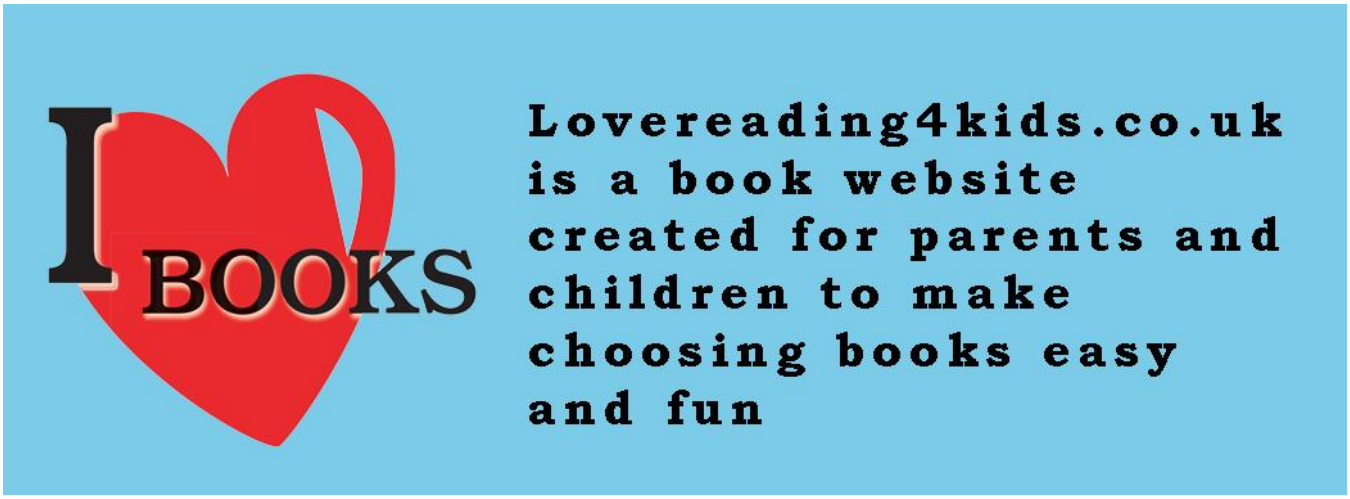


Opening extract from

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Chapter ONE

I flexed my feet in my too-tight shoes and made myself stand up straight, trying to ignore the rapid-fire clicking of the cameras going off all around me. It was still really hot out—despite the fact it was getting close to five—but I was wearing a knee-length tweed skirt and a white button-down shirt. My hair had been blown out and curled, and I was wearing pearl earrings and a light application of makeup. It was not the way I would normally have looked on a Wednesday afternoon in early June, but this was anything but an ordinary Wednesday.

"Thank you all so much for coming today," my father said from behind the podium that was currently in the middle of our front porch. He shuffled his papers for a second before taking a deep breath and going into his prepared speech, the one I now knew by heart, since Peter Wright, his chief of staff and main strategist, had made me listen to it over and over until I could do so with absolutely no change in my expression, like all of this was old news to me by now, and nothing my dad was saying would catch me by surprise.

For a moment, as the now-familiar words started to wash over me, I just blinked at the podium. Where exactly had it come from?

Did Peter travel around with spare ones in the back of his SUV?

". . . regret that the people of Connecticut might have lost any of their trust in me," my dad said, snapping me back to the present moment. I fixed my eyes on him again, hoping that my face hadn't betrayed anything other than a supportive daughter standing by her father. If it had, this story, which was already dominating the twenty-four-hour news channels and had spilled onto the networks, would just keep getting bigger.

It wasn't like I didn't understand why. A prominent congressman, one of the stars of the party, is suddenly caught up in a scandal that threatens to upend not only his career but the next national election—the headlines practically wrote themselves. If it had been someone else, I would have looked at the round-the-clock coverage and shrugged, figuring it was to be expected. But now that it was happening here—my front yard, my porch, my father—that certainty was totally gone.

