



Power Term

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Category: Romance

Description: Everything we've fought for grinds to a halt with the attack—our future happy-ever-after now a lost hope as I'm abducted from the wreckage.

There's a traitor in our midst who's working alongside my long-term enemy, eager to destroy it all. He wants me to give up, to hand the life I've fought tooth and nail to achieve over to him. If I do, the pain will end, but others will suffer.

How much can I take before Trey saves me from the terrible fate they've promised if I don't comply?

This is it, the moment where I have to make a choice. Me or the millions who will suffer under the sociopath's hand if I give him what he wants.

I might have been raised poor trailer trash, but that's not who I am now. My name's Randi Sawyer, and I'm the president of the United States. I will not bend. I will not break.

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Prologue

Randi

A sharp, high-pitched screeching in my ears threatens to rupture my eardrums and liquefy my brain. Combine that with the pounding in my skull that's nearly as brutal as the ringing, and my thoughts scatter as I try to decipher what the hell is going on and why I can't move.

Something happened to me.

What happened to me?

Fucking focus, Randi. Get your shit together.

But I can't. Nothing makes sense through the all-consuming pain keeping me from processing what the hell is going on. A memory flashes through my mind like lightning, there and gone quickly but enough for me to remember one thing.

A car wreck. I was in a car wreck, and now... now I can't move.

Panic races through my veins, skyrocketing my pulse to race faster than humanly possible as heat swells beneath my skin. Anxiety festers, generating fears of paralysis and dangling severed limbs to be the only logical reason for my immobility. Willing all my focus to one simple move, I slowly lift my chin from where it rests along my collarbone.

The simple movement rips a gasp from me as agonizing pain blazes down my neck to my lower spine, like hundreds of tiny knives stabbing those sensitive nerves repeatedly. Every movement is worse than the last, but a nagging sense of foreboding urges me to keep going.

Finally my head meets the back of the seat. I gasp a full breath as hot tears drip down my cheeks. Teeth clamped hard, I swallow a cry of agony and seal my lips to keep from calling out. Chest heaving from the exertion of that simple movement, I take a moment to let the pain ease to a manageable level.

The ringing in my ears and throbbing in my head continue, but it's a fraction less with the new position. I could easily give up in this moment, stop refusing the intense need to drift asleep. Abandon this mad idea of consciousness. But I won't.

I don't know how, but I know one thing is for certain.

I'm in danger, and I need to stay awake to fight.

Digging my teeth into my lower lip, I fight my lids to open. Slow at first, my lashes flutter as I blink past the haze clouding my vision. A sticky glaze makes each slow blink more difficult than usual to peel my lids apart once again.

As my vision sharpens, I observe my surroundings without moving. The back of a black leather seat is unmistakable directly in front of me, and just beyond that is a shattered, splintered windshield with something sticking through it from the outside.

Yells and gunshots sound in the distance while long shadows flutter outside the smashed tinted window on my right. Sucking in a breath for courage to take stock of the damage to my lower half, I slide my gaze lower. Yellowed light filters through the fissures of the town car's various broken windows, offering enough illumination from the streetlamps above to highlight the awkward angle of my legs and torso. But

it's what I don't see that causes a swift wash of relief. No dismembered legs or arms, no gaping holes in my torso, no rushing blood. Besides my throbbing head, which probably caused the spiderweb-looking crack in the window, I'm unharmed.

The ringing in my ear seems to swell, cutting off what minimal outside noise I could hear before. Pressure builds in my skull, causing my stomach to roll with nausea. Surrendering to the demanding fight to close my eyes, I rest my lids, dousing myself in darkness once again.

Focus, Randi. I'm a sitting duck wherever we are. I have to move, have to fight to find Trey.

A renewed sense of urgency blooms at the thought of Trey. I have to get to him, or get somewhere safe so he can find me.

But to do that, I have to move.

Fuck, this is going to hurt.

A pitiful whimper breezes past my dry lips as my fingers shift along the seat. The smooth baby-soft leather brushes beneath the tips, the texture a complete contrast to everything else in this moment.

With every move, pain infiltrates each cell and nerve, but I push through the agony. The leather sticks to my slick palm as I seal it to the seat and slowly rotate my upper body to align with my lower half. I sink my teeth into my upper lip to stifle the cry of pain that wants to escape.

I slowly peel my skin away from the leather, each square inch sticking from blood or sweat—I'm too chicken to glance down and find out which. The muscles of my right arm burn in protest as I reach out to grope along the door, fingers desperate in their

search for the handle. The tremble in my arm turns into a quake before my muscles give out, slapping my hand back to the seat.

A low groan fills the air.

A groan that was not my own.

Forcing my eyes back open, I scan the inside of the town car once more, slower this time to pick up any movements. Nothing. I didn't imagine that sound, did I? Or maybe it was my own and the hit on my head has caused temporary hallucinations.

My nostrils flare as I inhale deeply; the heated air burns down my windpipe and scrapes through my raw lungs. I release it slowly through pursed lips as I rotate to face the window. Bones creak, tendons along my neck and upper back tightening and stinging with the movement. Tears well, making the cracked window swim before I can blink them away.

All of a sudden, the entire car shifts. I slide to the left with the movement, almost as if someone's rocking the wreckage.

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Movement in the front snaps my attention from the window. The previously unconscious agent in the passenger seat rolls his head along the headrest with a guttural curse. Over and over the mangled car rocks, shifting me one direction and then the other. My eyes widen, a squeak of surprise lodged in my throat when his door wrenches open with a squeal of metal against metal. I blink past the sudden flood of light that only lasts a moment before a tall shadow shifts into the rays, offering a momentary reprieve from the blinding light on my overly sensitive eyes.

The relief is short-lived.

A long gun barrel points into the front seat. Brightness flares, and a splatter of warm liquid covering my face and neck is the only indication a shot was fired. In slow motion, the once barely alive agent slumps forward, his body position matching the one behind the steering wheel digging into his chest.

A scream works its way up my throat, and my lips part, readying to release a plea for help, only nothing happens. I work my jaw, move my lips, but still my cries and screams stay locked in my tight throat. Even my whimper is silent as I mentally rail on myself for allowing the shock to freeze my basic functions and inhibit me from calling out.

The shadow dousing the front seat and dead agent moves, allowing light to pour back into the car. Half a second later, the strange rocking movement from earlier shakes the car again, this time more pronounced.

Metal crunches and squeals as the door opens an inch and then another before it swings all the way out with a resistant groan. I blink past the assaulting overhead

light. The snug seat belt digging into my shoulder and chest keeps me in place even as I struggle to shift away from the swallowing shadow that engulfs the back seat.

A man stands between the seat and hanging mangled door. With his face shadowed, I take in what I can see.

No tie or jacket. A simple oversized black T-shirt covers his chest and slightly protruding belly.

Realization hits me like a physical slap to the face. I attempt to shift away from the open door and the man blocking the only exit who is clearly not one of my agents.

I blink, unable to move with the seat belt still tight against my chest as he leans into the back seat. The leather dips beneath his weight beside my shoulder as he uses the seat as leverage to bend around me. A sharp yank tightens the seat belt, hampering my breathing only for it to release almost immediately, the restricting hold now gone from my hips and upper body. When his hands slip under my legs and around my back, I have no option but to allow him to move me like a limp doll. It takes little effort for the man to slide me along the seat toward the open door and then haul me out into the open early morning air.

I try. I really fucking try to move, to fight his hold, but nothing will work. Maybe it's from shock, or who knows, maybe my spinal cord is now severed, but whatever the cause, I can't fucking move at all, leaving me fully exposed and vulnerable. The world spins, what once was up now down and back again. His hard shoulder slams into my gut, shoving bile and air up my throat. I bob up and down as he jogs along the black asphalt and leaps to the sidewalk.

Regaining some mobility, I press both hands to his waist, my arm muscles trembling with the exertion, to lift my head.

Even with the constant movement, there's no mistaking the utter destruction that was once my security convoy. My heart stutters. For several seconds, even the need to breathe vanishes as I visually piece the mangled mess together. The lead SUV is a crumpled pile of metal, the front end gone, almost like it was blown off by a blast of some kind. It's back end isn't much better, securely lodged into the windshield of what must have been my town car. The two other SUVs have minimal damage, but all the doors are swung open, a few limp-suited bodies slumped half in, half out.

