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—MARISA DE LOS SANTOS, author of *LOVE WALKED IN*

OUR GIRL IN WASHINGTON

A KATE BOOTHE NOVEL

MICHELE
MITCHELL



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IN WASHINGTON**

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Michele Mitchell

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ALSO BY MICHELE MITCHELL

The Latest Bombshell

*For Erica Cantley,
who told me to get over myself*



OUR GIRL
IN WASHINGTON



1

The Fault, Dear Brutus

It was the best line I ever heard in my life: “Come to Beirut. And don’t worry about a visa. My soldiers will meet you at the airport.” Not many guys could come up with *that* one, and it was quickly followed by another winner: “And please bring a bottle of good tequila.”

“What is this—nail the Christian girl at the airport with a bottle of Petron?” Jack asked me when I mentioned it to him. Because, after all, this wasn’t about seduction, this was about politics, which I suppose *can* be (and often is) the same thing. Still, neither Jack nor I had ever heard the likes of it before, which was why he fiercely sucked a cigarette while I packed (because, of course, I was going—we didn’t have a lot of other options at this point). My partner, by the way, wasn’t a smoker, unless the occasional cigar was involved.

Jack coughed and pursed his lips, glowering from the velvet chair in the corner of my bedroom as I threw jeans and a couple of tweed jackets into my suitcase and observed, “Beirut is supposed to be a lot more chic than that.”

“So what do I bring, Jack?” I asked, exasperated because I

was so tired. "The little black dress or track shoes to dodge the bombs?"

He thought a moment. "Both."

I rolled my eyes. This was, simply, where we were at, the crossroads of the capital of international intrigue, far, far off our usual beat. After all, how often did political consultants consort with men whom they were reasonably sure were arms dealers? I clicked the suitcase shut, and Jack and I headed grimly to his car.

This wasn't what our line of work was supposed to include. Political consultants live a notoriously dull existence. The cocktail party circuit to troll for potential clients, that is, candidates; Saturday night dates cut short so we could be fresh for the Sunday morning television shows, even just to watch, let alone appear on; the slavish months on the campaign trail, with an occasional and invaluable Post-it note on your hotel bathroom mirror—*You are in [INSERT CITY] to run [INSERT NAME]'s campaign*; the stupid lines that passed for wit in our town, like, "I have no idea what to order for an appetizer—let's CR it." As in, pass a continuing resolution. Ha ha ha. That would never work in more cosmopolitan towns like, say, Atlanta. It only made you sound like the kid who got the crap kicked out of him in grade school. Which is, of course, what most of the people in Washington had been.

I was *not* that kid. I could console myself with that fact, during that first long leg of the flight to Lebanon, a place I had always regarded as being in a perpetual state of war. I asked the flight attendant for a second scotch, which reminded me of my father, and from the comfort of that refill it was easy to remember his advice: Break down a situation methodically, and without emotion. That, he always said, was power.

Even through an alcoholic haze, it was pretty hard not to see the situation any other way: Jack and I had screwed up spectacularly. We had been friends a long time, partners for a bit less time, but still, I had to call it like it was. We, undeniably, were in way over our heads. I was on a plane to *Beirut*, for God's sake.

It hadn't always been this way. Once, one of the rags that covered Capitol Hill called us "the little firm that could, run by the dynamic duo of Jack Vanzetti and Kate Boothe" (Jack always got top billing). And on one occasion, just last year, there was a presidential election that was supposed to have been ours. Everyone said so. Our former boss, the one whose lousy, mousy paycheck had driven us into business in the first place, even stopped us on the street. "You two have your pick, eh?" he grunted. We offered up what all consultants did: media strategy, campaign logistics, polling results. And like all the other firms that clustered along the K Street canyon, we had worked hard, paid our dues—whatever cliché you wanted to apply. But no one could deny that during the Gold affair we had basically resurrected a dead body. We made the impossible possible. And that made us undeniably attractive to that most desperate of species, the presidential hopeful.

To be *wanted* was a mad, thrilling rush, all right. We would walk into Le Sénateur, the swank downtown restaurant that my best friend, Lili, ran, and when people looked at us, they knew who we were. I would push my straight hair, which was longer than usual, across my forehead and behind the blue topaz chunks sparkling from my ears. I had bought the earrings for myself to add some dash to my black suit, cut to fit me when I was literally in marathon shape—which I was, having convinced Jack to run one with me. (He hated every mile of it,

but he did it, nearly vomiting on the shoes of the marine who hung a finisher's medal around his neck in the shadow of the Iwo Jima memorial.) And Jack, whose dark brown hair was salted now, would flash his broad grin at Lili, who trilled "hello, dahlings!" with exaggerated affection and led us past the alert politicians to our table by the palm tree in the corner. We were the talk, and I would be lying if I didn't admit that we enjoyed every minute of it.

