

*(excerpt from story I wrote and published on the KindleVella platform in 2022)*

## CHAPTER ONE

### James

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*When* you decide to run for a political office, there are two things you should do: 1. Have your head examined. 2. Make sure you don't have skeletons in your closet that could destroy everything you're working towards.

I didn't have any skeletons in my closet, as far as I knew. For the past ten years, I'd been somewhat of a workaholic. I'd served as a member of the city council and Mayor Pro Tem for the city of Raleigh, plus I was on the board of directors for various companies throughout the state of North Carolina. I didn't have time for much else, including romantic relationships.

I'd been in one long-term relationship during this time, but it ended mutually and we'd remained friends. There weren't too many women willing to play second fiddle to my job, which was fine by me. It's not like I had fairytale delusions of getting married and living happily ever after. I believed you got *one* chance at true love and if you messed it up, anything else would be mediocre by comparison. I knew this firsthand.

I stared at myself in the green room mirror, practicing my TV smile. I wanted to come across as confident but approachable. I already faced an obstacle based on my appearance, so I tried to get people to look beyond my six-foot-one two-hundred-pound frame and dark chocolate skin, and actually listen to what I had to say. According to

the latest polls, it was working. People in the State of North Carolina considered me knowledgeable, trustworthy and capable. They felt I was someone who would look out for them in Washington. Under the current administration, people were not only looking for someone who had their best interest at heart and would keep their promises, but also someone who could be instrumental in helping to unify the country.

Things were quickly falling to ruin in our government, and our political systems were failing even more so than in the past; just as it appeared we'd made some progress. Things were being pushed back even further. Our current Senator was part of the problem because he supported every asinine decision made by his party. When politicians put party over country it became a lose-lose for everyone involved, which was the reason I ran for North Carolina's junior senatorial seat.

I felt strongly we needed to close the divide in political parties, close the divide in racial groups, close the divide among the rich and poor, close the divide between religions; we needed to close anything that divided us as Americans and human beings. *Close the Divide* was my current campaign slogan. It resonated well with people in and outside the state of North Carolina.

A few weeks ago, I started getting noticed by several national news outlets. Now that we were less than three months away from the election, I figured getting some of the national spotlight would give voters even more confidence in my ability to stand out in Washington. Therefore, I had my team say yes to as many interviews as my schedule would allow.

During an interview with NPR, I got news that would turn my entire life upside down. The interview itself was pretty similar to others I'd done. The associate producer led me from the green room to the studio floor, made sure my microphone worked, and after the countdown—we went live on air. The anchor did the customary introduction and asked how I was doing; I replied and then he asked why I wanted to be North Carolina's next Senator. I gave an answer I'd

committed to memory and as I finished up; he placed a finger to the earpiece he wore and several emotions crossed his face.

He frowned, obviously annoyed by the interruption in his ear, then his eyebrows rose in surprise by what he heard, and finally his expression turned sympathetic.

"Councilman Griffin, we just got word Ryan Jones of Jones-Beecham Enterprises has died. We want to send our condolences to his family. I know you and Mr. Jones were friends in college. Were you aware he'd passed away?"

My eyes went wide. *RJ was dead?* That was. . .no, that couldn't be true. I suddenly felt very warm and my vision blurred for a few seconds. I glanced across the studio and saw my campaign manager, Justin. His fingers were mimicking scissors. He wanted me to cut the segment.

I cleared my throat. "No, I wasn't aware of Ryan's passing. It's been a few years since I've talked to him. I'd like to offer my condolences to his wife, Stephanie, his daughter, the rest of his family, colleagues and the JB Enterprises family. As you can tell, I am in shock by this news and must regretfully end the interview at this time. Thank you." I stood and walked off camera, with the AP following me, trying to unclip the mic.

After the cameras stopped rolling, the news anchor came over to where I stood with Justin and my press secretary and personal assistant, Carmen.

"Councilman Griffin, my apologies I didn't mean to cat-," he started before Justin lay into him. Justin's dark blue eyes appeared almost black as he snapped.

"Come off it! You knew *exactly* what you were doing. I expected more from NPR. I hope your ratings boost was worth the

insensitive stunt you pulled!" Justin grabbed my elbow and led me to the far corner of the studio. "James, are you okay?"

"Is it true?" I asked shakily. I looked from him to Carmen, who had a sorrowful expression on her face.

He exhaled. "According to the Chicago newswire but I haven't talked to anyone from his family,"

I couldn't believe RJ had died. We'd been best friends throughout college. Me, him and Stephanie were inseparable until that damn bet. After the bet, things were never the same.