

POLITICAL CAPITAL

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This is an excerpt from an uncorrected proof. For mature audiences only.

CHAPTER ONE – LYLA

My pride drags behind me as I make my way downstairs. My brother's partner, Gabe, is camped out on the living room couch, looking like a frat boy recovering from a rager. But in his case, he's recovering from twelve hours of sleep after a twelve-hour shift at the hospital turned into eighteen, thanks to some emergency or other. My brother, Bradley, isn't home, which is good, because I need Gabe's help, and I need it discreetly.

"You look terrible," he greets as I flop onto the couch next to him in a pair of old cotton shorts and an oversized sweatshirt. "Also, why are you awake? It's barely seven on a Saturday morning, and you dragged yourself home mere hours ago from whatever debauchery you were engaged in last night."

"I thought you were asleep when I got home."

"I was." He nods. "You woke me up with your fumbling up the stairs."

"You didn't leave any lights on," I point out. "I had no choice but to fumble up the stairs."

"I was somewhere around hour eight of being dead to the world. It was technically your brother who left you without lights. My dear, sweet love left around eleven last night to go to the hospital. Being on call is a bitch, especially when it backs into a twelve-hour shift. We won't see the prince until tomorrow morning."

"Pity," I mutter under my breath. I'm in no mood to deal with the questions Bradley would have for me right now, so twenty-four hours without him gives me time to get my shit together. Assuming Gabe comes through for me. "I need your help."

"Are we doing a makeover?" he asks, giving me that judgmental once-over he's so good at when he disapproves of my outfit. "If so, can it wait another couple of hours? I'm comfortable, and I'm watching Queer Eye."

I huff, but I stay the course. He's the quickest path from point A to point B, and I've been suffering since last night.

"I need you to take out that little pad of yours and write me a prescription," I tell him.

"Something to take care of a raging UTI. Don't ask questions."

He lights up like a Christmas tree, because I've given him something far better than Queer Eye.

I should have waited another hour and gone to urgent care, but I've been awake for the last hour with what feels like hundreds of tiny needles piercing my bladder, and what's the point of living with two doctors if I can't call in a favor once in a while?

"A raging UTI?" he asks. "Tell me more."

"I said don't ask questions," I remind him.

"I'm a doctor and you're asking for drugs, I legally have to ask questions." That's probably true, but the glee in his features makes me wonder how true. "What are your symptoms?"

"All of them," I state as I pull my knees to my chest and wiggle around in search of some relief. It doesn't work.

"I'll need you to be more specific." He mutes the TV and turns to me, tucking one leg underneath him like we're settling in for a girl chat. "Pelvic pressure?"

"Enough to convince me my bladder is trying to create a pearl in there."

"Peeing a lot?" I glare at him. "That's a yes. Does it burn?"

"I hate you," I reply as I lean into the sofa cushions.

"Yes, then. Is there blood?" To be asking such a serious question, he looks downright giddy. I grab a throw pillow and cover my face. "Another yes." He takes the pillow, tosses it aside, and puts his hand on my forehead. "A low fever, nothing serious. Shaking? Chills?"

"No." I shake my head.

“Flank pain?” Another shake. “Doesn’t sound like it’s made it to the kidneys, then. That’s good.” I didn’t think he could smile bigger, but he does. I half-heartedly kick him. He only laughs.

“How did this happen, my darling Lyla?”

“No questions,” I insist. “Just drugs.”

“You’ve been having sex,” he surmises. “The question is, with who?” He taps his chin thoughtfully. “You were sequestered away in a mansion for five days with several single men. You claim the charming Will Craven is just a friend, so we’ll say he’s out. I can’t see you boning the promiscuous Luke Cross.” I make a face. “That’s a no.” He furrows his brow deeper. I hope it causes wrinkles down the road. “That leaves handsome Theo and his broody cousin.” He eyes me. “Which Kensington was it? Handsome or broody?”

“Scarlett was there too,” I offer.

“Nice try, but you’re straight,” he dismisses with a flick of his wrist. “Which one was it?”