My eyes drifted to the wall of reporters and photographers in front of me, the news cameras pointed toward us, the relentless sound of shutters clicking, all of it letting me know every moment was being captured. The press knew when there was blood in the water. It was evident enough by the fact that our front lawn was now packed and news trucks lined the block. They'd been here ever since the story broke, but until a few hours ago, they'd been kept from getting near our house by the guard at the entrance to Stanwich Woods, the planned community we lived in in Stanwich, Connecticut. Since normally this job consisted of waving in residents while reading magazines, I had a feeling whoever was working was not thrilled that they now had to fend off national media teams.

The headlines and news reports had been inescapable, all of them leading with the fact that my father had once been tapped as the vice presidential candidate before withdrawing five years earlier. Everyone brought up that he'd been widely considered to be a strong candidate for the VP spot again in the next national election, or even higher. Reporters commented on the story with barely concealed glee, and the segments and headlines were each worse than the last one. *Rising Congressman Falls to Earth. Congressional Corruption Brings Party's Star Low. Walker Trips Himself Up.* I'd been around the press practically my whole life—but it had never felt like this.

My father, Representative Alexander Walker, had been a member of Congress since I was three. He'd been a public defender before that, but I had no recollection of it—of a time when there weren't voters to court and messages to craft and districts to analyze. Some of my friends' fathers had jobs that they did and then left the office and forgot about, but that had never been my dad. His work was his life, which meant it was mine, too.

It hadn't been so bad when I was a kid, but in the last few years things had changed. I'd always been part of the Alex Walker brand—the daughter of a diligent single father who worked hard for the people of Connecticut—but now I was also a potential liability. Countless examples of politicians' kids who'd tanked, or at least threatened to damage, their parents' careers were laid out for me as cautionary tales and clear examples of what I was *not* supposed to do. I would not say anything offensive, or anything that could be interpreted as such, in a public forum or in earshot of the media. I would not be photographed doing or wearing anything even mildly controversial. I had the same social media

accounts as everyone else, but mine were regulated by a series of interns and I wasn't allowed to post to them without permission. I'd had a week of media training when I was thirteen, and after that I'd never strayed too far from the message, from the words that were vetted and scripted and written for me. I didn't cause my dad, or his team, any trouble if I could help it.

It wasn't like I never did anything that made waves—I'd once, without thinking, ordered my regular latte on a campaign stop, and his staff had had a two-hour meeting about it. Then they'd had a one-hour meeting with me, complete with an agenda labeled ALEXANDRA, despite the fact that nobody who actually knew me ever called me by my real name. I was Andie, and had been since I was little and couldn't quite manage the four-syllable name my parents had landed me with. "Andra" was the best I could manage at two, which turned into Andie, and fifteen years later, here I still was. In the end it was decided that when there was press around, I could no longer order five-dollar iced sugar-free vanilla soy lattes—they didn't want me to seem like a rich kid, throwing her money around while the people of Connecticut struggled to put food on the table. They also didn't want to offend the dairy lobby.

It didn't seem possible that after years of being beyond careful, watching all the tiniest details, and trying never to make a mistake, we'd ended up here anyway. But not because of anything I'd done—or even anything my dad had done, according to the version of events Peter had been giving the media ever since this broke. But this was happening because someone in his office had (allegedly) taken charitable contributions that were intended for my dad's foundation and funneled them into his

reelection campaign fund. Apparently, when it was discovered during an audit that my dad's foundation was nearly bankrupt, people began asking questions. Which had led to this, to today, much more quickly than I could get my head around.

Two weeks ago my life had been normal. My dad had been in D.C., working as usual, I'd been finishing up the school year, hanging out with my friends, and planning how to break up with my boyfriend, Zach (by the lockers, right after his graduation, quick and fast, like ripping off a Band-Aid). Two weeks ago my life had been going to plan. And now there was a podium on the porch.

I let my eyes fall for just a second to a spot on the lawn where a thick cable was laid out, flattening the grass. A month ago my dad and I had shot promo photos and ads there for his fall campaign, my dad in a jacket but no tie, me in a skirt and cashmere sweater. There had been fake fall leaves scattered over the grass, turning May into October. I hadn't asked if these had been purchased, or if some intern had had to make them, because I really hadn't wanted to know the answer.