An ambush. We were ambushed. This was a smash and grab—for me.

With the pressure digging into my stomach and the gore surrounding me, mixed with the overload of fear pulsing through me, I can't stop my stomach from clenching, my abs flexing and sending anything I've eaten in the last few hours up and out. My arms give out, dislodging the needed support to keep my head up, as liquid splatters to the sidewalk. Strings of saliva, bile, and probably blood drip from my trembling lower lip as I'm carried farther from the wreckage.

Surprised shouts break through the ringing in my ears. Pops of rapid gunfire sound close—too close.

The man abducting me slows as another set of shoes enters my line of sight along the dark asphalt. Muffled words are exchanged between the two. The chest of the man who holds me vibrates against the front of my thighs where they're clamped tight with an arm around them, securing me to his body.

Then we're running again, faster this time, as if someone is now chasing us. Hope blooms in my numb chest at the thought.

Someone is coming... for me.

Trash and debris litter the grimy-looking ground as he dashes through one alley

before darting toward another in a random pattern. Every step causes excruciating pain to blast down my curved spine. Every attempt to support myself, to help ease the jarring movements, is unsuccessful due to my weak arms and his quick pace.

The thought-scattering confusion that immediately followed the attack has lifted enough for one truth to solidify: I have to fight back, or I'm as good as dead.

Gathering what little strength I have—and a hell of a lot of courage—I wait for my moment. It only takes a few seconds for my opportunity. We take a tight right around a brick building, putting me close enough to grab the corner if I reached out.

This is going to hurt.

Without a second thought to the pain or what the hell I'll do next, I reach for the building. I cry out as the rough edges of the brick scrape down the length of my forearm. Curling my fingers, I grapple to hold on to the building's edge. The man carrying me loses his grip with my sudden jerk of a stop against his forward momentum.

I free-fall for a second, releasing my grip on the building and leaving bits of my skin, blood, and nails imbedded into the shallow rough grooves. The asphalt slams into my knees, bits of rock slicing through my bare skin and embedding themselves, adding to my laundry list of injuries.

A low curse sounds behind me, but it's the shouting from the direction we came that I focus on. Muscles quivering, knees and palms bleeding, I push to all fours to crawl toward those searching for me.

Hopefulness burns in my chest as my shaking arms support my weight and I make a single forward movement. Then a handful of my hair is gripped tight behind me. Knowing what's coming, I dig my nails into the sticky asphalt, desperate to hold my

ground. A screech rips from my lungs as I'm yanked backward, my scalp burning where several strands have ripped free. Once again my own body is manipulated against my will as I'm thrown over someone's shoulder.

Whoever this is doesn't waste any time racing away from my would-be saviors.

With my head dangling, my forehead sliding along a sweat-damp T-shirt, my tears of frustration and desperation leak from my eyes, slipping through my dark eyebrows and gliding along my forehead to disappear into my hairline.

The shouts grow distant before vanishing altogether as we slip through a rusted metal door into an abandoned concrete structure. The man's boots echo around us, spraying a few droplets of water along my dangling arms and hands as he tromps uncaring through the various puddles of rainwater. At least I hope it's rainwater and not rat pee.

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I eye the puddle we've just passed through. It would have to be a big rat to make that size puddle.

Another door opens and closes behind us. The structure is more of a cement maze than a parking garage. Fresh air breezes over my damp cheeks for only a moment before we slip into another building.

At the third or fourth building, the man's steps slow, as do the other set that's been keeping pace since we ran from the wreckage.

"Fucking finally," the man holding me grumbles as his long strides take us across the dusty floor.

"Toss her in," another voice says from somewhere behind me.

Before I can register his words, the one who's been hauling me around DC like a sack of potatoes grips my waist and lifts me off his shoulder. Dangling me in midair, his grip loosens before releasing completely. A silent cry burns in my raw throat as I plummet to the ground. My ass hits first, sending a shooting burst of pain along my tailbone up my lower spine as it takes the brunt of the fall, but the side of my head still collides with the ground with a... hollow thud?

Not the ground.

I furiously flick my gaze around, absorbing what I can of my surroundings.

No, not the ground. Worse.

A fucking trunk. I'm in the trunk of a car to be taken only the unicorn gods know where. I part my lips, inhaling deeply and readying to scream for help while praying this time my voice actually cooperates, only for a hot, sweaty palm to slap over my nose and mouth, stifling my attempt to call out.

I thrash my head left and right to dislodge the meaty hand only for it to tighten. A ski mask-covered face looms over my own. The malice in the beady eyes zeroed in on me kicks my unconscious fight-or-flight drive awake. With desperation and terror as my fuel, I kick against the carpeted trunk, my bare feet sliding along the coarse material, trying to gain traction. Skin rips beneath my nails as I claw at the arm holding me down.

Another shadow appears, the person looming just outside my field of vision. One of the two mutters something about holding me still. A prick, almost like a gnat bite, pierces the delicate skin of my upper neck.

I don't even have time to register what happened before my muscles tingle, their revived strength vanishing. I slump against the trunk's interior, the cheap mat fibers tickling my palms and cheek. My erratic breaths slow to a calm cadence as a warm rush washes over me, relaxing me deeper and deeper as the drugs move through my veins.

"No." The word is more of a slur with my numb lips.

A dark laugh rumbles through the trunk. Revulsion churns my already sour stomach as hot breath brushes against my ear.

"He doesn't like to play with his toys, but don't worry, Madam President. I do."

I scream and scream, but the trunk remains silent; I'm only able to call out for help in my mind.

“Stop fucking with the mark. We leave now to stick with the timeline.” Even with the distance and hollowness of the trunk, I hear the annoyance in the clipped tone.

The tip of a slick tongue slides down the exposed column of my neck. “Soon.”

A hand presses over my eyes and slips down, closing my lids with the movement.

For what feels like the hundredth time tonight, my body is moved against my will. First my legs are bent and maneuvered, something tight bites into my skin securing them together, and then the same with my hands before the trunk shuts with a deafening bang above me. The coarse floorboard rattles at the roar of an engine starting. With every bump I’m bounced and jostled, and at the turns I roll to and fro, unable to steady myself.

Panic sends my pulse racing. The roar of the engine and honking of other horns are all I can hear, leaving me alone with my darkening thoughts. Tied, drugged, and suffocating in the intense heat and no air, claustrophobia grips me, stifling my already short, raspy breaths.

Before I succumb to the panic attack, a pleading prayer blasts through my thoughts and images of the death that awaits me.

Find me, Trey. Find me.

Chapter One

Trey

The unmistakable stench of death fills my nose as I run along the sidewalk, my boots pounding the pavement, untied laces flying in my wake. There’s a heaviness weighing in the early morning air, thickening as I grow closer to the chaotic scene. I

could find my way by the scents filling the air alone—scorched rubber, burning fuel, and the sharp coppery tang of spilled blood—but there’s no need. No, I only need to follow the bright search lights of the low-circling military helicopters, flashing red and blue of local police units, and, of course, the growing crowd.

I pause at the edge of the onlookers, men and women alike who’ve poured out onto the streets in their nightclothes and robes from the neighboring apartment and condo buildings. I inhale more to steady my nerves than being out of breath from the quick sprint from the dark alley behind my own building to here.

Forgoing pleasantries and gentle prodding, I shove a shoulder through the outer layer of people and make my way to the center of the crowd, where I’m needed and my answers await.

Almost to ground zero, the crash site, I slam into an immobile human wall. A wall wearing fatigues, a massive assault rifle held between two hands secured across his chest, and a clear “don’t fuck with me” expression on his serious face.

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“Step back, sir,” says the kid who’s about to be on the wrong end of the fury-laced panic that’s thrumming through my veins, making me slightly unhinged.

“Secret Service,” I state impatiently.

The flickering camera flashes and overhead streetlamps highlight his unimpressed gaze as he slowly gives me a once-over. Lips pursed, he shakes his head and goes back to scanning the area for threats and keeping the excited crowd at bay.

