

CHAPTER ONE

Paternity.

The word reverberated inside Will Connelly's head, pummeling his temples until they began to throb. He clenched his jaw firmly in place, at the same time willing his knuckles to release their death grip on the leather chair. It was an effort to appear unfazed despite the fact the supposed purpose of the meeting had taken a one-hundred-eighty degree turn. If ever there was a time for Will to put on his game face, this was it.

The United States senator sitting across the conference table was sadly mistaken if he thought he was a match for Will's trademark inscrutable stare. There was a reason he was known as William the Conqueror throughout the NFL: Will Connelly tore through offenses relentlessly, all the while wearing a stoic expression that caused many an opponent to declare the Pro-Bowl linebacker had ice water running through his veins.

The men seated on either side of him, however, weren't as practiced at remaining cool. Both shifted uneasily in their chairs.

"Come again?" Roscoe Mathis, Will's agent, wasn't one to sit patiently while someone railroaded his client.

The senator's smug grin didn't waver, his gaze fixed on Will. "I said that Mr. Connelly might want to rethink his position as the national spokesman against deadbeat dads. He's been named the father in a rather... extraordinary paternity request."

"Now just wait one minute, senator," said Hank Osbourne, the General Manager for the Baltimore Blaze and Will's other companion. Often referred to as the Wizard of Oz around the league because of his ability to quickly turn a team in to a contender, Hank's demeanor was normally as cool as Will's. But his tone implied his temper was on a short leash today. "You

march us up to Capitol Hill, supposedly to ask questions about an alleged bounty scheme your committee is wasting tax payer dollars investigating and then you accuse my player with some cockamamie paternity suit? What kind of game are you playing here?"

The senator lunged forward in his seat. "Correction, Mr. Osbourne. I didn't invite you or Mr. Mathis here for this meeting. This business involves a personal matter between him," he shot a finger at Will, "and me."

"Your summons was rather vague," Roscoe said. "We assumed it involved this witch hunt into Coach Zevalos' career."

Will's body tensed at the mention of Paul Zevalos, his former coach at Yale. After college, the coach took a defensive coordinator position in the NFL, bringing Will along as an undrafted rookie. Without Zevalos championing him, Will might never have seen a professional gridiron, much less become one of the league's most elite players. And now, the world expected him to turn on his former coach.

Like hell he would.

Senator Stephen Marchione sank back into his padded, leather chair. Somewhere near forty-years-old, the well respected politician likely didn't have a daughter old enough to interest Will. And married women were off limits in his book. Will relaxed slightly, confident that a mistake had been made. Extremely careful in his personal life and monogamous to the women he dated, he took precautions to prevent children. He had to. No child should be subjected to the childhood he'd endured.

A ripple of unease crawled up his spine, however, as he remembered a sensual encounter the night of his best friend's wedding. But that had been nearly a year ago. If the woman had conceived a child, she'd have made her claim long before today. Besides, the woman was Italian

or French; the designer of the bride's wedding gown. It was unlikely she and the senator would cross paths. Reassured, he pretended aloofness by adjusting the cuff of his suit jacket as he waited for Marchione to continue.

The senator pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "You're right. Congress shouldn't be wasting time and money investigating professional sports. That's for the leagues to police. But, I'm in the minority and this is politics. Connelly, you don't want to testify against your old coach and I can impede the committee from forcing you to do so. For the time being. In return, I need you to do something for me." He eyed the men seated beside Will. "Something I think both of us would like to keep private."

For the first time since entering the ornate conference room Will spoke. "They stay." He wasn't sure what the senator was up to, but he wanted his agent and his boss as witnesses in case something went awry.

"Suit yourself." Marchione pulled a file folder out from the portfolio in front of him.

"Hold on." Roscoe pointed to a white-haired gentleman in a dark suit seated behind the senator. He was the only person to accompany Marchione to the meeting. "We'd like some assurances from your staff that whatever this is about, it'll remain private."

"That's Mr. Clem," the senator said. "He represents the child."

The room was silent for a moment while the men processed that statement. Will's temple throbbed harder as he realized another kid had been born a bastard. *Just like him.*

The senator's face was chagrined as he slid a photo across the table. Will's breath hitched as he caught sight of the alluring woman in the picture. Laughing, bright amber eyes dancing, she stood among several brides who towered over her curvy, petite frame.

Apparently, the senator did know the bridal gown designer.

Will silently contemplated the photo as his pulse ratcheted up several notches.

“I take it you recognize my little sister.” The senator’s voice sounded almost apologetic. “She designs under her mother’s maiden name, J. Valencia. But her real name is Julianne Marchione.”

He could feel the eyes of all the men in the room on him. Will was embarrassed to admit he and his mystery lover hadn’t exchanged names. Hell, they’d barely spoken at all. His palms began to sweat as he pondered the ramifications of his one and only one-night stand. In the world of professional sports, men and women hooked up all the time, no strings attached. But not Will. He’d born the shame of being the consequence of a one-night stand all his life. “Your sister didn’t offer her name, Senator,” he bit out. “In fact, she gave the impression she spoke little English.”

Marchione winced as he leaned back against his chair. “Julianne is multi-lingual. But since she’s as American as I am, she’s perfectly fluent in English.” He sighed. “She has a bit of a flare for the dramatic sometimes.”