We'd been shooting all day, first stills, then video, my dad and I walking across the lawn together, like this was totally normal. As if we ever got dressed up to walk across the lawn and have a chat, just for fun. As we were nearing the end of the day, the director had looked at the two of us and sighed. "Don't you guys have a dog or something?"

My dad had been on his BlackBerry as usual, not even hearing this, and it had fallen to me to give him a smile and say, "No dog. Just the two of us." And he'd nodded and said something to the guy holding the silver disk that bounced light onto us, and

we'd moved on, into the next setup, projecting the image of a small, happy family once again.

Now, though, I didn't know if those mailers or ads, complete with my dad's campaign slogan—"Toward the Future"—would ever be used. From where I was standing on the porch, it wasn't looking so good.

"I will say again that I had no knowledge whatsoever of this misuse of funds," my dad said, snapping me back to the present moment. His voice was getting low and serious, and I could practically sense the press grow still, like they knew they were getting what they'd come for. "But the fact is, this violation of campaign finance regulations originated in my office. And since it was an office under my control and my leadership, I must take responsibility. As you know, I've asked for an independent investigation, one that can get to the bottom of how this occurred. I've directed my staff to cooperate to the fullest extent. And while the investigation is ongoing—"

Here my dad drew in a breath and rubbed his wedding ring with his thumb, his nervous tic. Apparently, he'd lost four the first year he and my mother were married, and so she'd bought him a crazy-expensive one in the hope that he might hold on to it. He had, but ever since, he'd been absently checking for its existence. The press sometimes commented on the fact that he was still wearing it, five years later, but I had a feeling today that would not be one of the questions shouted at him from our lawn. There were much bigger headline-generating fish to fry.

"While the investigation is ongoing, I will be taking a leave of absence. I feel that I cannot serve my district or my state

effectively while this is being investigated. I will be donating my salary to the Ovarian Cancer Research Fund."

I hadn't heard about the charity—it wasn't in the last draft of the speech Peter read to me, and I tried not to let any surprise pass over my face. But I couldn't help wondering if it had been a last-minute addition, or if this was just something they hadn't thought I needed to know.

"I will be taking this time away from Congress to reflect on any actions that might have brought me here and to spend time with my family." My father glanced over at me, and I gave him the smile that Peter had made me rehearse that morning. It was supposed to be supportive, encouraging, and kind, but couldn't be too happy. I had no idea if it came off or not, but all I could think as my dad turned back to the press was how strange this all was—this bizarre theater we were performing for the national press on our front porch. "I will not be taking any questions at this time. Thank you very much for your attention."

He turned away from the podium as the reporters on our lawn started yelling questions. As we'd practiced, I walked toward my dad, and he put his arm around my shoulders as someone pulled the front door open from the inside. I glanced back to see Peter stepping smoothly up to the podium, answering the shouted questions my dad had walked away from.

The second we were inside, my dad dropped his arm and I took a step away. The door was firmly shut behind us by one of the interns who'd arrived with Peter last week. The intern nodded at my dad, then hustled out of the foyer, fast. Most of the interns—I never bothered to learn their names unless they were particularly cute—had been avoiding him since the story

broke, not meeting his eye, clearly not sure how to behave. Usually, they were unshakable, following his every move, trying to prove themselves invaluable, the better to get a job later. But now, it was like my dad was radioactive, and just being around him might damage their future job prospects.

"Thanks," my dad said after clearing his throat. "I know that can't have been easy for you."

It was only years of practice and ingrained media training that kept me from rolling my eyes. As though my dad had ever cared about what was easy for me. "It was fine."

My dad nodded, and silence fell between us. I realized with a start that we were alone—no Peter, no constantly buzzing BlackBerry. I tried for a moment to remember the last time it had been just me and my dad, together in a way that hadn't been staged for the cameras, engineered to appear casual. After a moment I realized it had probably been December, my dad and I driving together to a post-holiday charity event. He'd tried to ask me about my classes, until it became painfully clear to both of us that he had no idea what they were. We'd given up after a few minutes and listened to the news on the radio for the rest of the drive.