Huh. Never had that kind of reaction before.

I glance down at my own appearance to see why he so quickly dismissed me as a real agent.

Well, hell. Okay, now I get it. Dry-Fit T-shirt inside out and backward—I was wondering what was tickling my neck on my run over here—wrinkled-as-hell jeans with the zipper half up and button unfastened to the point that I don’t know how they even stayed up this long, and untied military-style boots. No wonder this kid thinks I’m a fake and probably in need of medication.

I search through every available pocket for my credentials to prove to this asshole that I am in fact a legit agent, but I come up empty. Pursing my lips in annoyance, I inhale deep, my nostrils flaring at the foul smells that assault my nose.

“I left my shit at home, but I’m telling you the truth. I’m Trey Benson with the fucking Secret Service. Now let me the fuck through.” Nose to nose, I’m screaming in his face. He doesn’t know why I’m so on edge, why the accident behind him is

extremely personal to me, but I don't care in this moment. All I want is for him to fucking move so I can find out what the hell is going on and find my fiancée.

"No one gets through," he hisses through gritted teeth as he widens his stance, readying for a fight.

Already on a hair trigger, my rising annoyance mixes with the desperation to get past this fucker, shoving me over the edge of reason. Lips pulled back in a snarl, I reach for one of the guns strapped to my body, 100 percent okay with shooting my way through if I have to.

Just as my fingers brush the grooved grip of my nine millimeter, familiar broad shoulders and a bald head rising over the soldier's catch my attention. On the far side, several feet from where I stand, Tank stalks along the inside circle of the soldier wall, peering over their heads like he's searching for someone in the crowd.

Both hands cupped around my mouth for maximum volume, I let out a sharp attention-grabbing whistle, one I used during widespread canvassing assignments in the army, then bellow his name over the thumping of the helicopter blades and excited crowd. I debate shoving my way toward him when he pauses and turns my direction.

His intense gaze locks on me. Immediately he sets across the closed-off street, his focus never wavering as he weaves through the FBI agents inspecting the evidence.

My trepidation rises with each step Tank takes as he draws closer. I'm eager to get around this fucker who's holding me back from entering the scene, yet at the same time I know the moment I walk into the protected circle, all this becomes true. Right now I straddle a fine line. On this side, I have the knowledge of what happened but not the proof or the details. If I don't see it, it didn't happen, right? If I don't step over the invisible line, thus changing me from outsider looking in to acting agent, none of

this is real. It's crazy to think this way, sure, but compartmentalizing this shit might be the only way I keep my emotions in check until we find her.

Tank's mitt of a hand encases the soldier's shoulder and yanks him backward. He struggles to stay upright, opening a small gap just wide enough for me to slip through.

"He's with me." Tank dangles his credentials in front of the kid's face, and I take the opportunity and move to stand beside my friend.

Not wasting time, Tank turns on his heels and strides from the sidewalk, stepping down onto the street where the destruction waits.

A couple feet from the town car—hertown car—I pause, taking in the mangle of metal. My heart squeezes like someone has it in a vise grip as I stare at the open back passenger door and the empty back seat.

Tank's heavy footsteps pause, his comforting presence welcome as I inhale a shaky breath, doing what I can to keep the fear of what's happening to her in this very moment from shutting me down. I can't break, not when she needs me.

"We'll find her. We'll get her back."

I nod, not daring to speak past the lump lodged in my throat. My fingers tremble as I rake them through my hair, relishing the sharp bites of pain as a few tangled strands yank and pull at my scalp.

"Get it together, Benson. Randi is out there waiting for you to piece this together and find her. She's counting on you finding her before it's too late."

Again I dip my chin in agreement, but this time with conviction. Rising determination

shifts my focus into overdrive, shoving aside all the other swirling emotions keeping me from thinking straight.

Wrangling the varying emotions that radiate from the happy memories we made only hours ago in my condo when she said yes to the paralyzing agony of the unknown, I shove them down with a deep fortifying breath.

Tank's right, like always.

She needs me more than ever. I can't fail her. I won't fail her. Not when our happy ever after was within our grasp. Whoever did this will pay, but first I have to find her.

"What do we know so far?" I ask, my voice void of any feeling.

"Did you know your shirt's wrong?" Tank asks. Normally we'd joke, have a good laugh at my haphazard state, but not tonight.

Stripping off the shirt, I flip it right side out, sink my arms back through the sleeves, and tug it over my head. Then I button my fly, tie the damn boots, and fix the jean cuffs to look somewhat more professional than the disheveled mess I was moments ago.

A puff of air explodes from my lungs at Tank's palm connecting between my shoulders for a comforting pat on the back. With a firm grip on my shoulder, he guides us around the town car to the hood, where the lead SUV is practically sitting on the dashboard. His grip tightens as we take it all in from this new angle.

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“I don’t know much, got here a minute before you. Plus I want our take on it all before I listen to their bullshit investigation.”

“Why?” I ask as I crouch low, pressing the tips of four fingers to the road for stability, and inspect the SUV’s undercarriage. Loose pebbles of asphalt crunch under my boots as I swivel in varying directions for different viewpoints.

“We know the standard routine when she visits you, but no one else does. We’re aware of how many cars, agents, the route, backup... that gives us different insight. Not better but different. Now tell me what you see.”

Damn, the man is smarter than most people give him credit for. With his large size, people think he’s all bulk and no brains. But he’s not in charge because of his size and past NFL record. It’s because of this, the way he processes things and sees different angles. On top of that, he’s observant and insightful, two of the main reasons he’s the alpha team lead and we all follow him with our full trust.

A few chunks of dark hair slide across my sticky forehead as I lean closer to the still warm blacktop. I’m no mechanic—I don’t even drive my own car to get serviced, it just magically happens—but the twisted metal beneath the lead SUV looks wrong.

“Did something explode from the ground?” I ask. Knee to the blacktop, I lean closer and inhale. “Smells like explosives, but hell if I know what kind.” Tank’s hulking figure settles beside me to see where I point under the front portion of the undercarriage. “Just there, it’s blackened and twisted.” I stand and step away from the two entangled vehicles to see the picture as a whole with this new slice of information.

“The blast point could be covered up by the debris,” Tank muses through a grunt as he shoves off his thick thighs to stand.

Rock fragments and other questionable material sprinkle from my dirty palm as I rake a hand through my hair.

“This was well thought out, meticulously planned, unlike the prior attempts.” Rounding the SUV, I pause on the other side. Blood drips from the gaps in the metal where the front passenger seat should’ve been. Grief grips my stomach like a tightening fist. I force my gaze away. There’s no need to know who was riding shotgun, or driving, or in the other SUVs. Only one thing matters now, and that’s finding the clues to locate Randi. Then murder the devil behind the abduction.

A vaguely familiar agent approaches, his wide eyes taking in the mess before him. “The FBI director will be here shortly, and ours is back at headquarters reviewing the information as it comes in.” At my side, he takes a deep breath and rests both hands on his hips. “Every single agent was shot in the head point-blank. A few appear postmortem. Whoever did this covered their tracks to make sure no one could identify them.”

“What about the new video surveillance we had installed?” Tank asks, his head on a swivel as he searches the lampposts for our cameras. He requested several to be secured along this route once we realized her visits to my condo would be a weekly routine.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” I snap, clenching my jaw so tight the muscles ache. “What do you mean? There can’t be nothing.”

“Whatever stopped the lead SUV also disrupted the video feed. All signals are down

in a two-block radius.” Tapping a pen against his palm, the agent takes in the surroundings. “What in the hell was the president doing in this area so early?”

Tank and I exchange a quick look. Neither of us is answering that loaded question.

Clearing my throat, I bring the topic back to the surveillance issue. “I’m no expert, but a sizeable explosion to halt a small motorcade coupled with an EMP of some kind isn’t normal.” I shake my head, trying to get the pieces of information we know to fit together somehow. “That is fucking sophisticated. Who are these assholes?”

I say assholes knowing full well this couldn’t have been done by one man. No, this was a team, a highly qualified and funded team with one objective: Randi, President of the United States. And now they have her. For what—

No, I can’t let my mind go down that dark path. I have to stay here in this moment if I want to help find her.