Will pushed back from the table and stalked to the picture window behind him, turning his back to the men in the room as he wrestled with his composure. The spring sunshine illuminated the Capitol against a bright blue sky, but he didn’t notice the postcard picture in front of him. His brain was scrambling to make sense of the meeting.

“Does that flare for the dramatic include seducing a multi-million dollar athlete to be her Baby Daddy?” Roscoe earned his enormous salary with that one question.

“My sister is a lot of things, but she is not promiscuous!”

Roscoe gave a snort. “Forgive me Senator, but in this business, women aren’t always what they seem. Not even little sisters.”

Will leaned his forehead against the warm glass of the window while Roscoe and the senator argued behind him. He dared not join in because in his heart, he wanted to believe the woman—*Julianne*—hadn't been a conniving seductress. Everything about that night lingered in his memory as a mystical, erotic fantasy. One he relived often in his thoughts, each time wondering if the encounter had been real or imagined.

He didn't have to wonder anymore.

The wedding reception had been over for several hours. A summer storm pummeled the coastline of Sea Island, casting the resort into an eerie darkness despite the fact it was still early evening. Will remembered an overwhelming feeling of restlessness. Being back among his childhood friends always made him that way. Despite their friendship and the acceptance of their families, Will always felt like an outsider. His best friend, Chase, had married his long-time sweetheart that morning. Will's other friend, Gavin, was off somewhere with his fiancé. And, once again, Will was alone.

He'd left his room to fill his ice bucket, when he saw her wandering the hall, still dressed in the knockout red dress that had every man at the wedding doing a double take. She'd tried to remain unobtrusive throughout the event, but she was hard not to notice with her curves and that luscious mouth. She stopped a few doors from him, fumbling with her key card. Her door wouldn't open and she mumbled something in Italian. Will wondered if she'd been drinking more than just the Club Soda he'd heard her order all day.

"Here, let me try." He'd been raised in the South, after all.

Startled, she nearly dropped the key card. Will caught her hand and a jolt of electricity shot up his arm. At the time, he attributed it to the storm churning over head. He tried the card unsuccessfully.

“You must have put it too close to your cell phone in your purse.” He carefully handed the card back to her. “These things demagnetize easily. They can fix it at the front desk.”

A savage bolt of lightning suddenly lit up the floor length window behind Will, illuminating her face. She wasn't drunk, she was terrified.

“Hey.” He gently took her elbow. “Why don't I walk with you downstairs to get this fixed?”

She said something that was a jumble of English and Italian, but he had no trouble picking up the gist: she hated storms. Just as they turned toward the elevator, another crack of lightning hit, knocking out the power and the hallway was enveloped in blackness. She let out a little squeak and dug her fingernails into Will's arm.

“Change of plans.” He maneuvered her back toward to his room, where the door was propped open by the security lock. The blue glare from his laptop screen provided enough light to guide her over to the king-sized bed. As he eased her down, her eyes locked onto the storm outside the window. Lightning streaked across the dark sky. Will crouched in front of her, gently laying a hand against her cheek. “Shhh,” he tried to reassure her. “It's gonna be okay.”

Her stare darted between him and the storm raging on the beach, fear still paralyzing her face as she fingered a cross around her neck. There was no hope for it. Will lay down on the bed and gathered her in his arms, gently stroking her back.

At this point, things got hazy.

He wasn't sure who kissed who first, but when their lips met, something ignited within them both. She tasted of coffee and smelled of tropical flowers and he couldn't seem to get enough of her. Their clothes melted away giving Will's hands and lips access to warm, soft skin.

When he entered her that first time, she welcomed him, wrapping her legs around his hips and bringing him to near perfect ecstasy.

The thunder and lightning were winding down the second time they made love, her fingers and mouth torturing his body before he found his release. The third time he took her, the storm had dissipated outside, but continued to rage on between them as the electricity he'd felt in the hallway reached a fevered pitch. Will had never felt such an intense connection with any other woman.

Until she called out another man's name while climaxing. And then the condom broke.

When he woke the next morning, she was gone; the battered beach the only evidence of the previous night's storm. Will's psyche was as ravaged as the shoreline. His mystery lover had checked out of the hotel and disappeared without a word. As it turned out, she might have taken a lot more from him than a little piece of his ego.

Will took a deep breath and grabbed at his tie to loosen the stranglehold it had around his neck. He needed air. Roscoe and Hank were standing when Will turned to join them.

"You can't leave!" Mr. Clem threw his body in front of the double doors. "That boy needs you!"

Will felt his chest constrict. *A son. I might have a son.*

"Mr. Clem," Roscoe voice sounded miles away as the world spun around Will. "We're not acknowledging anything without a paternity test."

"We don't have time for that!" Mr. Clem slammed his fist against the door as his face turned scarlet.

The senator slapped both hands on the table in frustration. “She doesn’t want you to acknowledge the baby! She doesn’t want a red cent from you. You never even have to see him.”

Rage swarmed through Will as he rocked back on his heels. What the hell was going on? Who was this woman? If the boy was his, there was no way Will wasn’t going to acknowledge him! Much less be a part of his life. A very big part.

Hank stepped in front of the senator getting right in his face. “I’m going to ask you this one more time, Senator. What kind of game are you playing?”

“It’s not a game. My sister never wanted Will to know about him. Her plan was to raise him herself. In Italy. But things have changed. Julianne needs your help.” The senator’s voice sounded like a plea.

Will barely heard Mr. Clem over the roaring in his ears. “She doesn’t want your money!” The man practically wailed. “She wants your blood!”