"We've got the tiger by the tail," Jack whispered in my ear one evening there. His dark blue eyes shone with excitement. He had always been a good-looking guy, but now, with immense success at hand, he was irresistible to the women of Washington, who trooped by our table, leaning in at him and cooing, "Hello, Jack. Are you going to yoga class tomorrow morning?" I sucked back a groan, because the only reason Jack even went to yoga was to meet girls—the odds were excellent when you were the only straight man in the room, breathing deeply on a squishy mat. He beamed at me, and raised his glass. We were, without a doubt, about to have the time of our lives.

And then, suddenly, it all disappeared. Because of me, I suppose, as I found a fault with every single presidential candidate who passed through our rose-colored conference room; too eager, too dumb, too brittle, too . . . too spongy. Jack stomped around the office, shouting, "If we had to *like* the people we represent, we'd starve!" Then again, Jack dithered, too, because he wanted a specific amount of money. "We're worth more," he would say, hanging up the phone after yet another discussion with a pol who lamented our terms. "If we don't set a certain rate now, when we've got momentum, what kind of message will that send?"

The kind of message that suggested to presidential candidates that they seek support elsewhere. Which they did. And then we were forced to scrape up clients where we could. In an inordinate amount of local races in New Jersey ("the armpit of the world," grumbled Jack on his umpteenth trip to Trenton), among a few of our old standbys in Congress, in the gubernatorial race in Vermont.

I took stock of things on election night. My eyes ached with fatigue and my hair had gone unwashed for days, and I found myself standing in a dingy campaign office in Burlington with my hand around a cold cup of watery coffee, realizing that not only was my candidate going to lose but that there wouldn't be enough money to pay our fee.

So. Our newfound confidence was shattered into a thousand unpaid invoices. A miserable, cold, flat January had set in. We didn't even attend any of the inaugural balls—and we always tried, as a matter of good business, to go to all the major soirees. We couldn't afford the tickets, and no party bigwig tossed any comps our way. We did not discuss the yawning possibility that we could be washed up. And then, one grainy day, Jack leaned against the doorway to my office and flashed his old smile, the one that made him look like a kid hiding a swell present, and declared, "*This* is our year."

Well, why the hell not? We'd lost more than half the races. Lili had moved away; Le Sénateur had closed. We weren't sure we could afford to pay our assistant. Barring the existence of a pool of champagne that I could snorkel through until the entire twelve months evaporated from my memory, *something* had to happen to deliver us.

And now, it had.

"The Essex Group called," Jack told me. Despite what I proudly thought of as my inability to be shocked, I stared at my partner.

"Why?" I asked, almost in a whisper.

"It ain't because they want to buy us out," Jack said with a wink.

"Well." I finally remembered how to breathe. "Let's take the meeting."

As if we had any other choice. No one would turn down an opportunity like this, and we had bills to pay. The Essex Group! I sat at my desk and stared at my flickering computer screen, the flashy flat kind that Jack insisted on stocking our office with. They were the charter members of the Old Boys' Club themselves. Technically, the company labeled itself an "investment group," but it was so much more than that. For one thing, Essex didn't hire Wall Street gurus. Essex hired everyone who was anyone in worldwide politics—lawyers, diplomats, former politicians—the collection was quite extensive. And Essex leveraged the value of this crew against global deals. This was one reason why, for example, out of all the world's drilling companies, the one controlled by Essex got the rights to explore for oil off the coast of Japan: One of the group's partners used to be the prime minister of Japan. Now *that* is clout.

And they wanted to meet with us!

I knew that Jack was a bit nervous—he checked his silver cuff links several times as we pulled up to the Ritz-Carlton for lunch. ("Just want to make sure they're still there," he muttered.) The Ritz was slightly off the path for us in Washington; most of our clients are politicians, so we usually spent lunch meetings suffering through cloying cream sauces on Capitol

Hill. But our new potential rainmaker had its annual investor conference at the posh hotel (when not holding meetings on yachts). Jack and I walked into the hotel, across the thick oriental carpeting toward the parlor, not knowing who our new client had sent forth as an emissary. We knew we were meeting with a managing partner, but that was it.

Nevertheless, I had an idea of what to expect. A cut far above everyone else in town, no khakis-and-blue-blazer Capitol Hill combination for Essex, not even a straight-up suit. No, you adopt a certain uniform when you're attached to a company that rakes in hundreds of millions every year, when your chairman worked previously for a Republican president, when most of your partners had done time with Democratic presidents (and one had actually *been* a Democratic president), when your advisors include a former chairman of the Federal Reserve Bank and a one-time British prime minister. That's when you switch to hand-tailored suits, clipped and buffed fingernails, and perhaps a monogrammed gold ring to pass off as a family heirloom. And indeed, the gentleman we saw waiting for us in a high-backed leather chair was all that, and more.