I swallow hard, my feet moving of their own accord before stopping in front of the open passenger door of the town car. Her flip-flops lie discarded on the floorboard, shimmering drops of crimson dotting the leather. Fear rakes like talons into my chest, stifling my breathing at all the blood. Leaning deeper into the interior, I examine the spray pattern. A spray of tiny droplets and chunks of something coat the back windshield and seat. It’s all covered in sprinkles of red except a small void where she would’ve been sitting.

I shift, turning to the front seat, where it seems most of the blood exploded from. A shouted curse slips as I’m met with a gaping, oozing skull cavity pointing at me from the front passenger seat.

Seeing the dead agent with the back of his head missing shouldn’t fill me with relief, but it does. Because the blood splatter isn’t hers.

It's not her blood.

I make it a mantra to keep my focus from slipping as I examine the back seat again, hoping to find anything useful. A blinking light from the floorboard on the other side of the car snags my attention.

"Gloves," I grumble over my shoulder and blindly stretch an open hand behind me.

The soft thin latex glove slapped into my awaiting palm is a complete contrast to the brutality of the incident I'm investigating. It slides easily over my fingers, catching on my sweaty palm. Reaching to the other side, I stretch as far as I can without disturbing the other evidence. With the tips of two fingers, I slide the phone closer until it's within reach and duck back out of the town car with it carefully cradled in my hand.

With a press of the Home button, the screen flares to life, displaying the red battery in the right-hand corner, several unread texts, and ten missed calls from Taeler. The sliver of optimism that she'd somehow managed to keep the phone and the tracking device within on her through the wreck and abduction dissolves, feeding the worry about how in the hell we're going to find her in time.

"It's hers," I say, dropping it into Tank's large latex-covered hand.

Arms crossed over my chest, I stare into the dark car. There has to be something we can use; no one's that good to not leave anything behind.

Diving back into the wreckage, I scour every square inch of the area void of blood splatter, looking for something, anything that will help us find her. If she was fighting, there could be hair, skin, clothing left behind. Unless she was unconscious from the impact of the SUV or drugged.

I shake that thought before it can fester and distract me from the task at hand.

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Fuck, I have to find her.

The tips of my fingers tremble as I run them along the smooth thick polyester seat belt down to the metal clasp and back up again in case I missed something lodged in the chest strap.

I pause their journey halfway up as a thought hits. Going back to the metal clasp, I pull it out for further inspection. I glide two gloved fingers along the shoulder strap and lap belt again to double-check I haven't missed a cut or slice. But I haven't. The entire belt is still intact.

Gripping the outside frame, I haul myself out of the town car and turn, pointing back inside. "We need someone to dust for prints on the seat belt release. There aren't any lacerations on the strap, which means they released her or she did."

Something deep in my gut tells me she didn't willingly release her safety belt. If she did, there would be evidence of her attempting to scramble away to the other side of the seat or blood on the door handle where she tried to escape.

Tank bellows the order for an FBI agent, sending several jogging our way.

"Tank, Playboy. Over here."

Tank and I turn our attention to the far side of the secured perimeter. Champ squats at the very edge, his back nearly leaning against a soldier's legs, pointing at a glistening puddle on the ground.

I arch a questioning brow Tank's way as we stride toward our fellow alpha team agent.

"I reached out to them all after I spoke with you," he says in response to my silent question, pursing his lips at the end like he's holding himself back from saying more.

"Looks like vomit. Already had someone bag a swab and sample for testing. If it's from Randi, we'll know if there were any drugs in her system." Champ's determined gaze meets mine. "Don't worry. We'll find her." The resolve in his hard tone and clipped words offers the boost I need to push past the idea of her possibly being drugged and unable to fight back against whatever is happening to her.

Hands tightened into white-knuckled fists at my side, I slowly turn, taking in the entire scene from this new vantage point.

"We know there had to be more than one attacker," I state more to myself than to the other two waiting as I talk through the details we know. "But there isn't any sign of how they got away before the backup units arrived. What do we know about the timeline? From the moment the possible explosion went off in the street to when the standby convoy arrived?"

"When other agents arrived and realized she was gone, there was zero sign of her or the attackers. There were only dead agents and the wreckage. I spoke with one of the backup agents when I arrived on scene. He stated several canvassed the surrounding area while other secured the scene. Every alley was checked, but they didn't find any evidence indicating which way they'd gone or how they got away."

I nod absentmindedly at Champ, letting him know I heard him even though my unfocused gaze is on the surrounding crowd. There were only two options for escaping before the backup arrived just moments after the crash: by foot or by vehicle.

I have to think like them. How would I get the most protected woman on the planet away from the wreckage before the cavalry arrived? Based on the details so far, these fuckers knew the route, the number of men, hell, even the new surveillance we installed recently. They had to know additional backup would arrive within minutes of the wreck.

I glance back to the town car, this time looking at it from their perspective.

It would need to be quick and undetectable.

The blacktop pounds under my boots as I stride to the open back passenger door of her town car. Mimicking what would've been done to remove her, I go through the motions like I'm unstrapping Randi and tugging her out into the early morning air. She doesn't weight much, so even if she was drugged, her limp body wouldn't be too much for an average-size man to carry easily.

I count out ten medium-length strides from the car to what we believe is her vomit, which could either be from drugs administered to keep her compliant or from a concussion. Based on the town car's impact with the lead SUV, I suspect the nausea was from a concussion.

"Twenty seconds to remove the president and carry her here," I state to Tank and Champ. "Now where would I go if I didn't want to risk a getaway vehicle being spotted and pursued by the coming backup convoy or a man being seen carrying a limp body down the street?"

A beat of silence falls between us as the repetitive thump of helicopter blades pulses above us. Spotlights illuminate the area, eliminating every shadow while Secret Service and FBI agents alike shout to each other about evidence collection or needing more body bags.

“We need to move, search, do fucking something.” I rake my fingers through the longer strands of my hair, tugging at the ends to help keep me focused. “We split up. Each take a different alley. That’s the only way to escape this shit show with the president without being seen.”

Assuming they’re on board, I scan along the length of the street. I count three alley openings close enough for an optimal escape route. “Tank, you take the one there.” I point to the farthest from where we stand, then to the next closest. “Champ, you take that one, and I’ll take the last one.”

I shoulder through the wall of soldiers and shove through the spectators. A pulse of anger sizzles through me at their ogling. This is a fascination for them, a bit of drama for their boring everyday lives. But for me, it’s my life. They’re staring, whispering at the visual representation of what remains of my heart and soul with Randi missing.

Wrecked.

Burning.

Destroyed.

I have to get her back.

My life depends on it.

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Hold on, Randi. I'll find you. Hold on for me.

Chapter Two

Randi

A chest-rattling bang from somewhere close by jolts me awake. My brain batters against my skull with its own thundering pulse, making me loathe this day before I've even opened my eyes. The intensity of the headache feels like a migraine, but I haven't had one of those in years.

Fuck, I wish I could stay in bed, or even have the luxury of hitting Snooze. But the country's problems won't wait. There's no lazy morning for the woman running the United States.

I toss my head to shift the hair that's fallen across my nose, the small movement sending a stabbing pain along my neck all the way down to my toes.

Another noise, something I've never heard while snugly tucked in bed within the safety of the White House, drags my attention from the new odd pain.

What the hell is going on out in the hall?

I shift to sit up and find out what the racket is about, but I can't. I try again but fail to move even an inch. Confusion clouds my already slow thoughts as I jerk at my hands to move the infuriating tickling hairs strewn across my face. More strange pain radiates from my wrists.

My heart races, slamming against my chest. Blinking through the stickiness coating my lashes and dry, scratchy eyes, I will my lids to stay open. My blurry vision clears, revealing an unfamiliar exposed industrial-looking ceiling above me.

Instead of smooth white plaster, rusted metal beams crisscross with bundles of exposed thick black wires and silver-coated ventilation ducts of some kind. Struggling through the sheer agony of the simple movement, I twist to look toward the only natural light shining in the run-down warehouse. It takes a moment of zero movement and deep inhales and exhales through my nose for the discomfort to diminish to a non-excruciating level and my vision to focus. Across the expansive abandoned room, along the far wall, a row of filthy cracked and broken windows allows slivers of warm sunlight to filter through. The soft rays that make it through the grime and gaps highlight the dust floating in the stagnant air.

