public eye. There's nothing the world doesn't know about me."

Ha! Kate thought, then paused to draw in a deep breath. She and Emily had a long, strong, and deep friendship. Emily wasn't often the type to shoot the messenger, but she'd taken her share of shots at Kate. The fact that Emily trusted Kate totally meant that she also felt free to behave her worst around her best friend. It was like two sides of a

coin. Just as Emily's best could be breathtaking, her worst could knock Kate flat. In a way, Kate knew those knockout punches were a tribute to their friendship. Emily had faith that Kate would stay by her side, no matter what. That faith was mutual.

Kate figured that's what friends were for. If your best friend wouldn't tell you the truth, who would?

Kate braced herself, then let the words go. "Don't be sure. Here's the bad part. My source in the Talbot camp tells me that his people are putting out feelers to Nick. And I have to admit that it's a smart tactic. What better way to derail our campaign than by bringing your ex-husband on board theirs?"

Emily didn't move. That was bad. She was very controlled in public, another lesson learned from her very public childhood. But Kate knew Emily well enough to see the anger in the way her friend stood, the muscles in her shoulders and back unusually rigid.

But then Emily's voice betrayed her, revealing something else mixed with the anger.

Regret?

"Oh, well. I knew they'd make a play for him sooner or later. I just didn't think it would be this soon."

"Emily, honey, it's been a long time," Dozier "Bulldozer" Marsh said softly. He'd been leaning against a wall, having waved away a seat when they started their powwow. He pushed away from the wall now and straightened, commanding the collective attention of everyone in the room except Emily, whose back was to everyone.

He might be past eighty these days, but Dozier still moved like a man twenty years his junior. The old hands on Emily's

team swore he kept young by living on the blood of the lesser beings who had dared to stand in his way. He'd survived more nasty political campaigns than any four dozen politicians alive. Part of his success was due to the fact he'd aligned himself with Big Henry Benton, Emily's dad, becoming a key member of her father's legendary inner circle. After a couple of beers, Emily could often be persuaded to tell Kate hair-raising stories about her Uncle 'Dozer. So Kate knew the legends were true—and, if anything, understated.

Usually a thundering voice in any discussion, Dozier spoke now in uncommonly tempered tones. "I know the divorce was messy. What divorce isn't? But that piece of buffalo chip matters less than a stinging ant in a wasp nest." He stepped across the room and joined Emily at the window, throwing a fatherly arm across her shoulders. "Nick's been out of your life . . . what? Twelve years?"

Chip McWilliamson spoke from across the room, his comment almost too quiet to hear. "Longer than you were married . . ."

"Exactly." Dozier turned briefly to acknowledge the younger man's contribution, then faced Emily. "He's been out of your life so long that Talbot won't get a blessed thing of any use from him. He's hiring the boy solely to throw you off your game. You're not going to let him get to you, are you?"

Emily took a deep breath and evidently shook off whatever emotions had threatened to swamp her. She also stepped away from the protective arm of Dozier Marsh.

Emily Benton stood in the shadow of no man.

"Get to me with Nick? Sorry. No way. Talbot's made a big mistake, tipping his hand like this. If he's prepared to

hire Nick, willing to tolerate being in the same room with him, then my opponent's demonstrated just how low he'll really go." She sounded almost as if she believed her own words. "Better than that, Talbot's camp is proving just how desperate they are."

Emily turned her back to the Dallas skyline and faced her inner circle, the occupants of this room. "So I guess that answers your question, K. We're going to need a wide variety of weapons and all the ammunition we can get. From handguns to howitzers. And we'll use them. We'll use them all. Nobody messes with me and comes out unbloodied. In fact, nobody messes with me and comes out alive—not in politics!"

She smiled. Kate and most likely everyone else in the room noted the glint of steel in her gray eyes, one Kate knew meant an unstoppable amount of dogged determination. But there was more in that expression. Looking past the classic beauty of Emily's face, Kate knew her friend's curling lips formed something less than a smile and more like a stylized snarl.

It was Emily's war face.

Kate had first seen that particular expression during their days together as law school roommates at Georgetown University. That look always meant trouble—not for Emily but for anyone who dared to oppose her, from the cafeteria worker up to the dean of the law school. Kate had survived as Emily's friend by knowing when to feed the beast and when to keep her fingers away from the gaping maw.