“I’ve been back from Kensington Manor since Monday—Tuesday,” I correct quickly, almost forgetting that Bradley and Gabe don’t know I stayed at my boyfriend’s—I still can’t believe Kage Kensington is my boyfriend—when we came back to the city after several days at Kensington Manor where we rode out a hurricane and Kage and I stopped dancing around one another and became an actual couple. “There are several days in there in which I could have slept with someone not named Theo or Kage.”

“Except you didn’t,” Gabe says. He should scrap being a doctor and become a detective.

“You’ve gone to work. You’ve gone to the gym—several times, suspicious behavior, that—and you’ve come home. You did mention going to that dive bar you frequent, but unless you had sex in the bathroom with a stranger, I doubt you’ve banged anyone since your return.” He reaches for his phone to check a text, which is the only reason he doesn’t see my cheeks flame red. I have had sex in that bathroom with a stranger, after all. I didn’t know Kage’s name that first night, when I let him

take me in the bathroom after once in his Bronco wasn't enough. "Your brother just saved a life. He's very excited." He tosses the phone aside and refocuses on me. "Anyways, tell me. Which Kensington heir had his dick in you?"

"Bradley saved a life?" I ask, trying to change the subject, if only for a moment, because I really need those drugs.

"He's a doctor. It's his literal job," Gabe dismisses. "Which one was it, Lyla? Was it tall or taller?"

"Do you really need this information in order to write a prescription?" I ask.

"Need it? No. Want it? Very much so." He narrows his eyes at me. "It was Theo, wasn't it?" I don't react. "Fine. It was Kage." Something in my features must give me away because he leaps to his feet and points at me. "You fucked Kage Kensington!"

"I . . ."

"Do not even try to deny it." He sits back down, vibrating with excitement. "You've been fucking the broody one!" He smacks my leg. "I knew it! He carried your bags to your room! Looked at you all longingly while you were hugging Bradley. Looked like a sad puppy when he told you goodbye. Oh my Dolly, this is fantastic!"

"Dolly?" I ask.

"Parton—the gays love her." He waves his hand again. "Stay on task, Lyla Adler. You're fucking Kage Kensington?"

"We're dating," I admit.

Gabe's jaw falls through the floor.

"Dating?" he exclaims. "You are dating Kage Kensington?"

"He calls himself my boyfriend and everything," I confirm.

"Since when?" Gabe demands.

“Since this weekend,” I say. “Seriously, the drugs . . .”

“In a minute.” He waves me off again, eyes on me. “Kage Kensington is your boyfriend? Are we sure?”

I sigh and tell him most of the sordid tale. I keep the one-night-stand-in-a-Bronco part out, however, and spin it so it sounds like we met through Kage hanging around Bradley and the self-defense classes at his gym he MacGyvered me into taking. We hit it off, we tried to resist for Bradley’s sake, but here we are, dating.

“And obviously fucking,” Gabe finishes. “He has a big dick, doesn’t he?”

“Gabe!” I gasp.

“Don’t look so scandalized,” he says. “Any man who looks and acts like he does has a big dick.” He pauses, considering. “Or they’re making up for a small dick. Which is it?”

“I’m satisfied,” I state.

He gives me a look. “You’re no fun.”

“Write me a prescription?” I counter. “Please? I’m begging.”

“I’ll call something in for you,” he agrees. “Is it safe to assume your brother doesn’t know you and one of his besties are fucking like rabbits?”

“I was getting to that,” I admit. “Will you keep it to yourself? For now? Kage wants to tell him—something about guy code.”

“I don’t keep secrets from Bradley,” Gage reminds me. “That’s not our deal.”

“Please?” I ask. “Kage has tried to get him alone to tell him a few times this week, but Bradley’s work schedule has been all over the place. If he doesn’t tell him soon, I will.”

“I’ll give you some time to tell him,” Gabe decides. “But do it very soon, or I will. I don’t want to keep it from him, but I do think this needs to come from you or the broody Kensington.” I pick up on an undertone I can’t place. I don’t press on it, though. He’s agreed to meds and keeping

Kage and I's relationship to himself. That's all I need for now. "I'll call in a script for your drugs. Please, pee after sex, Lyla. It's Fucking 101. And drink lots of water."

"He's a cuddler," I reveal. "It's hard to get out of bed."

"He cuddles?" Gabe questions. "Didn't see that coming. I'm learning so much today."