I glanced up and saw our reflection in the hall mirror, a little startled to see us standing next to each other. I always wanted to think I looked like my mother, and I had when I was little. But I was looking more and more like my dad every year—the proof was being reflected right in front of me. We had the same freckly skin, same thick auburn hair (more brown than red, except in the light), same thick dark brows that I was constantly having to tweeze into submission, same blue eyes and dark eyelashes. I was even tall like him, and lanky, whereas my mother had been

petite and curvy, with curly blond hair and green eyes. I looked away from the mirror and took a step back, and when I looked up again, it was just my dad reflected back, which felt better—not like the two of us were being forced into a frame together.

"So," my dad said, reaching into his suit jacket pocket—undoubtedly for his BlackBerry. He stopped after a second, though, and dropped his hand, when he must have remembered it wasn't there. Peter had confiscated it so that it wouldn't go off during the press conference. He'd taken my cell phone too, which even I had to admit was a good idea—my three best friends had a tendency to start epic text threads, and even if my phone had been on silent, its buzzing would have been distracting and probably would have spawned a story of its own—*This press conference is like sooooo boring! Texting daughter can't even pay attention as Walker's career hits the skids.* My dad stuck his hands in his pockets and cleared his throat again. "So. Andie. About this summer. I—uh . . ."

"I won't be here," I reminded him, and even saying the words, I could feel relief flooding through me. "My program starts the day after tomorrow." My dad nodded, his brow furrowed, which meant he had no idea what I was talking about but didn't want to tell me that, just wanted to look concerned and engaged. I'd been watching him do it with opponents and voters for years, and tried not to let myself be surprised that he hadn't remembered. "The Young Scholars Program," I clarified, knowing telling him was the simplest path out of this. "It's at Johns Hopkins."

"Ah," my dad said, his brow clearing, and I saw he actually was remembering, not just pretending to remember while waiting for Peter to whisper something in his ear. "Of course. That's right."

The program at Johns Hopkins was one of the best in the country, designed for high school students who were planning to be pre-med in college. My friend Toby insisted on calling it pre-pre-med-med, and the fact that I kept telling her not to only seemed to be making the name stick. You stayed on campus in the dorms, took advanced math and science classes, and got to shadow interns and residents on their hospital rotations. I'd known I wanted to be a doctor since I could remember. I had a story I told to reporters about my dad giving me a toy stethoscope for Christmas when I was five that actually wasn't true, but I'd said it enough now that it *felt* true. When I was applying to the program, I was confident I'd get in based on my grades—I did well in all my subjects, but I did great in math and science; I always had. And it didn't hurt that one of my dad's biggest supporters was Dr. Daniel Rizzoli, who was the former provost of Johns Hopkins. When he'd handed me my letter of recommendation, handwritten on heavy, cream-colored paper, I'd known I was in.

I'd been looking forward to it all year, but with everything that had been happening, I was practically counting down the minutes. My dad could stay here and sort things out on his own, and hopefully by the time I came back in August, things would be settled. But either way, in two days this would no longer be my problem. In forty-eight hours I would be gone. I would be in a dorm room in Baltimore, meeting my new roommate, Gina Flores, in person for the first time, and hoping that her tendency to never use exclamation points in any of her texts or e-mails was a weird quirk and not actually indicative of her personality. I would be reading over my syllabus for the millionth time and

getting my books from the campus bookstore. I would hopefully have met someone cute at orientation already, halfway to my summer crush. But I would not be *here*, which was the most important thing.

"Are you all set with everything?" my dad asked, and I wondered if this sounded as strange to him as it did to me, like he was reading badly written lines he hadn't fully memorized. "I mean . . . do you need a ride?"

"I'm fine," I said quickly. The last thing I needed was to have my dad drive me onto campus trailed by a CNN news truck. "Palmer's driving me. It's all arranged." Palmer Alden—one of my three best friends—loved any opportunity for a road trip, and when she'd seen me looking into buses and car services, she'd jumped into action and started planning our route, complete with mixes and snack stops. Her boyfriend, Tom, was coming as well, mostly because he insisted, since there was a rumor that *Hairspray* was going to be our school musical next year, and he wanted to do some "method research."