And now it appeared that Emily Benton had just declared war to the knife.

Talbot, Kate figured, was history. And Nick, being

caught in the cross fire, would be an acceptable casualty along the way.

Emily caught Kate's eye and held her gaze for a moment. It was a clear signal: time to strategize, and that meant a tête-à-tête between just the two of them. Kate turned to her companions, about to make a suggestion that it was time for Emily to get some rest, but Emily beat her to the punch with her usual blunt honesty.

"K and I need to be alone to talk." Her smile grew less predatory as she addressed Dozier and Chip. "You two need to get some sleep, anyway."

Dismissed, Dozier stepped over, bussed Emily on the cheek, and paused to lean down and touch foreheads with Kate, a gesture she didn't particularly like but tolerated for Emily's sake. "Don't let her stew too long," he said in a loud stage whisper.

Kate responded with a small wink.

Chip seemed reluctant to leave. Lately he'd been jockeying things around to put himself closer to Emily, and Kate was pretty sure it was part of his thinly veiled bid to become the First Gentleman of the United States. But Kate knew his efforts were futile and had told him so on several occasions. In his favor, he was smart, handsome, and ambitious, but he was also too young, too inexperienced, and much too naive in the world of politics.

Emily needed somebody who would challenge her. Chip couldn't even influence her.

Yet he persisted, and Kate and Emily weren't above using his dogged determination for their own purposes. If nothing else, he was an attractive bit of beefcake to drape on Emily's arm at Washington social events.

He served his purpose, and his governor, well.

Chip tried and failed to hide his besotted smile as he stepped closer to Emily. His face betrayed an obvious desire for a good-night kiss, but then his common sense prevailed. “Sweet dreams, Governor Benton.”

She shrugged off the formal title that sat so oddly on Chip’s lips and sent him away with a brush of her hand. Her smile had now lightened to something bordering on sociable. But the moment the door closed behind the men, her more pleasant expression disappeared.

Now that it was the two of them, Kate and Emily, the real dialogue began. Kate knew that Emily trusted no one else but her when it came to the big issues.

“Nick can hurt us. Hurt me.”

“I know. So what are you going to do about him?”

“Short of killing him, I don’t know. Yet.”

“Seduction?”

Emily flopped onto the bed with a sigh. “He *was* good in the sack. I’ll admit I still miss that aspect of our marriage. But . . . no. If I seduced him, it’d simply prove that we consider him a threat. He’d love it. Then he’d hold it over me like a WMD for decades.”

“Assassination?” Kate widened her eyes at the obvious exaggeration.

Emily released a deep-throated laugh. “Don’t tempt me. Some nights, I actually have dreams about pulling the trigger. Luckily dreams aren’t actionable.”

“Discredita-shun?” Kate said in her best Cajun accent, a fair imitation of Nick’s slight Louisiana twang.

“Please. Don’t remind me,” Emily complained, squeezing her eyes shut in mock pain.

They'd all met in New Orleans a long time ago when they were four law students on a last fling before taking the bar—Emily and Kate from Georgetown and Nick Beaudry and his roommate, Wendell Conway, from Tulane. Wendell and Kate had been a minor flash in the pan, and they'd gone their separate ways only a few months after they'd hooked up. However, Nick and Emily had been flint and steel, and the sparks from their constant clashes ignited a roaring fire of a romance, culminating in the social wedding of the season—held in the White House, no less.

The honorable William R. Benton, president of the United States, had escorted his niece, Emily, down the aisle in the East Room, taking the place of her father, the late Henry Benton, his brother.

As the maid of honor, Kate had the perfect vantage point to see the look of longing on her best friend's face, but she knew the expression had less to do with the wedding night and more to do with Emily's realization that she was one step closer to living in the White House. Emily's political dreams of achieving the presidency had been finalized in grade school.

Nick and Emily had been the picture-perfect political power couple, a photo favorite of newspapers and tabloids alike. A trace of Native American blood slightly darkened Nick's Black Irish good looks, which made him a perfect contrast to Emily's blonde, all-American beauty. Hollywood couldn't have cast the roles better. In public, they were a dream team.

But in private Kate saw firsthand how flint and steel could create wildfires of a different sort. Nick and Emily brought out the worst in each other, probably because they

were so much alike—always looking out for themselves, never thinking about the team.