I laugh and leave him to call in my prescription and watch *Queer Eye*. I stop by the kitchen for coffee, then head upstairs to my bedroom in search of my phone, which I find on my nightstand, charging. I pick it up and find a text from Kage.

Kage: Good morning.

I smile. He's a good-morning texter, a good-night texter. The text also loosens a knot in my chest. He's usually quick to reply; he doesn't keep me waiting or wondering. I heard from him yesterday afternoon—he made sure I got home from work okay, the first text from him since lunchtime—but when I asked him if he wanted to meet me at The Black Dragon, he was vague and said he had plans with the guys. Except, his friend Will was at the bar with us. I casually mentioned those plans, and Will confirmed them. He said he wasn't in the mood to trek across the Brooklyn Bridge so he joined us instead. I let it go, but something felt off about the story. I type back a "good morning" and curl up in bed to suffer while I await word that my prescription is ready.

Kage: Come to the gym today? We'll train, maybe get lunch? And dinner?

He includes a winking emoji that makes me smile.

Me: Lunch and dinner, yes. Train, no.

Kage: What's wrong?

His reply is quick, and the fact that he knows something is wrong makes me warm inside.

Me: Nothing major. Just a UTI. Gabe called in meds for me.

Kage: What do you need? I'm coming over.

I roll my eyes. I'm learning he's protective, almost to a fault. It's as sexy as it is annoying.

Me: I'll pick up my meds when they're ready and lay low today. I'll be fine, just no sex for a few days.

Kage: Be there in an hour.

I try to reason with him, but he's unreasonable, so I inform Gabe he's coming over and make myself more presentable by brushing the tangles out of my hair and upgrading my pajamas to athleisure. I've just finished warning Gabe to behave when I hear the front door open.

"Has he ever knocked?" I ask Gabe.

"Not once," he replies. "I'd say he was raised in a barn, but you've been to his family manor." He lifts an eyebrow. "Is there a barn? They feel like the kind of people who would have a fancy barn."

I snort in amusement—I'll break the news that there isn't a barn at Kensington Manor later—and move to greet Kage. I find him in the entryway, and he takes my breath away. He's dressed for the gym in athletic shorts and a black long-sleeved Kensington Boxing shirt, but it's enough to make me think unholy thoughts.

"Hey," he greets, taking a step toward me, hand out to reach for me. But he remembers himself and lets it fall to his side.

"It's fine," comes Gabe's voice. I look over my shoulder. He's leaning against the arched doorway that leads into the living room with a shit-eating grin on his face. "I know all about you two. That was a shit lie you told when you texted about where to pick up her prescription, by the way. I'm headed to the gym and Lyla told me she couldn't train today because she's sick and waiting on a prescription. What pharmacy is it at? I'll pick it up for her on my way.' Even if I didn't know about you two, I'd be suspicious as hell after that."

"He knows about us?" Kage asks me.

“He forced it out of me in the name of getting drugs,” I tell him. “He’s agreed not to tell Bradley.”

“Yet,” Gabe supplies, this time with a note of warning. “You have a limited amount of time to do it yourself, though, and then I’m singing like Céline.”

“Dion?” I ask.

“You’re catching on, poppet.” He nods, then gestures at me as he eyes Kage. “Take care of this one.” He returns to the living room and Kage and I look at each other. He seems uncertain, and I’m nervous as to whether he’s okay with Gabe knowing about us.

“Hi,” I say, and he quirks that half smile of his.

“Hey.” He does reach for me this time and I’m all too happy to fold into him. He wraps his arm around me and kisses my hair. “How are you feeling?”

“Wondering how hard it would be to get a new bladder,” I reply.

He chuckles into my hair. “Can I interest you in an antibiotic and cranberry juice instead?”

“Sure can.”

I pull away and lead us into the kitchen. I intend to go for the glasses, but Kage catches my hand and steers me to the kitchen table.

“Sit,” he directs. “I’ve got it.”

“I’m not an invalid,” I tell him. “I’ve had UTIs before.”

“Yeah, well, this one is my fault.” I frown at that. “Now, sit. Let me take care of you.”