"Oh, good," my dad said. Peter must have finished answering a question, because suddenly the shouts of the press outside got louder. I winced slightly and took a step away from the door.

"Well," I said, tipping my head toward the kitchen. My phone was in there, I was pretty sure. Not that I even really needed to check it, but I wanted this to be over. The whole day had been strange enough, and we didn't need to keep adding to it by trying to have the world's most awkward conversation. "I'm going to . . ."

"Right," my dad said, his hand reaching toward his suit jacket again, out of habit, before he caught himself halfway and

dropped it. "And I should . . ." The sentence trailed off, and my dad glanced around the entryway, looking lost. I felt a sudden flash of sympathy for him. After all, my dad always had something to do. He was beyond busy, his day scheduled to the minute sometimes, always in the center of a group of staff and handlers and interns and assistants. He ran his team; he was respected and powerful and in control. And now he was standing in our foyer without his BlackBerry, while the press tore him apart just a few feet away.

But even as I felt bad for him, I knew there wasn't anything I could do or say. My dad and I fixed our own problems—we took care of them ourselves, didn't share them with each other, and that was just the way it went. I gave him a quick smile, then started toward the kitchen.

"Andie," my dad said when I was nearly to the kitchen door. "I . . ." He looked at me for a moment before putting his hands in his pockets and dropping his gaze to the wooden floors, which seemed impervious to scratching, looking as brand-new as the day I'd first seen this house, like nobody actually lived here at all. "Thank you for standing up there with me. I know it was hard. And I promise I won't ask you to do that again."

A memory flashed before me, fast, just a collection of images and feelings. Another press conference five years earlier, my mother, her hands on my shoulders, squeezing them tight as I tried not to flinch while the flashes went off in my eyes. The way she'd leaned down to whisper to me right before, when we were standing behind the doors of my dad's congressional offices, the synthetic hair of her wig tickling my cheek, so unlike the soft curls I used to wind around my finger whenever

she would let me. "Remember," she'd said, her voice low and meant only for me, "if things get too dramatic, what are you going to do?"

"Mom," I'd said, trying not to smile, but fighting it with every millimeter. "I'm *not*."

"You are," she said, straightening my dress, then my headband. She tugged on the end of her hair and arched an eyebrow at me. "If things are going badly and we need a distraction, just reach up and yank it off. They'll forget all about what they were asking your dad."

"Stop," I said, but I was smiling then; I couldn't help it. She leaned down closer to me, and I felt my smile falter as I could see just how thin she was, her skin yellowing underneath the makeup she'd carefully applied. How I could see the veins in her face, the ones that we must all have—but on the rest of us they were hidden, not exposed where they shouldn't be.

How the press conference had gone on longer than they'd expected, how my mother had left me to go stand with my dad when he started talking about her. It had all been about her, after all—the reason he was pulling his name from consideration for vice president, despite the fact that it was going to be him, everyone knew that. It was *supposed* to be him. How hard I'd fought not to cry, standing alone, knowing even then that if I did, that would be the story, the picture on the front page. And when it was over, how my dad had given me a hug and promised me that was that, and I'd never have to go through another one of those again.

"Really," I said now, my voice coming out sharper than I'd expected. My dad blinked at me, and I held his gaze for a moment, wondering if he even remembered the last time we'd

done this, or if they all blended together, just another promise he'd made that he couldn't actually keep. "Because I've heard that before."

I didn't want to see if he understood what I meant. I wasn't sure I could take another fake furrowed brow, not about something like this. So I just gave him a nod and headed into the kitchen, walking twice as fast as usual, ready to put all of this far behind me, and suddenly feeling, for the very first time, that nobody gave rats the credit they deserved for abandoning the sinking ships. They were the smart ones, getting out while they still could. After all, they saw the way things were going, and they were just looking out for themselves. And so was I.

PALMER

Andie!! How are you doing?

BRI

You looked great on CNN.

TOBY

Totally great. Did you do that thing with the curling iron? Remember, the thing you promised months ago to teach me?

BRI

Toby.

