

Chapter 1

“You’re going to be the first female mayor of Los Angeles!”

Thunderous applause exploded inside the Biltmore’s Colonnade room.

“You forgot the first black female mayor,” a woman bellowed above the noise.

Grace Monroe smiled into the crowd of rainbow faces. She motioned with her hands to quiet her supporters. “Thank you, but my focus is not on the mayor’s office. I want to serve the people of the eighteenth district. You, who with your confidence and countless dedicated hours have elected me today as your Councilwoman.”

A roar reverberated through the room. Grace glanced over her shoulder and, behind her, Conner beamed. Next to him stood their daughters, whose smiles matched the ones in the crowd. Jayde, her fifteen-year-old, raised her thumb in the air.

Grace turned toward her constituents as the cheers faded. Her smile disappeared. She scanned the quieting crowd for unfamiliar eyes. Someone was watching her – she could feel it. But then, she shook her head to dislodge those thoughts. Out of more than two hundred people in the room, she knew less than fifty.

She cleared her throat before she spoke, “I will fulfill my campaign promises – the most important being that our children receive the education they deserve. We’re going to begin with morals and ethics.” Minutes passed before she was able to continue through the applause. “We will address the questions that are important to you. We will provide solutions to the challenges of drugs and teenage pregnancy.” Another eruption of applause. “I thank you for your commitment, but remember, this is the beginning. We must work hard to make the eighteenth district of Los Angeles a model community, an example for the nation.” She paused for just a moment. “God bless you.”

Silver globes – reminiscent of the disco decade – glittered from the high ceilings as strobes swept rainbow meteors across the room. Bass tones blasted, and then Jeffrey Osborne’s baritone serenaded the crowd turning Grace’s feelings into song.

We’re going all the way.

Grace swayed to the music as her family joined her at the podium. Conner entwined his fingers in his wife’s and raised her hand in the air in victory. “I am so proud of you. Congratulations, Councilwoman.” His lips grazed her ear.

She shined with pride as he kissed her cheek and the crowd cheered their approval. She could feel her daughters on her other side.

Amber giggled. “Mommy, the music is so loud.”

Grace laughed, stooped and hugged her seven-year-old. Then she pulled Jayde into her arms.

“Congratulations, Mom,” Jayde grinned.

Grace smiled, relieved that her teenager was in the mood for the celebration.

“Well done, dear.” Grace turned at the sound of her mother’s voice. She had squeezed between her grandchildren to stand at her daughter’s side. Grace hugged her mother.

Lily patted her daughter’s back as they embraced. “I’m proud of you.” As Grace pulled away, her mother whispered, “The only thing missing is your sister...” Grace shrugged from her mother’s arms, her smile gone.

Before a tick clicked on the clock, Conner stepped between the two women and put his arm around his wife. “The cameras, honey,” he said through lips that hardly moved. He motioned toward the crowd with his dimpled chin.

Grace returned to center stage, her practiced smile in place. She waved, then took Conner's hand and moved toward the curtains behind them. Lily and the girls followed. Before she was two steps backstage, Zoë ran toward her with headphones covering her braids and a clipboard in her hand.

"Grace, Channel Two wants the first interview. We should give it to them because their polls supported us. And they were the fairest in reviewing our platform." She took one glance at the clip board, then added, "Next, we'll go to Channel..."

Grace held up her hand. "Zoë, take a breath."

Zoë stared speechless for a moment, then smiled. "Have I congratulated you?" She squinted, as if trying to remember.

"No, you haven't." Grace hugged her campaign manager, now chief-of-staff. "And I haven't thanked you." She squeezed Zoë's hand. "Tell Channel Two that I'll be right there." Zoë nodded and rushed away. Grace shook her head, knowing that in five minutes, she'd be back with three more interviews arranged.

"Girl, girl, girl!" Devry clapped and Grace laughed at her sister-in-law. "You did it."

Grace hugged Devry, but stepped back when she felt the gentle swell of her sister-in-law's belly between them. "Don't want to hurt the baby."

Devry laughed. "Girl, Baby Monroe is having a blast. Just like the rest of us." She took Grace's hand. "I'm so proud of you."

"It's still unbelievable," Grace said, then her eyes wandered over Devry's shoulder into the face of Conner – only the man didn't have her husband's eyes. Chandler's were a tint lighter than Conner's dark brown ones. As she hugged her

brother-in-law, she thought for the thousandth time that the doctors had been mistaken – they couldn't be fraternal twins.

The family's circle was infiltrated by others – from campaign workers to church members - all offering their congratulations. As she stood in the crowd's midst, Grace stepped away in her mind. With the music blaring at levels that would make an audiologist cringe, Grace felt like she was in the middle of a Time's Square New Year's celebration. She smiled. It was a new year – a new beginning for a community that she loved and another new start for her. God just continued giving her new blessings.

Grace joined the crowd again, and continued hugging and kissing her well-wishers until her cheeks ached from the smile she'd worn since all three networks declared her the victor.

“Honey, we should get out there,” Conner said. “There're a lot of people to meet and greet.”

She nodded and turned to Jayde and Amber. “Give me a hug, ladies. Are you sure you have everything?”

Amber nodded and embraced her mother. “Yes, Mommy.”

When Grace turned to Jayde, her oldest daughter stood with her arms crossed. “I don't know why I have to go to Nana's. There are other kids here,” she said, peeking through the stage's curtains.

Grace stroked Jayde's cheek. “You have school tomorrow and that's all that counts.” She kissed her, then stepped back as Conner kissed their daughters goodbye. “Thanks, Mom.” Grace turned to her mother.

“There's nothing I like more than having my grandbabies with me.”

Conner motioned to Frank Austin, Grace's driver, that Lily and the girls were ready. He waited until they were out of view, then, with pandemonium still surrounding them, pulled Grace into his arms. "Well, Miss Councilwoman," he began, and kissed her nose. "It's time for my personal congratulations." He paused, becoming serious. "I wish we could leave now for our own celebration."

Her eyes glittered. She pulled away and faked a yawn. "It's been a long day." She looked at her watch. "Let's sneak out in five minutes."

"What would Channel Two say?" He laughed. "But, the quicker we make our appearance, the quicker we'll be able to escape." He put his arm around her waist. "Come on, Councilwoman Monroe, the people want you." He took her hand. "Just remember that your husband wants you more."

As Zoë led them into the waiting crowd, neither noticed the woman whose eyes watched them and whose steps matched theirs as she moved along the room's perimeter.