I sit, but I watch him, thinking. He needs to take care of people. I’m noticing it more now that I’m with him. Two days ago, he was lecturing his cousin Theo about getting enough sleep—rich coming from someone who doesn’t sleep much himself. He ushered us all out of the city and up to Kensington Manor for the hurricane, where he took on the role of caretaker. He stepped in as guardian to Will, his little sister, Andie, and Theo after their parents died in a plane crash. And he

certainly goes out of his way to take care of me. It's the little things he does, like buying food I like for his condo or wordlessly handing me a coffee or surprising me after work a couple of days ago to escort me home which involved a pit stop at his condo so we could have sex and, in hindsight, is probably when I got the UTI.

Now he's pouring a glass of cranberry juice and reading the label of my antibiotic.

"It says take one pill every eight hours," he reports. He shakes one out, then brings me the juice and pill. I mutter a thank you and he stands there, tapping through his phone while I take my meds. "I set a reminder. I'll call or text you when it's time for the next one."

"Do you want a detailed report on the conditions of my bladder every hour, on the hour, too?"

He looks at me. I lift an eyebrow.

"I'm being overbearing, aren't I?" he realizes.

I nod, glad he's figured it out on his own.

"I'm sorry." He pulls out a chair and winces as he sits.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Just sore," he answers dismissively. "I'm sorry. I know I can be overbearing. It's an instinct that kicks in whenever someone I care about is in pain or sick or whatever. I know you are more than capable of taking care of yourself. I just . . . want to take care of you."

The way he says it, like he's resigned to not taking care of me despite his need to do just that, makes me want to let him have this one. I strongly suspect his need to take care of others has something to do with losing his parents, just like I suspect my tendency to resist it is related to how my ex-boyfriend, Deacon, and my family tried to keep me in a bubble. We're going to have to learn to compromise.

"Could you top off my coffee?" I ask.

His smile has a certain shyness to it that says he knows what I'm doing—giving him the caretaker task he needs. He leans forward to press a kiss to my forehead before he stands and goes to the coffee maker. He ends up making a fresh pot, then starts rummaging through the bag he brought with him.

“Have you had breakfast?” he asks.

“Not yet.” I shake my head.

“I brought you a bagel,” he says, producing a small, brown paper bag. “Two flavors of cream cheese, too—plain and strawberry.” My smile grows. “There’s also junk food—candy, mostly.” He glances at me, then does a double take. “What?”

“You’re sweet,” I say.

He shakes his head. “I’m not sweet,” he says like he always does when I call out his thoughtfulness. He holds up the bagel before I can argue. “Want this toasted?”

I direct him to the toaster’s location and decide I want both cream cheeses—one on one half, one on the other. I watch him as he moves. He says he’s sore and it shows. There’s a stiffness to his movements that usually isn’t present. What I don’t know is why he’s so sore. He pours us each a fresh cup of coffee, then joins me at the table.

“No bagel for you?” I ask.

“I made an omelet before I left my condo this morning,” he answers. I wonder how long he’s been up—what he’s been doing. He answers before I can ask. “I wanted to get to the gym early—get some work done while it’s quiet.” He gives me a flirty look. “Had to make a detour, though.”

“Sorry to wreck your plans,” I quip.

“I told you, Lyla, you’re messing up everything.” He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “And I’m going to let you.”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or a bad thing,” I say.

He considers me, then gives me the soft smile he only uses with me.

“It’s a good thing.” He watches me take a big bite of my bagel with strawberry cream cheese.

“So . . . Gabe knows about us.”

“He does.” I nod. “I asked him for a prescription for a UTI, and he wouldn’t let it go until I confessed. He means what he says, though. He’s not going to tell Bradley right away, but he won’t wait long. They don’t keep secrets from one another.”

A shadow crosses Kage’s eyes, but he blinks, and it’s gone.

“I’m going to tell him soon,” he promises. “I’ve tried to get him into the gym all week. If I have to, I’ll come over and drop the bomb on him. I want to do it on neutral ground though—ideally where he can take a swing with protective gear.”

I still don’t love Kage’s plan to tell my brother we’re together while they’re sparring, but I know Bradley and I know Kage. The plan has merit.

He checks the time.

“Time to go?” I guess.

“I’m coaching in twenty minutes,” he confirms. We both stand, and he pulls me back into his arms. I thread my arms around his waist and lean into his solid chest. “Rest today.” He kisses my hair, and I don’t think anyone would believe me if I told them how affectionate this man is with me. Not when his reputation for being dominating, blunt, and demanding precedes him. “Stay with me tonight?”