The oblivious bliss that my confusion offers only lasts a few seconds before the swarm of images and memories assaults my already struggling brain. I squeeze my eyes shut.

Shit. Shit. Shit. I'm so fucked.

Dread settles in my gut like lead weighing me down from the inside at the last thing I remember before the trunk shut over my unresponsive, drugged body. Of what that one dick for brains whispered about playing with his toys. A shiver of revulsion shakes my shoulders.

I need to get out of here. Now. No matter what I have to do or endure.

Whatever they have me tied up with digs into the bare flesh of my wrists and ankles, but I fight through the slicing of my skin and protesting muscles. Panting, I give up after a minute of attempting to escape with brute force, which is obviously getting me nowhere. Resting back on the hard surface, I grit my teeth as the adrenaline fades and

the damage I caused shifts into a fire-hot burn along my wrists and ankles.

“Think, Randi.” My cracked voice is barely a whisper. What do I know? What do I have that could help me get the hell out of here without ripping my hands and feet off?

First things first, I need to take inventory of what’s broken, bruised, and okay on my own body.

I lick my dry lips, preparing for the worst—the pain and knowledge that even if I do get out of these restraints, my legs could be broken, or something else that could hinder my escape. I start with my toes, wiggling one and then adding another in. Besides the raw sensation along the tips of my toes and feet, I’m good there. Slowly I work my way up my shins, past my knees. And because avoidance is the healthiest option at this point, I skip over the apex of my thighs, too scared that will break me mentally if I discover I was abused while drugged.

Swallowing the tears that are lodged in my otherwise dry throat, I take a deep fortifying inhale.

Terrible idea.

Horrible, awful, delusional idea.

Immediately my lungs revolt as if I’d swallowed burning coals. A violent cough shoves all that air back up my dry throat with a hacking cough. To force whatever is lodged in my lungs up and out, my abs tighten and flex while my back presses hard into the solid surface beneath me in an attempt to gain some leverage, doing whatever needed to not choke to death on my own phlegm.

That is not an option for tomorrow’s headline.

President found dead. Choked on own spit.

She should've swallowed.

A delirious snort tickles my nose between violent coughs at my slightly disturbing and gross humor. A cool smooth surface slides along my cheek as I force up whatever is lodged in my chest. A tangy, metallic taste fills my mouth as I ready to spit whatever was in my lungs as far as I can.

Which, of course, doesn't even go half a centimeter. Spit and what I now suspect is mucus and coagulated blood oozes along my warm cheek before slowly dripping away.

Awesome. Tied up and covered in my own spit—and from the skull-splitting pain in my brain, probably a concussion too boot.

Oh, and bonus, no fucking clue where I am or who the hell took me. Or why.

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Let's be honest: there could be a lot of answers for the "why" question. I've made some formidable enemies since appearing on the DC scene. One who's already tried to poison me once and another group who've sent multiple assassins to kill me.

But with those assholes who attempted to drive the world into war for monetary gains dead, or worse, at some nondescript CIA black site location, there's only one asshole whose loathing exceeds all others.

Shawn fucking Whit.

Shawn is who I'd place my bet on setting this all up. There's no way he could've pulled this off on his own though. Which doesn't surprise me in the slightest considering he isn't the type of sociopath who gets his hands dirty. Watch someone destroy me and get off while doing it, sure, that's Shawn. But not actually executing the kidnapping of the president and murder of over a dozen agents.

I choke on a sob.

Those men, my agents, are dead. All of them.

Warm tears escape from the corners of both eyes, descending over my temples and trailing along my jawline. Despair grips what little hope I've held on to this far, suffocating it until all that's left in its place is a desolate chasm where it used to live.

Seconds turn to minutes. Minutes turn into what feels like hours of lying there despondently, staring unseeing at the ceiling. Eventually the leaking tears dry even though the grief continues to strangle my heart.

The bright glaring sun through the windows and the increasing sweltering heat are both signals I've been here for a good while. Yet no one has checked on my well-being or explained their demands. I'm not sure which is worse: lying here alone with only my increasingly dark and rampant day dreams as company or meeting the men who took me and them clearly detailing out what they have planned for me.

I could die here today. More than likely I will die right here in this abandoned warehouse alone and in quite a bit of pain.

Stealing my spine, I drum up any semblance of courage I can, preparing myself for the inevitable.

It's okay if I die. Everyone will move on. The world will still turn and live their lives.

Then a happy memory of a smirking, honey brown-eyed man flashes before my eyes. The look of sheer happiness and relief when I said yes sticks to the forefront of my mind, reminding me of what I have to live for and blasting through the despair I unconsciously slipped into for self-preservation.

A new wave of agony takes hold as more faces, more memories, emerge, reminding me of what I would leave behind if I just gave up now.

Taeler and that sweet baby. I'd never get to see my only daughter become the fantastic mother I know she'll be. Or get to see my grandbaby grow up to be just as crazy and dramatic as her mother and grandmother.

Tank and Sarah. I wouldn't ever get to thank them for being the friends I've always wanted but never had and for showing me what true love and respect in a relationship looks like.

Mom. A bit of an odd cookie now, sure, but I'm so proud of her, even if she thinks

everything can be cured by honey or an oil.

Vlad. Okay, that one is a stretch.

This is my inner fighter, the badass I've always wanted to be, pushing me to not give up but to wage the same war on them that they've done to me. I'm not some helpless victim who takes things lying down. That's never been me. I've always fought, struggled, and worked to get anywhere in life. Sure, escaping all this alive might be a bit trickier than undergrad and Harvard, but I have to at least try.

The emotionless chill that settled into my blood is driven out by their love for me and mine for them.

I can't give up.

What the ever-loving fuck was I thinking?

Yes, I'm miserable, yes, I'm frightened, and hell yes, my chest and soul ache with the deep, urgent need for Trey, but I can't let that hold me back from fighting.

It's me and me alone until Trey finds me. Until he and Tank swoop in and save the day. Which, deep in my gut, I know they will. Before it's too late, well, I'm not sure about that one, but I know they will come. I just have to hold on, not give up until they do.

Which means I have to fight.

Fight for my life and for the lives that will be affected if I die here.

Today is not the day I take my last breath.

Neither is tomorrow.

Trey and I will have our happily ever after. I won't let anyone take that away from me, not now, not when I've finally found my source of happiness.

No. I'm not giving up.

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Whatever happens next, whatever they want from me, I'll hold on and wait for Trey.

I can do this. I'm the motherfucking president of the United States of America, and I will not bow down. I will not give up or give in.

These fuckers think they've already won no doubt.

Too bad for them, they don't know how damn scrappy a girl from the trailer park can be.

I picture myself bursting out of these restraints and going all assassin on the assholes the moment they bust through the door. Like all those heroines do in the movies. I just need to channel my inner Beatrix and go all Kill Bill.

If only I had a sword like hers in the movie. Oh, or a black mamba in my pocket. Maybe I should commission one and a secure traveling case for future abduction attempts. Hell, what a time for a unicorn army. All I'd have to yell is the code word "Impale," and everyone trying to hurt me or those I love would die by unicorn stabbing.

"Fuck yeah," I whisper to myself. "Impale. Impalement for them all."

A heavy scraping sound echoes through the empty room, putting a pause on my vindictive thoughts and daydreams of becoming a killing machine. I survey what I can see of the room but come up empty. Straining to see what's behind me, I jolt, the restraints holding my jerking body in place, at the bang of what sounds like a heavy door slamming shut.

A soft squelch, like rubber shoes against a slick surface, causes the hair to rise along the back of my neck and down both arms. My chest shakes with the ramming pound of my heart. Fear clogs my throat and steals the breath from my lungs.

Closer and closer the even steps grow until they stop, still out of my line of sight. An eerie sense of being watched crawls across my skin. Jerking against the restraints, I attempt to angle my body to the side and for a better angle to see who's lurking behind me, but I can't.

