

RED,
WHITE,
and **BLUE**

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Red, White, and Blue

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*To Pam, Karen, and Angel
for keeping me sane.*

*To my dad
for his strength, his patience,
and his faith in me.
(And all those neat genes
that let me figure out
how to construct and deconstruct.)*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I couldn't do this series without the assistance of Denise Little, who helps me keep Kate and Emily alive and kicking.



KATE ROSEN SAT ON THE EDGE of the stage, the large hotel ballroom stretching beyond her, long emptied of people. The only things left behind were the detritus of a grand night of celebration—balloons skimming over the carpet, trampled paper streamers, discarded signs, and swags of limp bunting that sagged against the walls.

No more cameras, no strobe lights, no cheering throng.

The exuberant but exhausted audience had finally faded away hours earlier, the journalists following suit shortly afterward. America had finally gone to bed, either celebrating or lamenting the fact that that they'd just elected their first female president.

Kate cherished the silence. She needed someplace where she could collect her thoughts, which had been shattered tonight. She'd discovered things she could hardly believe even still about her best friend. And she'd been disillusioned in a way that nobody, even a politician's top aide, was prepared

to be. Her headache and heartache had been made worse by the oppressive crush of supporters commemorating their candidate's—her candidate's—triumph. Once Emily and her entourage, minus Kate, went upstairs, the party had finally broken up and the ballroom's capacity crowd started to stream home for their own private celebrations.

But Kate's ears still rang with the sound of more than a thousand people cheering, screaming their support of their candidate.

“Benton! Benton! Benton!”

Emily Rousseau Benton, former governor of Virginia, Kate's best friend, had been elected president of the United States, in no small part due to Kate's hard work. Emily's race for the White House had dominated both of their lives for the past four years. Everything Kate did, every action she took as Emily's campaign manager, had been done solely in support of her friend's bid for the presidency.

And now that Emily had won, Kate was alone, horrified at the prospect that she might have made a terrible mistake.

She slipped down from the stage riser and kicked idly at the balloons in her path, creating a slight rippling effect across the bubbled mass of them. An occasional balloon still floated down from the ceiling, a day late and a dollar short.

Kate's most recent revelation had been like that, one day too late. . . .

“Hey, Kate.”

A lone voice penetrated the silence. She stiffened in surprise and raised her hand to shade her eyes and get a better look at the person standing on the balcony. Her mood lightened and her shoulders relaxed when she realized who had spoken.

“Hey, Wes.”

“Y’all all right? Need some company?”

She nodded.

It was a classic Southern salutation, and the familiarity of it was oddly comforting. Then again, Wes Kingsbury always knew what to say—he was equal parts her friend and her spiritual mentor. Disappearing into the shadows, Wes emerged a few moments later from the staircase leading to the balcony box.

Kate glanced at her watch and stifled a yawn—3:46. That was a.m. Too early to be called morning, too late to be called night. The true dark hours of the human soul, when body rhythm and spirit were at their lowest point.

“I can’t believe you’re still here,” she said. The man had a wife and a small child, a real world and home to which he could return. He hadn’t closed his life down to a single obsessively sought goal. That had been her mistake.

“And I can’t believe you’re not upstairs. M’s still up in the suite, partying hearty.”

She kicked at a balloon, stirring up a small whirl of color. “I know. I’m not in much of a party mood.”

“So I see.” He fell into step next to her. “What’s going on? I would have thought you’d be thrilled. This was the goal, right?” He pointed to an abandoned placard: *Benton/Bochner ’08*.

“It was. It is.” She couldn’t help but shiver. “It’s complicated.”

“It’s Emily. It’s always complicated.” He chuckled, then sighed. “Okay, what has she done *now*?” At Kate’s hesitation, he added, “It’s got something to do with Talbot, doesn’t it?”

Charles Talbot had been Emily’s opponent in her race for

the White House. As such, he'd pulled out all the stops to find all the dirt he could on his challenger. Kate, as Emily's friend and ally for more than twenty years, had been positive there was no dirt to be found.

She'd been so wrong. . . .

Talbot's investigators discovered that Emily's family had illegally won important highway construction contracts in Virginia while Emily was the state's governor.