I look up at him. “What do we tell Bradley about why I’m not home?”

“Oldest lie in the book.” He shrugs. “That you’re staying at Cecily’s?”

“We’re sneaking around like teenagers,” I accuse.

“We are,” he agrees. “I’m going to tell him, Lyla, I swear. I just . . . miss you.”

I quirk an eyebrow. “You’ve seen me every day this week.”

“For a few minutes at a time,” he says. “And almost exclusively at the gym.”

True. I have made it to the gym every day this week except yesterday. I worked out with his friend Scarlett, and I started self-defense lessons with him. I can’t say I’m a fan of either one, but I do like being pinned under Kage when he’s trying to make a point about something. He wraps a strand of hair around his finger, then lets it unravel. “I want to take you on a date. Rest today, then I’ll pick you up and take you home with me. We’ll get dressed up, go to a nice dinner, come back, and hang out on my couch before we go to bed.”

“We’re not having sex,” I remind him.

“Newsflash, Lyla, I want more than just your incredible body.” He leans in and kisses me. “I want you.”

“How about I meet you at the gym?” I propose, whether a little lightheaded from the meds, his words, or both, I’m not sure. “Make the lie more believable without you picking me up? Around five?”

“Perfect,” he agrees. He kisses me again—a sweet kiss, like I’m something precious. “Rest,” he says one more time. “I’ll check on you later.” He pulls away and reaches for the jacket he took off and draped over a kitchen chair. His shirt rides up when he puts it on.

“Kage!” I gasp and push up his shirt.

“I’m not opposed to you undressing me, but didn’t we just say no sex?” he asks. I’m not listening to him, though. I’m more concerned about the massive bruise blooming across his rib cage.

“What did you do?” I demand.

“Boxing.” He winces as my hand runs over it. It’s a substantial bruise and explains why he’s moving so slow. “You should see the other guy.” I’m unamused. “The other guy is Luke,” he continues. “He has a black eye.”

“You gave Luke a black eye?” I question.

“In a manner of speaking.” He tugs his shirt down. “Theo has a similar bruise on his hip.”

“His hip?” I repeat. “What the hell did the three of you do last night?”

“Boxing and drinks.”

I’m not sure I believe him, though. I don’t think a bruise on Theo’s hip came from boxing, for one thing. I’ve been reading up on the sport since Kage loves it so much. Hits below the belt aren’t legal.

“Sometimes, we’re dumb guys, Lyla. It happens.”

I purse my lips as he pockets his phone. Will said they were in Manhattan. The gym is in Brooklyn.

“Where did this boxing take place?” I ask.

“At the gym,” he answers easily. “Then we got drinks at a whiskey bar Luke knows of.”

“Will said he was with us at The Black Dragon last night because he didn’t feel like going to Manhattan to hang out with the three of you.” I watch him, searching for any tell that he’s lying.

“To be clear, the bruised ribs, hip, and black eye happened later, when we were fucking around at Theo’s place after we got drinks,” he says without missing a beat. “Luke started it by insisting he was the superior boxer. We got a little carried away—made a mess of both Theo’s place and ourselves—then went down the block to have a few more drinks. I switched to water, but Theo and Luke are a little worse for the wear this morning.”

I press my lips together as I debate whether I believe him.

“Why all the questions?”

“I know you,” I remind him. “Horsing around and going out drinking isn’t your usual M.O.”

“Met you at a bar, didn’t I?” he reminds me. “Like I said, we’re just dumb guys on occasion, no matter how buttoned up we are most of the time.”

I don’t think I believe him, but I also don’t have any evidence to counter his story. I file it away for now with the intention of picking his story apart later.

“As much as I’d like to go upstairs and lounge around in bed with you, I really do need to get to the gym.”

I walk with him to the door where I get another kiss—this one a little more searing. I’m unsurprised to find Gabe waiting in the hall behind me when I close the door.

“Talk about one hell of an upgrade,” Gabe says. “From dainty Deacon to that? I’m impressed, poppet. Just remember, pee after sex. I don’t want to make it a habit of writing you prescriptions for UTI meds.”