Five rocky years later, Nick chose Emily's very public thirty-first birthday party bash to rise unsteadily to his feet in front of everyone and declare it was either politics or him and that Emily needed to choose. Now. Before answering him, she calmly blew out the candles on her cake, cut a slice, and held it out to him. Shocked by her silent reaction, he automatically reached for the plate. That's when she smashed the cake into the pleated front of his expensive hand-tailored tuxedo and motioned for security to remove him from the room.

Kate managed to smooth over the disruption with the usual dodge of "too much wine and strong antihistamines" as the justification for Nick's bizarre behavior. No one bought it, but it dulled the gossip to whispers. The next morning, Nick helped shred the remainder of his reputation by being picked up doing ninety on the George Washington Memorial Parkway in a drunken haze and in the company of not one but two known prostitutes.

From that point on, it was easy to paint Emily as the good woman ridding herself of an unfaithful and feckless husband.

However, it hadn't been as easy to remove Nick from Emily's heart—or from her politics, for that matter. He stayed in Virginia for a while, but Emily's influence meant he met nothing but roadblocks in his pathway. He eventually returned to Louisiana, where he was shunned for the requisite three years before being allowed back into parish politics. Eventually, he achieved a comfortable status as a gentleman state senator. In public, he and Emily remained

civil, albeit cool, to each other, but there were always sharp, coded looks between the two of them that even Kate couldn't decipher.

And now, after having tried to slice away at Emily's political ambitions once before, it appeared he was getting ready to pick up the knife again. And twist.

"We fight fire with fire," Emily said. "Right?"

Kate remained silent, trying to figure out exactly how to drop the last bombshell.

"Right?" Emily repeated. She took one hard look at Kate. "All right, Rosen. Spill it."

Kate drew a deep breath. "Talbot isn't hiring Nick as a consultant. There's talk that Nick will become his deputy campaign manager." That meant Nick wouldn't merely be trotted out every now and then for maximum embarrassment value. Instead, he'd be part of Talbot's inner circle, available for round-the-clock information and influence. During his five years in the Benton family's good graces, Nick had learned which family closets held which family skeletons. He knew enough about the past transgressions of the Bentons to cause some major problems for Emily and for the rest of her relatives in politics. Kate figured that he was in this for payback, and he was going to make the campaign as ugly as he could for Emily.

That, Kate figured, would be ugly indeed.

Emily obviously reached the same conclusions as Kate; she let loose a string of expletives that, no doubt, she'd learned at her father's knee. Times like this, it was best just to let her burn off the excess anger. Kate had learned long ago to let her friend yell, scream, throw things, whatever it took to bleed off the worst of the temper. To Emily's credit,

she had the self-control to never do it in public. But Emily never felt the need to rein in her impulses around Kate—for better or for worse.

So in private, all bets were off.

It took nearly five minutes for Emily to run out of steam and invectives. After circling the room, growling like a caged tiger, she finally flopped onto the bed again, spent.

Long experienced in dealing with Emily's intense emotions, Kate stood over her friend, her arms crossed. "You finished?"

Emily sighed. "Yes."

"Good. Now, can we discuss what to do next?"

"Simple." Emily rolled over to her side and propped up on her elbow. "We fight back. You dig. Dig deep. Look in places even he doesn't know about. Get me every bit of dirt on Nick Beaudry you possibly can. I was married to the guy. He was no saint. And I've heard he got worse, not better, after I kicked him out. You can find the ammunition we need if you look hard enough."

"But . . ." Kate thought about how much she hated this aspect of politics. Yes, everyone who got into politics knew it would happen to them. Yes, it was part of the game. But Kate always felt that digging for the ammunition of a good mudslinging match left her soiled. Only her loyalty to Emily could make her do it. "But you know how I feel about that stuff."

"But nothing. I know you don't like it. I also know I can count on you to do it right. I don't want unsubstantiated rumors. I don't want innuendo. Those things can come back to haunt a campaign. I want facts. You have never given me anything that I couldn't take to the bank. So I'm

counting on you, K.” Emily yawned and stretched. “Is there anything else of earth-shattering importance we need to talk about?”

Kate consulted her planner. “You’ve been asked to speak at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery.”

Emily groaned. “I thought you weren’t going to push your religious initiative policy thing at me until I got into office.”