Frustrated, I flop back prone on the table. "What do you want?" I growl like a wild animal as I test the restraints once again. Now would be a grand time for the plastic ties to somehow weaken on their own, allowing me to break free and play out the massacre I plotted moments ago.

My question receives no response. Blood rushes in my ears, making it difficult to hear anything, but still I strain to listen, not wanting to be snuck up on. Something moves directly behind me, casting a long shadow across my face and chest.

Chin in the air, I strain my neck, arching as far as I can to look behind me.

Ice licks down my spine as an unfamiliar set of uncaring eyes locks with my own.

"Please," I beg. "What do you want? Let me go."

A harsh chuckle escapes his lips as he reaches closer to fist a thick handful of my dark hair, his short jagged nails scraping across my scalp. I cry out, my hands fighting to be free and help alleviate the pressure. With a painful yank, he jerks my face forward, my chin slamming into my collarbone, severing my visual of the man. A pitiful whimper escapes as cool, rough fingers firmly trace along the edges of my trembling upper lip before moving to the lower. The scents of dried blood, gunpowder, and onion infiltrate my nostrils, evoking my gag reflex. Not wanting him

to see how much his proximity and touch terrify me, I restrain the sob that's desperate to escape.

Those same two fingers shove between my lips, forcing them apart and invading my mouth. I thrash my head, attempting to dislodge them as he thrusts them deeper. I gag, revolting against the intrusion, but the hold on my hair tightens, keeping me at his mercy. Something hard presses against the crown of my skull. Up and down it rubs against my hair as his fingers mimic the movement inside my mouth.

My attempt to scream is choked back as he forces another finger into my already full mouth. Jaw straining, tears flow as saliva drips from the corners of my mouth and down my neck.

“Just prepping your fuckable mouth for my big cock to shove down it. I want to feel you choke on my dick until you can't breathe.”

Revulsion sends a shudder down my spine, but there's nothing I can do to make him stop.

Then it does.

The fingers are ripped from my mouth, and his unimpressive dick stops humping my head. I scream in pain as chunks of hair rip from my scalp as the hand still gripping it is jerked backward.

Heaving for breath, weeping, and trembling all over, I almost miss the hushed words said somewhere behind me.

“I told you the rules,” someone, a male, states.

“Fuck you. We're not partners. This is a onetime deal between us. You can't tell me

what to do. I risked my life helping you get that woman, and now I'm going to reap my rewards."

"I paid you plenty."

"Well, unlike you I always play with my toys before I destroy them. We're not all fucked in the head like you, you damn freak."

I hold my breath, waiting for the other man's response.

"I wanted to wait until later to do this, but you've pushed my hand." A soft pop of air has me stiffening at the distinct sound of a gun fired with a silencer. "Fucking hell, I hate carrying dead bodies. This is why I wanted to wait." The distinct click of a man's dress shoes draws closer. "That is now two of my so-called acquaintances you owe me for." I jerk at the voice, its somewhat familiar low, rough tone. "Maybe I should make you carry him instead."

"Why am I here?" My voice shakes, giving away the utter terror engulfing my every thought and cell.

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A shadow creeps closer and looms over my face. I blink at the change in light to refocus my vision. The image clears, but all I can make out is the end of a blue tie, a white dress shirt, and barely a hint of a smoothly shaven chin.

“You were my toughest challenge to date, you know that? Twice, you avoided what the other client had planned for you. That was their fault though, not involving me in the execution of the plan and only using me for information.” Shifting against the table, I try for a new angle to see the man’s face. It’s someone I’ve met before—the voice is too familiar—but the drugs or maybe the concussion keep his identity deep in the recesses of my mind. “Not that it matters now. They failed and I still got paid by them, and now I’ll collect the remaining funds of this second contract as soon as you’re... handled.”

“Second,” I rush out. What is he saying? “Two people wanted me?”

Okay, yeah, not sure why that should surprise me, but it does. I mean, do people hate me that much for what I’m trying to accomplish? I’m more than just the president. I’m fucking fun, and happy, and witty. Why in the hell would people want me dead when I can bring all that to the table?

“Ah, you are listening. Good.” The shadow shifts as he raises an arm, a hand dangling midair above my face. I flinch, sealing my eyes shut, preparing for the hit I know will come next.

Only the blow never comes.

A softtskhas me peeking one eye open. “You don’t have to worry. I won’t touch you,

at least not until he arrives. That's when you should be afraid." The inkling in my stomach tells me I know exactly who he's referring to. "As much fun as this is," he continues, though his exasperated tone says he's having the opposite of fun, "there are a few loose ends I need to remove before the client arrives and starts your final party." He sighs. "And now I have to clean up this mess. Fucking hate burying bodies. Such a time suck." A palm smacks against the table, and I jolt against the restraints in surprise, expecting the next hit to be directed at me.

Light blares down on me once again, the looming presence gone.

"Wait." I arch my neck, desperate to catch a glimpse of my captor before he leaves me alone again. "Just let me go, please."

"Not a chance, Madam President."

"What do you want? Why are you doing this?" My words come out stronger with my growing frustration and disdain for his man and my situation.

"You. It was always about you. I'm not sure how you managed to piss off so many, but you did, and now I'm here. Don't take it personal. It's business."

"This isn't business. Kidnapping the president is a fucking felony, you traitor," I snap. "I'm a good fucking person and don't deserve any of this." My voice echoes through the large space.

After a moment with no response, I catch an exasperated sigh and a mumbled "I don't care."

The annoyance in his tone stops me from uttering another word.

"I'll be back soon, and then the fun will start. Oh, I almost forgot." The outline of a

black rectangular shape hovers over my face. A click and flash of a picture being taken, and then he's gone again. Eyes wide I stare at the ceiling as grunted curses and the brush of something heavy being dragged fill the area.

"Oh, and, Randi, don't bother hoping that motherfucker Benson will find you. I'm the best at what I do. There's no way for him to track you. No one will find you. No one is coming to save you."

The dragging sound grows distant. A squeak of metal against metal cuts through the air, making me wince. With a few more distant curses, all noise is cut off with a bang, the vibrations from the force reverberating along my spine.

It's the following quiet that terrifies me. Now I wait. Wait for whatever he and his demented client have planned. Darkness encroaches on my vision as I struggle to suck in enough gulps of air to keep me conscious.

Inhaling deep through my nose until my ribs protest, I let the breath out slow through pursed lips.

I use deep breathing to relax my racing pulse. I have to calm down. I'll be useless passed out. That fucker said no one would find me, but what if someone hears me?

A spark of hope bursts in my chest, making my heart race all over again, this time with excitement instead of dread. Drawing in a lungful of air, I scream for help at the top of my lungs, my voice straining into silence at the end. Over and over again I yell. Some of my screams are calls for help, others attempting to shatter the remaining intact windowpanes with my shrill.

I call out for what feels like hours, attempting to draw attention to my location. I'd take any help that comes my way. Hell, maybe my screams will attract a wild animal and they'll come nibble through the restraints setting me free. Oh, or a bird. No, not

just any bird—a pigeon, one that delivers messages. Shit, that won't work. I don't have a pen to write an SOS note to Trey.

For far longer than would be considered “sane thoughts,” I debate which of the many wild animals I'd choose to come rescue me.

In the end of the too long mental debate, the masked bandit raccoon wins out. Their opposable thumbs would come in handy with the restraints. Plus, they're curious little guys and have sharp teeth in case they can't figure out how to unsnap a zip tie.

Wait. Do I even know how to unsnap a zip tie?

“What is wrong with me?” I whisper. A wobbly smile tugs at my dry, cracked lips, and a delirious giggle bubbles in my chest, coming out as a rasp. Once it starts, I can't stop. Harsh chuckles fill the room, cutting through the silence as I laugh like a hyena.

“I'm going crazy,” I state between laughs. “Come save me, raccoon,” I croon with my crackly voice. “Come save me with your cute tiny thumbs.”

“How in the hell you became VP instead of me is fucking insulting on too many levels.”

Immediately my laughter shrivels and dies at the voice I know all too well.

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I swallow hard to clear my desert-dry throat.

An even crazier thought than the raccoons saving me pops up. Maybe if I stay still, he won't notice me lying here, in the middle of the room, tied to a table.