“Is poppet my new nickname?” I ask.

“Perhaps. I think I like it.”

“I recommend going back to the drawing board.”

“Poppet it is,” he determines, making me chuckle. “Join me in the living room? You owe me some girl talk on how, exactly, all of that”—he motions at the door to indicate Kage—“came to be.”

I spend the rest of the morning on the couch with Gabe, then meet my friends Cecily, Sam, and Ollie for a late lunch.

“No Kensington today?” Ollie asks, once we’ve placed an order.

“I saw him this morning,” I say, and Sam and Ollie both wolf whistle.

Cecily, who knows about my UTI and Kage’s morning visit, rolls her eyes.

“Nothing like that.” I shake my head. “He brought over breakfast; I’ll see him later.” I look at Cecily. “I’m going to tell Bradley I’m staying at your place. It shouldn’t be an issue—he’s on night shift—but in case . . .”

“I’ve got you covered,” she confirms, like the good friend she is. “Will Gabe go along with the lie?”

“For now,” I answer. “Kage has been trying to get Bradley alone all week, but his schedule has been insane. He’s hardly ever home.”

“Can I be present when Bradley finds out?” Ollie asks, always the friend up for a good time. “I don’t really know him, but I feel like he’s going to go ballistic and I kind of want to watch.”

“Why do you think he’s going to go ballistic?” Sam asks. “Bradley seems like a reasonable guy.”

I snort at that. Bradley Adler is the most reasonable guy I know . . . until it involves one of his sisters.

“Come on, Sam. Best friend’s little sister? They make movies out of that. They write books about it. The brother always gets pissed.”

“Ollie isn’t wrong,” I say. “Bradley is overprotective. He’s going to be pissed at Kage.” Ollie opens his mouth. “No, you can’t watch,” I cut him off.

“Lame,” Ollie mutters.

“Speaking of your family,” Sam says after our waitress brings our drinks. “Lyla, was your mom in town recently?”

“I have no idea.” I shake my head. “She could have been, but we’re not on speaking terms right now.” I look at him. “Why would you think she was in town?”

“There was a big, black, official-looking SUV lurking around the neighborhood earlier this week. I saw it a few times and glimpsed a woman that looked like Senator Adler once.”

My internal antenna goes up. My mother is basically synonymous with big, black official-looking SUVs in my mind. She's been driven around D.C. in one most of my life. Even her personal vehicle is a black SUV.

"If she was here, it wasn't to see Bradley and I," I tell him.

I have mixed feelings about the fact that my mom and I aren't on speaking terms. I don't agree with a lot of her choices. My political beliefs tend to be vastly different than hers, and she certainly hasn't been the best mother to me. Still, she's my mom and with my dad gone, I miss her. Or maybe it's the idea of a mom that I miss.

"Why are you two on the outs anyway?" Ollie asks, never one to shy away from asking potentially inappropriate questions.

"Things that had been brewing for years finally boiled over," I say, vague on purpose. There's no need to get into my past or what I expect my mother might be involved in. "Sam, how's that paper going?" I purposefully change the subject to Sam's master's program in sustainability, and he's happy to take up the reins. I let the others carry the conversation while my thoughts travel down a road of "I'm missing something."

I've felt like this for a while, but I've been certain of it since Kage produced the actual autopsy and accident reports related to my father's death a few days ago. That information was buried for a reason, one I'm certain is linked to the stolen classified papers I found hidden in his desk while I was cleaning out his office after he died. I can't stop wondering how Kage got his hands on them.

His "I have resources I'm not afraid to use" line is ominous. So is his desire to train me in self-defense. He's had me doing drills with him almost every day this week, lifting weights with Scarlett, and made me promise him I'll be mindful of my surroundings. It's not suffocating, exactly,

because he's not trying to hold me back, but there is something more to his insistence that I know how to protect myself. There's a reason for why he's so protective.

I have no proof that the vehicle Sam saw was my mother's, yet I know it was. Just like I know Kage isn't telling me the truth about what he did last night. There's also the fact that I was nearly kidnapped a few weeks ago, and the fact the Bradley has a security system so intense I'm surprised there's not a TSA-style checkpoint to enter the brownstone.

Something is off.

And I'm going to figure out what it is.