“I’m not pushing. Though you know how much that religious policy ‘thing,’ as you call it, means to me. This is a request they made on their own through the local campaign office. I didn’t set it up.”

“When do they want me?”

“Sunday, the twenty-third.”

Emily groaned. “By speak, you mean preach, right?”

“Not really. More like speak. It’s a celebration of the end of the Montgomery bus boycott.”

“I’m fine with the civil rights aspect, but there’s no way that I’m getting up on a pulpit and doing some fire-and-brimstone song-and-dance routine.”

“I don’t think they’d expect it of you.”

“No, but they’d expect me to sit there and look interested. Rapt, even. And sing hymns.” She made a face. “They always want me to sing.”

“Look, if it bothers you that much, you don’t have to do it. I can tell them you have family obligations and regret that you are unable to come.”

“It might even be true—I’ve got an obligation to keep my family free from the problems Nick can cause.”

“True.” Kate paused. “One question, though.”

“What?”

She took a moment to formulate her question. Since Emily had promised to create an Office of Religious Initiatives once she got into the White House, and since she planned to put Kate in charge of it on top of her obligations as chief of staff, then maybe Kate needed to ask a very basic question of her friend now. They'd discussed the issue before, but it was one Emily was adept at sidestepping. "I've never understood why you hate doing appearances at churches so much. It doesn't make sense. You go to church when you're home."

Emily picked up the empty bottle of water and tossed it toward the trash can. "Because it's good politics to be seen there. No one complains at home when I sit in the back pew and use my BlackBerry during the service. No one expects me to be a mover and shaker in the congregation. I don't have to join the choir, teach Sunday school, or run the outreach program. I just have to show up. Every once in a great while, I let them trot me out front and center. But they know I won't do it often or for long. I like that. It's the religious version of 'don't ask, don't tell.'"

Kate grinned, then realized that Emily wasn't kidding. "C'mon," she said. "Churches aren't just collections of people who get together to show off their nice suits on Sunday morning or show off what notable person is in their congregation. Churches stand for something. And those congregations would appreciate hearing what you stand for."

"It's not that simple, K. You know I believe in God and all that, but it's hard to explain."

"Then try. Explain it to me, at least," Kate said.

Emily remained on the bed, staring at the ceiling. "Let's just say that I know where I stand politically. Where I stand

before God is a totally different question that I'm not ready to investigate. Until I am, I'm steering clear of standing in front of any congregation. Out of sight, out of mind."

"Emily!" Kate exclaimed, torn between horror and fascination with her friend's reasoning. "You can't avoid God by ignoring him."

"Maybe not, but maybe he'll ignore me if I stay in the back of churches, not in the front. And that's my plan until further notice."

"Avoiding the subject doesn't make it go away," Kate said. "I don't want to sound like I'm repeating myself, M, but sooner or later, you need to come to terms with your faith." Kate frowned. "I don't think anyone can survive long-term in politics with their spirit intact without a true and sustaining belief in God." She glanced toward the bedside drawer, which she knew contained a Gideon Bible. "These days, my faith is all that keeps me sane sometimes."

"If you can't survive in politics without religion, then how do you explain what happens on Capitol Hill every day?" Emily asked. "You sure see lots of lip service to God but not much actual faith. And talk about all that bad behavior and sinning. Hooboy! As far as I've seen, Washington's fruit of the spirit is mostly rotten tomatoes." Emily crossed her arms. "I may not be preaching from every handy pulpit, but I've always stood by my words. So if I get into a pulpit to preach, I need to mean it. Until I can mean it, I'm staying out. Period." Her face and her posture softened slightly. "It's not like I'm ignoring God completely. Once I'm in office, I can make things happen. I did it as governor. So you know I can do it as president. I can lead by example. Appoint good people to the bench. I've even agreed to your religious office

plans, haven't I? I know it's been tried before, but I think you can really make it work, especially since I've got your back." She made eye contact with Kate, then turned away.

Kate studied her friend, knowing the gesture signified an end to the conversation. She sighed. "So what do I do about Dexter Avenue Baptist Church?"

"Send flowers or something. Anything else?"

"Nothing pressing."

"Good." Emily unclenched her arms and rolled over onto her back. "As you go out, will you send Chip in here?"

Although dismissed, Kate didn't move. "Do you think that's wise?"

"Wise?" Emily released a short bark of laughter. "Not particularly. But I need a distraction right now. And Chip's good for that. And for keeping his mouth shut."