When Kate learned his camp was prepared to release this information, the only way she could stop him was to explain to him exactly the unsavory facts that her own investigations had uncovered on him—details she'd kept out of Emily's hands.

The last thing Kate had wanted was her friend to strike an ill-timed and unnecessary first blow—using a nuke when a nudge would have worked just as well. She'd learned the hard way that Emily, though a talented politician, wasn't exactly good at being subtle when she had a bigger weapon handy. But when Talbot made his big, bold move to not only discredit Emily but take down her family by attempting to dismantle the entire Benton legacy, Kate had intervened by threatening to use her opposition research.

Talbot had killed . . . and Kate felt that she had no choice but to remind him of the lengths to which he'd gone to cover up his own crimes. She had the bloody proof that he'd been criminally negligent, if not morally responsible, in the grisly death of his college girlfriend. Talbot might have maneuvered his way out of the scandal, but Kate had the goods on him—incontrovertible evidence.

If released to the public, her evidence would have been sufficient to end his campaign, destroy his reputation, and

possibly land him in jail for a long, long time. Talbot saw the light and backed down from his threats.

So Talbot had been stopped. The situation had served to cement Kate's resolve that Emily Benton would make a far better president than her opponent. Emily was a policy wonk who knew her stuff, she was talented at getting things done, she worked hard for the people she represented, and she was charismatic enough to persuade even those who opposed her to allow time for her ideas to have a chance to work. In other words, Emily was the best politician of her time.

However, Kate soon learned not only that her actions had made Talbot her enemy for life, but also that no one ever wins in a competition of "who has the best blackmail" because the games like that never end. She'd felt sickened, soiled, and finally betrayed.

Kate drew a deep breath. "Emily found out."

Wes straightened for a moment. He'd been one of only two confidants who knew the sins of both candidates, other than the candidates themselves.

"About . . ." Wes paused and glanced around as if gauging the likelihood of being overheard. Even though no one was in sight, he kept his voice low. "About the ammunition you had? How?"

"I told her I'd stopped Talbot, but I refused to tell her how. I didn't think she needed to know. So in the middle of the night, my best friend M sent one of her protégées to 'borrow' the report from me."

"Protégées'?" Wes's gaze narrowed. "Maia," he said in a flat voice.

Kate nodded. "Our very own iron ingenue in training."

She stared across the vast ballroom, watching a piece of bunting as it slipped from the balcony railing and wafted gently to the floor. “Though apparently she’s more iron maiden than ingenue. Scruples don’t seem to concern her. I rip my heart out every day, trying to find the right balance between my Christian convictions and loyalty to my country and to my friends—especially Emily. I want to make a difference in the world, make people’s lives better. I don’t always like how I do it. Yet Maia didn’t have a second thought when Emily asked her to steal the reports from me in the middle of the night. She made copies, then replaced the originals so I wouldn’t know. Then Emily had Maia contact Talbot with what you’d call a very thinly veiled threat.”

Wes read between the lines. “Destroying any hope of the campaign staying out of the gutter.”

“Yeah. But then came the weird part. It did—stay out of the gutter, I mean.” A shiver coursed up her spine and she crossed her arms in an effort to combat it. “Buttoned up tighter than Fort Knox. Maybe my way wasn’t effective enough. Maybe Emily’s decision to send him a second threat was the only real way to stop him.” A second tremor joined the first, and Kate knew it wasn’t because she was cold. “Maybe I was wrong. Or maybe I’m in the wrong business. Or maybe I’m simply overreacting.”

“Or maybe not.”

They took several more steps through the remains of the revelry before Kate stopped. She reached down and rescued a placard bearing Emily’s likeness.

“In any case, I don’t know . . .” She hated how her voice broke when she spoke. “I don’t know if I can stay. If I can continue working with her. She lied to me, stole from me.

Maia actually expected me to be impressed by their cleverness. Emily knew better. But she set it up anyway.” She studied the picture plastered across the placard. Emily’s resolute smile looked effortless despite the fact it’d taken the photographer over two hours to capture the perfect expression.