TOBY

What? I'm trying to say she looked good. And that I would like to as well. 👩 👩

PALMER

How are you holding up?

In the safety of my own room, I looked down at my phone and felt myself really smile for what I was certain was the first time that day. I could see Peter had been right to keep my phone away from me—it looked like these texts had started right around the time my dad's speech was wrapping up.

I crossed over to my bed, phone in hand. We'd been in this house five years, but my room hadn't changed a whole lot since the day we'd moved in. It had been professionally decorated, but by someone who clearly didn't know they were designing for a middle schooler. It was all taupes and beiges and subtle patterns, everything matching, like a bedroom suite had just been picked whole out of a catalog. After all this time, it still sometimes felt like I was sleeping in a hotel. I had my makeup and jewelry organized on my dresser, framed pictures of my friends, and clothes folded on the chair in the corner, but aside from that, there was very little that marked this room as mine. I flopped down onto the bed, kicking my shoes off and settling back against the throw pillows, getting comfortable, since these text chains could go on for hours.

I glanced down at the last text, Palmer's, and hesitated, my hand over the keypad. I leaned closer to the window that was above my bed—it was open slightly, and I could hear voices drifting up to me. I looked out and saw the press conference had wrapped up. People were wandering around the lawn, and there was no sign of either Peter or the podium.

I turned my back on everything that was happening outside, hoping that maybe the next time I looked, everyone would be gone, the flattened grass the last reminder of what had taken place there only a few hours before.

ME

I'm fine.

PALMER

Really?

BRI

REALLY?

TOBY

?

ME

Totally fine. The press conference was a pain, but it's my dad's issue, not mine.

BRI

Hm.

ME

What?

TOBY

She's saying she doesn't believe you.

PALMER

How can you tell?

BRI

No, Toby's right. I don't. But we can discuss it later.

ME

There's nothing to discuss

BRI

Yes there is

TOBY

And when we discuss it, why don't you also show me the curling iron thing?

PALMER

Toby, I thought we were going to be supportive.

TOBY

I AM being supportive! I even tried to drive over and be there for Andie, but the guard at the gate wouldn't let me in.

ME

He wouldn't let you in?

TOBY

No! Something about needing to be on a list, national security, I don't know.

ME

Sorry, T. This should be back to normal as
soon as all the press is gone

TOBY

Well, I was offended. He knows me, after all.
We go way back, me and Ronnie.

PALMER

His name's Earl.

TOBY

Oh.

PALMER

But anyway!
We're going out tonight.

ME

We are?

BRI

We are. We voted, and it's a necessity.

TOBY

Absolutely. That's what I tried to tell Ronnie.

PALMER

Earl.

BRI

There's a party. We're all going.

We think you need it after everything that's happened.

I turned and looked out the window again, at the press corps that weren't leaving nearly as quickly as I wanted them to. There were now reporters lined up in front of the house, cameras pointed at them, no doubt recapping what had just occurred. It didn't seem like I was going to be leaving unnoticed any time soon.

ME

I'm not so sure that's going to happen, guys.

TOBY



PALMER

No, it totally will!

BRI

Don't worry

PALMER

We figured it out.

ME

But the press are still all over this place.

We'd need a way to get me out of here unseen. . . .

Don't know how that's possible.

TOBY

Andie, RELAX. We have a plan.

I looked down at that sentence, feeling a tiny stab of nervousness. The fact that nobody would tell me what exactly this plan *was* had me concerned. Especially if Toby was the brains behind it. I moved a little closer to my window, still trying to keep myself out of sight, and pushed it open more. There must have been a reporter doing her recap practically right beneath me, because suddenly I could hear it crystal clear, her miked voice traveling straight up to me.

"The last time the congressman was the focus of this much attention was five years ago, when, due to his wife's failing health, he withdrew his name abruptly from Governor Matthew Laughlin's unsuccessful presidential campaign, despite the fact he was seen as the front-runner for the VP slot. His wife, Molly Walker, died from ovarian cancer six weeks later. It's unclear what this latest upset means for the congressman's future—"

I slammed the window, shutting out the reporter on the lawn, and picked up my phone again.

ME

A party actually sounds great.
Let's do it.