Emily's change in subject meant she was finished talking about Nick for the time being, and Kate was supposed to simply play along.

So she did. "Chip may be asleep already," she said.

Emily's expression—it was hard to call it a smile—bordered on predatory. "Or he may be waiting impatiently by the door. Either way, I want him."

As she walked out, Kate allowed herself a sigh of exasperation. Pausing outside the door, she tried one last time to make her friend consider the consequences of her actions. "He could be a weak link."

"You worry too much."

"That's my job," Kate said to the door that closed behind her. "It's what you pay me for." But Emily wasn't listening. And she would be waiting for Chip.

When Kate knocked on the young man's door, a few

rooms down the hallway, he responded much too quickly. Emily was right. He *was* waiting for her. He failed to hide his momentary disappointment in realizing it was Kate at his door, not Emily.

“Expecting someone else?” Kate asked.

He blushed and Kate suddenly felt decades older than he was. She continued with the charade. “Emily needs to speak with you for a moment.”

“Aahh.” He swallowed his smile and nodded.

“Briefly,” she added.

He nodded again and scampered off to their boss’s room.

Kate didn’t want think about what they did in there. If the two of them were strategizing without her, great. If it was an affair, she didn’t want to know what was going on. Maybe, like Emily, Kate was avoiding a subject she just didn’t want to think about. And as she’d told Emily, ignoring the truth wouldn’t change it. But, she thought with relief, at least Emily wasn’t bragging about it.

Maybe the relationship with Chip was just another instance of “Don’t ask, don’t tell” that was a part of Emily’s life right now.

It was times like this that Kate pushed aside their friendship and looked at Emily strictly as her employer. That sort of compartmentalization of emotion had saved their friendship more than once. Although Kate had her friend’s ear, sometimes it was much more important to be her adviser, her nursemaid, or her conscience.

Or her mind reader.

But right now Kate didn’t dare try to read her old friend’s mind.

Kate slid into the desk chair in her room and flipped open her laptop. She'd already anticipated Emily's command to look into the darker corners of Nick Beaudry's life in order to short-circuit his effectiveness.

Fourteen new e-mails waited in her in-box and she hoped that at least one of them would help her start the new scorched-earth phase of the campaign.

Before she could settle in and start reading the messages, her cell phone rang.

It was Dozier Marsh. "Kate, got a minute?"

Kate tried to give herself permission to lie, but something deep inside her refused to take the liberty. As she'd told Emily, her faith was all that was keeping her sane these days. And that meant telling Dozier Marsh the truth. No matter how much she didn't want to.

"Sure. What's up?"

"We need to talk. Now."

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Allow me to let you in on a secret. I've never really liked politics. I'm not likely to jump into a heated political discussion. I've never felt compelled to sway people into supporting my candidate, whoever that might be. Maybe that's a funny thing to admit after what you just read, but it's true.

So this is less a novel about politics than it is about the trials, tribulations, and heavy burdens of people who work in politics. As the famous philosopher Stan Lee said, "With great power comes great responsibility." To me, that's one of the key issues of this series. Emily will be facing some pretty stiff challenges that come with the office of president. Will it be enough for Emily that Kate is her conscience? Or will Emily realize that she must forge her own relationship with God to responsibly wield the power of the presidency? With Emily's soul and the fate of the country in the balance, I know what I'm hoping will happen.

Emily is a stubborn woman. Then again, Kate is a patient one.

I just hope that Kate's patience lasts longer than Emily's stubbornness. . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama, Laura Hayden began her reading career at the age of four. By the time she was ten, she'd exhausted the children's section in the local library and switched to adult mysteries. Although she always loved to write, she became sidetracked in college, where the lure of differential equations outweighed the draw of dangling participles.

But one engineering degree, one wedding, two kids, and three military assignments later, she ended up in Colorado Springs, Colorado, where she met people who shared her passion for writing. With their support, instruction, and camaraderie, she set and met her goal of selling her first book. She now has published ten novels, including the First Daughter mystery series, as well as several short stories.

The wife of a career military officer, Laura has moved with surprising frequency and has now returned to her native Alabama. Besides writing, she owns Author, Author! Bookstore and is the head of the graphics department for NovelTalk.com. When not at the keyboard of her computer, Laura can be found at the keyboard of her piano.