“You have very high standards for your behavior.” Wes took a few more steps, then stopped, pivoting to face her, his hands jammed in his pockets. “Emily’s a lot more flexible; she’s a big proponent for ‘the end justifies the means.’ You know that. I know that. The question is, can you tolerate that? Jesus himself said, ‘Render unto Caesar that which was Caesar’s.’ But there have to be consequences when a person crosses the line. Nobody’s above the law, not even Emily—though she’d probably argue that point. The big question you have to answer here is what is the right thing for your faith and the right thing for the world. Think hard about that and then move forward. I’ll pray for you. I know it’s going to be a tough decision.”

Kate looked up from Emily’s compelling expression, the look in her eyes that said, *You know you can trust me.* “A decision I was hoping you’d help me make.”

To her utter surprise, Wes shook his head. “Nope.”
“But—”

He raised his palm to stop her. “Hear me out. I’m always willing to offer advice, lend a hand or even a shoulder, but when it comes to something like this, you need to work with a higher authority.” He pointed upward.

Kate managed to conjure up a tight smile. “Somehow, I don’t think you mean President-Elect Benton in the penthouse suite.”

“Nope. A lot higher.”



They rode up the elevator in silence. It wasn't until they reached the door to the suite, flanked by Secret Service agents, that Wes hesitated.

Kate fought the urge to say, "You're going in with me, aren't you?" She realized she needed to speak to Emily in private. If any of the campaign entourage still hung about, Kate would have to bide her time, smile, make nice with the natives, and wait for her chance after all the hoopla finally ended. It had been relatively easy to have the candidate's ear in private, but getting the attention of the next president would be more complicated.

She practiced her smile on the two agents, whose names she needed to learn. Then she stopped herself.

Or maybe after tonight it wouldn't matter.

"This is where I say good-bye." Wes leaned over and kissed her forehead. "And good luck. Let me know what happens."

"Thanks. I will," she whispered. Drawing in a deep breath, Kate reached for the doorknob, but the agent on the right beat her to it.

"Allow me, Ms. Rosen." He opened the door.

It was a testament to the construction of the hotel that she heard little in the way of sound from the suite until the door opened. Then a cacophony of laughter and voices met her, the celebration evidently still in full swing. The crowd had dwindled some, but an impressive number of folks still lingered, including several of Washington's biggest power players, senior members of the party, a large assortment of Benton family members, and some of the key campaign staffers.

Kate didn't see Emily at first but finally spotted her in

a corner of the room, holding court. They made eye contact and Emily raised her hand as if saying, *Over here* and motioned Kate over. In response, Kate began to pick her way through the clusters of people. She was stopped every foot or so to be congratulated, hugged, and offered a drink.

She felt odd accepting the accolades, but she had no trouble waving off the libations. The last thing she needed was the muddle of alcohol. She could only hope that Emily had kept a clear head as well.

Before Kate could reach Emily's position, she bumped into a rather solid male form. Before she could recover her balance, a hand grasped her elbow and she was hit in the face with a cloud of whiskey breath.

"Katie-girl!" Emily's old family adviser Dozier Marsh pulled her into an awkward embrace. He might have looked like someone's sainted grandfather, but it was as far from what he really was as the North Pole from Antarctica. He was the ultimate political fixer—a devious, dangerous old power broker with a fondness for hard liquor and Emily, though not always in that order. And right now, he was acting like a lecherous uncle.

Great-uncle.

"Where you been, darlin'?" he wheezed. "Hard to have a party without Emily's right-hand gal!" He tried to swing her around. The move would have made them both fall over had the young aide standing next to him not reached up and steadied him.

"Sir, perhaps you'd rather sit," the aide said.

Dozier gave Kate a grin and leaned heavily against his aide. "I suspect you're right, Percy. The room is definitely leaning to one side." He dropped heavily into the nearest

chair, managing to spill two drinks that were abandoned on the nearby end table. He stared blearily at the mess. “Would you be a dear, Kate, and get me a couple of cocktail napkins so I can clean up behind my sorry, drunken self? I’d ask Perry here, but he’s playing a key role in supporting me.”

“Now, Dozier . . .” Emily’s voice knifed neatly through the chatter, instantly commanding the attention of the room. “You’re not asking the future White House chief of staff to be your fetch-it girl, are you?”

Dozier’s ruddy complexion deepened. “Of c-course not, Emily. . . . I mean . . .” He pulled awkwardly to his feet, away from his aide, and managed a small stiff bow without falling over. “Madam President.”