He smiled tightly as we approached. He had a long, angular, conventionally attractive face, with prominent cheekbones and just enough lines to suggest what my mother would call "seasoning." His tie was salmon pink and dotted with golden horseshoes—expensive, and what passed for daring in this town—and his suit, probably custom-made on Savile Row—was chocolate brown. The man was resplendent in the confidence that he was in control of the world. I couldn't stop staring at him. What, I wondered, must his house look like?

The man stood, and said with icy reserve, "You must be

Kate Boothe. Very pleased to meet you." He gently took my right hand and lifted it to his lips. A courtly gesture, one not often seen in the political trenches. He smiled. "And Mr. Vanzetti." He turned and seized Jack's hand. "I am Philip Cross."

He said this like, "I am Jesus Christ." He might as well have been, from how enthusiastically Jack pumped his hand. Philip Cross practically had to pry it away. "Martini?" he asked us. Cross already had one in front of him, so strong and raw I could smell the gin.

"Not for me," I said, never having been a fan of the drink, but Jack was eager.

"Love one," my partner said. "A double." He took the chair closest to Cross. "How did your team do in the bowl game?"

This was Jack's favorite way to kick off a conversation with a new client. In Washington, D.C., with the highest concentration of advanced-degree holders in the country, chances were pretty good that someone attended a university whose football team played in one of the fifty or so bowl games at the end of the year. And, indeed, Cross smiled, this time more genuinely; he revealed a fine line of teeth.

"Not bad," he said. "We beat Ohio State."

Jack's face clouded. "I went to Ohio State."

"Sorry, fella," Cross laughed. "Well, we'll see if I can make you feel a little better about the new year." He took a sip of his drink. "So," he said, turning to me, "I saw your work during the Gold affair. Quite impressive."

"Thank you," I replied. The Gold affair was our dead body, of course. A journalist, Lyle Gold, had been falsely accused of committing treason in a case that had split the country. A lot of people made their names off of flogging him, and Vanzetti/Boothe,

Inc., had been the only consulting firm willing to spin his case in the court of public opinion. It wasn't very tidy—a murder on the subway tracks of New York City, a suicide, and the real traitor got away (although, I note with some satisfaction, he is presently fat and broke)—and many people wished to forget how they behaved at the time. But Gold was now vindicated and free, and our media skills were generally credited for righting him.

"Your time is coming," Cross said to me. "That was just the beginning for you. You've become someone to watch."

I didn't quite know how to react, but obviously if I was *someone to watch*, I needed to maintain some modicum of poise. I kept my hands folded in my lap and tried to muster a serious expression.

"Someone who can anticipate a cycle, someone who knows how to control certain elements of it," Cross went on. His voice was warming up, and I felt the delight that comes from flattery. "As I know both of you are well aware, it is a different world now than it was two years ago. Times are static. Values are stable. The enemy is identified."

He listed these with the casual self-importance of those in the know. I tried to appear bright enough to understand what the hell he was talking about. Jack drank deeply from his martini.

"Mr. Cross," I began, "I appreciate that sentiment. I do. But why us?"

Jack shot me a glare, but I did not care. I wanted to know—we were coming off a rotten year, and Cross had to be aware of that. A second drink was set before Cross, who paid no attention to it. He kept his focus on me and Jack.

"We are an investment firm. The bulk of our business is in the field of national security, energy, areas like that. We have a

high-profile staff and high-profile clients. This has made us . . . interesting . . . to the press. Understand me, we don't mind what the press writes or says. If some sod pulling seventy-K a year wants to take a few shots, that's fine with us." He shrugged. "We don't lose sleep. It's all inside-the-town coverage. The average American doesn't grasp what we do, and they're happy as long as we keep the oil prices down."

We keep the oil prices down? Well, it could be true. Or, Cross could just be like the rest in Washington, where an overweening ego was not rare. Jack, however, nodded. Maybe he knew something I did not.

"What we are concerned with," Cross said with almost courtly mien, "is perception. Our clients want us to make them money; our clients would like to keep those matters private. They do not take kindly to being deemed part of the 'evil empire'."

So, Essex was calling us in to do media strategy. Give Vanzetti and Boothe a crisis of bad press, and we'll manage you out of it.

"It is not a good time to be a gadfly," Cross said, his eyes suddenly cold, "but that does not mean there aren't those irresponsible enough to give it a try." He smiled at me, warmly. "The firm is in agreement. You are the best at what you do."

"You bet," Jack said. He firmly believed in the benefits of post-cocktail palaver. He tapped his foot on mine. My cue.

"And you," I returned brightly to Cross, "are the best at what you do, so it only makes sense that we work together."

"Indeed." Cross rose. His pants fell perfect and unwrinkled. He took my hand in the time-honored Southern tradition of clasping a woman's fingers. I read the signal. Our audience was over.

"We'll be in touch," he said, and quickly shaking Jack's out-