Clearly I'm cracking under the pressure.

"But," he continues, his voice drawing closer, "now you'll pay for that infraction, along with many others."

Sweat slicks my forehead and dampens the back of my neck. Unlike the other two men, Shawn doesn't hide from me. He strolls the length of the table, stopping at the end by my feet. I strain to look down my body and immediately wish I hadn't. A sinister smile splits his cheeks as he surveys my restrained ankles.

"Ready for payback, Trailer?"

My heart skips, pausing entirely before thundering against my chest once again. "Not really, but thank you for asking." I grimace.

His smile falters slightly before returning to its Joker-esqe expression. "That was a rhetorical question, you fucking idiot."

"Then you should've said that," I snap. "And seriously, you want to do all this, to kill me, because Kyle chose me over you? Be pissed at him, not me. I'm innocent against that charge."

“Ah, see, you were until you lied to me. That’s why you’re here today, what tipped my hand to this extreme.”

“You poisoned me before that,” I retort.

“What can I say? Birmingham was a bore, and games are my weakness,” he says, brushing off some lint from the sleeve of his dark blue jacket. “And you’re too tempting to play with. That and toying with your rent-a-cop of a boyfriend. But then you went and played me, convinced me not to put the understanding of me being selected as your VP when you became president in writing. That is why you’ll pay with your life. However,” he says, tilting his chin up in a haughty move, “I can be persuaded to let you live if you do what I want.”

Indignation boils inside my gut. “I won’t get anywhere near your pencil dick, dick.” Fuck, I need some caffeine. That insult was lame. Or water. Could be dehydration playing at my loss of unique name-calling.

A sneer curls the corner of his upper lip. “You won’t get anywhere near me. I’m not willing to catch whatever shit you caught while growing up in fucking poverty to get my fat dick sucked.”

I snort. “Embellish much? You’ve always been right about one thing, you would make a better politician than me with those kind of exaggeration skills.”

Between blinks, he shifts along the table, pausing at my side. Fury burns behind those near black eyes that are intently focused on my neck. Then a steady manicured hand lashes out and wraps around my throat.

The constricting grip unleashes a floodgate of hysteria into my veins. I arch my back off the table, thrash my head, doing anything I can while restrained to dislodge his hold. Shawn laughs as he applies more pressure, slowly strangling the life from my

already exhausted and bruised body.

A rasp of a cry pushes past my lips. Stars twinkle before my eyes as darkness seeps from the corners of my vision. My struggles weaken, my body going limp.

This is it. This is the end.

Unable to grasp even a single puff of needed oxygen to stay conscious, I give in to the peaceful oblivion that waits for me on the other side.

I'm sorry, Trey. I'm so, so sorry.

Chapter Three

Trey

The shouts of agents and the murmuring of the crowd fall away as I continue to scour the alley for any sign this was the route they used to extract Randi. They didn't just up and disappear; they had to escape undetected and quickly before the backup arrived. These assholes had two, maybe three minutes tops before half of the American army reserves and another half-dozen agents were swarming the area.

It took a hell of a lot of planning to pull this off. And experience. This wasn't their first time handling a high-profile job like this.

But even professionals make mistakes. And I'll find it. The one rogue hair, one tear of clothing or footprint. I'll find it, and then I'll find her.

Fuck, if it were only that simple.

Tiny fur-covered bodies scurry along the alley to my right, their thin nails scratching

the slime-crusted asphalt as they weave between dumpsters. Unbothered by the rats, I continue a slow prow, going farther away from the crash.

At the cross of another back alley intersecting with the one I've been following, I pause. Going right would've been their wisest choice in order to avoid those pursuing from seeing them. Staying straight would leave them vulnerable to those following.

Right it is, then.

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At two more intersections, I do the same, analyzing which way would provide the least amount of exposure before changing routes. After one turn, I pause and retreat a step, backtracking to whatever snagged my attention.

The urgency in my gut tells me there's something here... there.

Balancing on the balls of my feet, I squat and inspect the object. Not bothering to secure the glove over my sweaty hand, I use it to pick up what looks to be a fire-engine red piece of something.

Not just something—a nail.

Randi's fake nail.

It's a long shot, sure, but at this point, even a long shot is better than nothing.

Encasing the evidence in the glove, I shove it deep within a front pocket. Even with the sun rising there's not enough light to check for additional signs of a struggle. Phone out, I use the flashlight function to help me scour every nook and crevice within a ten-foot radius from where I found the nail.

On my hands and knees checking under a rank dumpster is how Tank and Champ find me.

"I think I found a bit of her nail on the ground just there," I say, gesturing behind me. Satisfied I haven't missed anything obscured under the green metal bin, I push myself up. Staying on my knees, I dig both clenched fists against the top of my thighs in

frustration. “But nothing else.”

“Let’s keep moving,” Tank says, offering a hand to help me off the ground. A clap pulses down the alley as our hands connect. With his inhuman strength, he yanks me to a standing position with ease. “Now that we know this is the way they came, we can get more agents down this way to help look.” A few sharp commands into his radio and it’s done, a team of various agency agents en route to our location. With an incline of his head in the direction I was headed before I stopped, Tank says, “Let’s find where they loaded her. There could be evidence there as well.”

On reflex, I nod at the issued command from my team lead.

With renewed adrenaline flowing at finding the minuscule piece of evidence that proves there was a struggle, it’s better that I let him do all the thinking. Murder and annihilation are the most prevalent thoughts at the moment. Partly because of the uncontrollable rage pumping through my system, but also if I concentrate on the unknown person’s death, then images of her scared, alone, and hurt can’t consume me.

I can’t function with those debilitating images. Murder and causing excruciating pain are a much better option for a fully functioning Agent Trey Benson.

Using the hem of my T-shirt, I swipe away the beading sweat from my brow and follow Tank and Champ. Their heads move on a swivel, scouring around each dumpster, every nearly disintegrated cardboard box, piles of discarded trash, and a random pile of ratty blankets.

Again something in my gut draws me up short. I skid to a halt, bits of rock shifting beneath my boots. Tank and Champ pause several steps ahead and turn to where I stand staring at the pile of blankets.

Tanks brows furrow. “What is it?”

Not wanting to spook the man or woman, I press a single finger to my lips and point at the lump on the ground.

Please don’t be dead.

On quiet steps, I inch closer. A foul cloud of body odor, fluids, and who the hell knows what else engulfs me. I gag on reflex before switching to breathing through my mouth to keep from smelling the growing stench. If this guy helps us locate Randi, I’ll not only offer him a shower and clean clothes but buy him a damn house with as many showers as he wants.

I still when the mountain of shredded blankets and old newspapers shifts.

“I’m not here to hurt you or make you leave,” I say as calmly and sincerely as I can muster with my emotions raging like a damn hurricane inside. “I just wanted to ask if you saw something earlier. A man, and maybe a woman, come down this way.”

Nothing. In fact, the person beneath the mound of debris seems to shrink further in on themselves. I hold back my growl of frustration. We don’t fucking have time for this shit.

Time to step up my game. “I’ve got a bottle of whiskey with your name on it if you help me,” I state.

A full head of slick, greasy gray hair pops from under the blanket mountain. His cloudy eyes level my way, a scowl forming beneath a white wiry beard. “I’m a vodka man.”

“A handle of vodka it is, then.” I breathe a sigh of relief. Finally something we might

be able to use. “If you’d just answer a few questions for—”

“I’m homeless, not deaf, boy,” he chastises while leveraging off the ground to sit upright. Back against the brick wall, he drapes a blanket over his crossed legs. “I heard ya the first time. Yeah, I saw people.”

“People?”

“Two fellas, one hellcat.” I choke on a half laugh, half sob. He points down the alley where we just came from. “Her tumblin’ out that one’s hold is what woke me. Fought like hell to get away.”

“What happened next?” I somehow get out over the growing lump of dread lodged in my throat.

“He hauled ’er up and ran, followin’ the other one in a suit.”

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“A suit?” all three of us question in unison. I watch Tank out of the corner of my eye. His attention is now torn between the old guy and whatever he’s furiously typing on his phone.