The room went silent, no one quite sure what direction Emily’s response might head next.

“I’ve never really liked being called ‘madam.’” After a tense millisecond, Emily allowed a smile to spread across her face. “But I guess I’ll get used to it, if *president* gets to follow.”

Dozier, freed from the sharp conversational hook on which he’d impaled himself, offered a weaker version of her smile and lifted the drink he’d never lost grip of. “Hear, hear.”

With the momentary tension broken, the room went back to its earlier state—celebrating people clustering in small discussion knots. Dozier’s aide, a young man whose name was neither Percy nor Perry but Zack, distracted Dozier with something shiny, giving Kate a chance to escape. Once again, Emily gestured for Kate to follow her and led to the bedroom portion of the suite.

Once the door was closed behind them, Emily gave her a warm hug. “I was starting to get worried about you.” She gave Kate a close scrutiny. “Honey, you look like the weight

of the free world is still on your shoulders. But the campaign's over. We won. You can afford to relax now."

"No. I can't." Kate said. She bit her lip before her words started pouring out, uncontrolled and bitter. She wanted to be completely in control of her emotions before she confronted Emily.

Emily sighed, obviously ignorant of the battle brewing inside Kate. "I know. I feel the same way. Campaigning is hard work, but nothing compared to running a country." She dropped to the bed. "If I allowed myself a chance to stop and think about what I'm taking on, I'd probably run out of this hotel screaming like the Madwoman of Chaillot.

"Remember when we went to New York on spring break back when we were in school? How we jumped on our beds at the Waldorf-Astoria hotel and had a pillow fight? Mom was horrified, but Dad told me that he hoped I'd never get too old to bounce on the bed."

"Yeah," Kate said. Decades of memories came crashing down upon her. Room service, going to plays, Emily's genuine pleasure at sharing the treat with her friend. The phrase "Never get too old to jump on the bed" had become an inside joke, a motto for that trip and later, the watchwords for those times when the responsibilities of law school—and beyond—threatened to drag them down.

When Nick and Emily got married, their gift to each bridesmaid included a sterling silver box engraved with that motto. Kate still had that box sitting in a place of honor on her dresser.

"Well?" The next president of the United States, the Honorable Emily Rousseau Benton, took off her shoes and

took a few experimental bounces on the bed as if to test the bed's recoil potential.

"Not today." Kate tried to smile, desperately wanting to recapture that same sense of giddy accomplishment that Emily evidently felt. Kate had indeed expected to feel a sense of joyous triumph when thinking ahead to this day. But now her heart was too heavy, her mind too burdened with the difficult decision that lay ahead of her.

Emily stopped jumping, the bed undulating in her wake. "Why not?" she said. The confusion that initially filled her face dissolved into an expression that Kate couldn't quite understand. Then it passed almost immediately to a tight, guarded smile. "You have a point. I need to be dignified. Somehow, I don't think the White House curator is going to let anyone jump on the bed in the Lincoln Bedroom. Not you. Not even me."

"That's not what I meant."

Emily locked eyes with her for a moment. Then she turned away, unable to hold the contact for long. A Benton never crumbled under pressure. A real Benton dodged it. The president-elect slid off the bed, pulled on her heels, and straightened her skirt. She didn't meet Kate's gaze.

"You're right. We're both exhausted. You've always dealt with exhaustion in different ways than I do. Why don't you take off a—"

"I'm exhausted. But that's not the problem. I'm confused. Angry. And I'm disappointed in you." Kate's heart took the extra beat it always did when she made the final decision to confront her best friend. "You didn't need to send Maia to steal the files from me. You should have talked to me about it."

“Oh.” Emily spoke in a low, even voice. “You found out about that?”

Kate nodded.

“I didn’t send her,” Emily said. “She did that on her own, trying to curry my favor.”

Kate didn’t know whom to believe. She knew Emily better than she knew herself in some ways. Emily was brilliant, capable, the best person imaginable to have around in an emergency. She was a born leader. But part of that leadership tool kit was that she would also stop at nothing when she wanted something. Of course, Maia was cut from the same cloth. Emily’s words were plausible. “So did the favor currying work?” She tried to keep any emotion out of her voice. “Did she make a big impression on you?”

“Yes, but it was a mixed bag. I thought Maia showed a remarkable amount of initiative, but I told her that she’d chosen the wrong person to cross.”

“But that didn’t stop you from reading the reports, did it?”

“Of course not. I’d have been a fool to lose that unexpected opportunity. I’m no fool. You know that.”

“Yes, I do. And I guess that’s why you instructed her to send the threatening e-mail to Talbot. Were you just taking advantage of another unexpected opportunity?”

“Sure. It seemed the wise thing to do at the moment. He was a loose cannon. He needed to be locked down.”

“And now? Are you still glad you did it?”

Emily collapsed on the bed, her ice queen facade shattered. A single tear trickled down her face, leaving a glistening trail through her perfect makeup. “No. I regret it more than you’ll ever know.” She bent her head, trying desperately

to hide the additional tears, but a sob tore through her, making her shoulders shake.

Kate almost gaped at her friend. She'd seen Emily's crocodile tears before. But they didn't look anything like this. This was the real thing.

Real emotion. Real regret. . . .

Emily continued. "Mind you, I didn't hate what I did to Charles Talbot. He's a pariah, an abomination. A murderer. He should never have been able to get away with driving that car while drunk, and leaving that poor girl behind, still clinging to life, to take the rap for his actions. Had he gotten her help at the time of the accident, she might have survived the crash as something other than a vegetable. But no, he had to save face, run away, pretend nothing had happened. He left her to die in that car. It took hours for anyone to discover the wreck. Then he had the audacity to bribe and threaten people into giving him an alibi. He had to make everyone think she'd been the one driving while intoxicated, even if it killed her. He's the lowest of scumbags. I won't apologize for pricking whatever fragments he has left of his conscience. I'm pretty sure all I did was dent his enormously bloated and unconscionable pride."

Emily's flare of anger dissipated quickly, as if she suddenly felt guilty of failing to be remorseful for her own actions. Kate knew that, for Emily, anger was an emotion easier to understand and embrace than remorse. Especially when she felt that anger was righteous. Emily could move mountains when she had on a full load of righteous anger. Kate had seen her shame an entire state legislature into voting for health insurance for disadvantaged children, all because she'd vented her anger into a biting five-minute speech to them.

Kate gave her friend a steady stare. “What he did and what you did are separate issues. And you know it.”

“I’m sorry.” Emily’s voice dropped to a whisper. “You’re right. When Maia gave me those copies, I did exactly what you were afraid I was going to do.” She looked up, naked emotion filling her face, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I allowed my need for revenge to overwhelm my sense of honor. I’m so sorry.” She stood, her arms at her side. Her voice broke in a show of raw emotion that Kate had never seen from her before.

“Kate, can you forgive me?”

Kate felt tears forming in her own eyes.

Could she forgive Emily? Of course she could. Christ was clear on the responsibility to forgive a repentant sinner. Kate could do no less.

But could she trust Emily enough to continue working for her? That was another question entirely.

For now, she reached over and hugged her friend. The two of them cried together for what seemed like hours.

But the big question—whether Kate would stay on after this—hung over them. No matter how often Emily asked it, Kate refused to answer.

Finally Emily said, “Take some time, go home, cool off, and then we’ll talk.”

As was often the case, Emily was right.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Welcome back to the world of Kate Rosen and Emily Benton. As you've learned, the road of their relationship isn't particularly smooth, especially not after Kate has done some soul-searching. Is there any chance for recovery? That's up to them.

I know it sounds odd for me to talk about them as if they are real, but to me, they are. As a writer, you work very hard to create characters who become three-dimensional and realistic. If everything goes right, they almost gain lives of their own. I may plan scenes, set up plot points, but often, things simply . . . happen. The characters say something or do something I haven't planned, and suddenly the story takes a slight detour from what I expected. That's when you sit back and realize that you've been writing for four or five hours without a break, and it seems as if you've been sitting there for only minutes. We call that being in the zone—and it's a marvelous feeling.

This leads me to the admission that when asked "What's next for Kate and Emily?" all I can say is—it's up to them. I know what I think will happen, but you never know what surprises are around the bend when you're working with two other headstrong women who may have ideas of their own.

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 eleven 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.