“That’s what I said. A suit and intense as anything I ever seen. I know those types and stay the hell away. I don’t think he saw me. Didn’t want to get on his radar, that’s for damn sure.”

“Those types?” I ask.

“The ones who enjoy it. Saw enough in the service.” His eyes seem to grow distant, like he’s chasing a memory. “The ones you were glad were on your side after you saw what they did to the enemy.”

“And he was one of those guys?” I ask, trying like hell to understand what the old man is referring to.

“Where is my vodka?” he demands, crossing thin, bare arms across his chest.

“At my place. I’ll give you the address and call someone to let you in.”

“You one of them freaks who collect body parts?”

I almost snort, but the seriousness of the situation keeps it reined in. “No, just someone who can help and wants to.” I bite at my lower lip as I decide what else to divulge. “She’s my girlfriend, the woman. The hellcat.”

“And them?” He casts a suspicious glare at Champ and Tank. “What’s with the light show down there anyhow? To damn hot to be time for Christmas lights, ain’t it?”

“They’re with me, helping me find her. So are all the cops, which are the lights you see.” I rattle off my address while shooting a quick text to Gerard, letting him know a smelly visitor will be stopping by. “Someone will meet you at the front door. A hot shower, some vodka, and the best damn cookies you’ll ever eat are waiting.”

Not sure why I’m tempting him to leave now, but a feeling in my gut tells me whoever took Randi might double back after we’re all gone and dispatch this old man just for camping along his escape route. If one of the men who took Randi is as unstable as the old man believes him to be, I sure as hell don’t want my new informant waiting here like a sitting fucking duck.

I help him off the pavement, keeping a firm grasp on his hand until he’s steady on his feet. The three of us watch as he hobbles down the alley before disappearing around a corner.

“Are you two thinking what I’m thinking?” Champ questions as he steps to my side, his shoulder brushing mine. “A suit. Why in the hell would someone wear a suit to an extraction?”

“Maybe to fit in with the other agents,” I offer. “Maybe that’s how he got close enough to trigger the explosion.”

“A suit doesn’t make an agent, Benson, you know that. If some random guy walked up in a suit, we would notice. We know our teams.” I wait for Tank to continue as he scrubs at the top of his sweaty bald head. “No, I think it’s deeper than that. Way fucking deeper.”

“You think it was an actual agent.” Tank’s dark eyes meet mine. Suspicion and worry

flash in his before he checks his phone, almost like he's avoiding telling me something. "You have an idea of who it is, don't you?" I take a menacing step closer to my best friend. "Tell me now, Davis. Tell me what the fuck you know."

"Stand down, Trey. You know who I suspect, because you've suspected the fucker since day one."

"Smith," I growl. "Where is he?"

Head shaking, he says, "I don't know. I called and texted the entire alpha team, telling them to get their asses up here and help with the investigation. Every single agent has responded to me except one."

"I'll fucking murder him," I hiss through gritted teeth. At the sudden wave of new rage, I turn with a roar and slam a fist against an already dented-to-hell dumpster. The burst of pain overtakes the urgency to find and kill Smith. Chest heaving, I massage my split and bleeding knuckles. "I knew it. I fucking knew there was a reason not to trust him."

"Calm the hell down, you fool. We need to be smart about this." Tank slaps the back of my head—hard. "If it is Smith, he can't know we suspect him. We let him lead us to her, and then we act. First we have to find him."

I rake a hand through my sweat-damp hair. "If he's not picking up, we need to start where it all began, where we first met him. She'll have his home address and background information."

"The director. Great idea. Let's go." Rocks and broken shards of glass crunch under his shoes as he twists to face Champ. "You follow this alley and find where they loaded her into the escape vehicle. There's no way in hell they're keeping her close by."

Champ nods once to Tank, then to me before turning and methodically walking down the alley the way we were headed before I spotted the homeless man.

Jogging in the opposite direction, I dodge boxes and dumpsters, all while running through the details we know over and over, hoping to make a connection that will aid in our search.

A dull ring comes from my phone shoved in my back pocket. Not bothering to slow, I slide it from my jeans and check the screen.

UNKNOWN

Ice encrusts my veins. I slow until I'm standing as still as a statue, staring at the still ringing phone in my hand.

"Who is it?" Tank asks, towering over my shoulder for a look. "That normal?"

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I shake my head.

“Answer it. What if it’s someone who knows something?” He shoves my shoulder, urging me into action. “Or her?”

At that, I immediately slide a finger across the screen and hold it to my ear.

“Who is this?” I demand. My girl is missing and in danger. No time for damn pleasantries.

“Vlad.” A bolt of shock wakes up every strained brain cell. “I heard about your president. Have you found her?” The concern in his voice is clear, easing the tight ball of tension that’s taken root in my chest. This is her friend, the Russian president, and he’s worried about her. At least we have him and his unrestricted access to data on our side.

“No. We’re gathering evidence now and looking into a few leads.”

“I have a suggestion.”

“Suggestion?”

“An inkling, if you will.”

“We’re on our way to investigate a suspect. I don’t have time for this vague bullshit. Spit it out.”

“Your secretary of state, he knows more than he tells.”

“What?” Pulling the phone from my ear, I tap the Speaker button and hold the small device between me and Tank. “Why do you say Rosen?”

“I said an inkling. And I do not trust him. He works for the higher bidder, not the best of your country.”

Tank nods, his thumbs already flying over the screen of his own cell, no doubt looking into the exact location of Todd now.

“We’ll look into him, but, Vlad, I need more. I need to know where to find her.” I clear my throat. “Can you help me?”

“I heard nothing of this. No talk. I will search as you search.”

The screen flashes before going dark, signaling the call was ended.

“Todd Rosen,” I muse. “I don’t see it. The fucker is just a weak-ass idiot. But Vlad has never steered Randi wrong.”

“Agreed. I have his location. He’s at home, forty minutes away. Let’s start with the director, then go see what Rosen knows.”

Together we sprint down the alley, the pounding of our boots reverberating off the walls and sending the curious rats scattering.

“I won’t make it if we don’t find her,” I admit, hoping the growing noise of the scene drowns out my fear.

“You won’t have to find out, Trey. We’ll find her.”

When we turn the corner, we fight through the crowd, working our way toward the other side of the sea of people to Tank's SUV.

"Let's stop by my place," I tell him. "I need to change, grab my badge and papers. Maybe grab a few more weapons too."

"And whatever Beth made for breakfast," Tank adds in. "What?" His brow rises at my huff. "We have to eat to keep our energy up. We won't be sleeping until she's safe in the White House once again."

He's right. I won't sleep until she's safe in my arms.

And once she is, I'll never fucking let her go.

Chapter Four

Randi

Holy fuck, hell hurts. At least I assume I'm dead and in hell with the near suffocating dry heat. Dribbles of sweat slide along my spine and between my small boobs. And the hurting part, well, it feels like someone took a sledgehammer to my head a few hundred times. Its battering pulse feels like my brain might ooze out through my ears under the pressure.

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One thousand percent positive I ended up in hell.

Cracking one eye open, ready to face the flicking flames and little red people with pointy tails, I peel the other eye open in disbelief.

“The fuck?” I rasp, my throat so parched the words feel like broken slivers of glass.
“I’m not dead.”

“Your low IQ is rather astounding, Trailer.”

“Or maybe this is hell and you’re Satan himself,” I huff, licking my dry lips to ease the sting of them splitting open. Another long line of sweat slips down my spine, the sensation alerting me to the fact that I’m not only sitting up but in a different area of the warehouse I was held in before—or a different location altogether. Zero windows line the upper walls; hell, there isn’t even an upper wall to speak of. In the middle of the low ceiling, a single cage-looking fixture houses a sole yellowed bulb, the only source of light.

Small, windowless, and fucking hot as hell.

My stomach rolls with unease. This new location is not a good sign for my life expectancy.

In a smooth fluid motion, Shawn stands from the small chair he was perched on and leans a shoulder against the cinder block wall, dressed in a pair of light gray slacks and an untucked white dress shirt. It’s as casual as he gets, I guess. If I ever saw him in shorts and a T-shirt, I’d probably die of shock.

I snort. Little did he know all he had to do was buy the entire Banana Republic summer section to kill me.

“And what is funny about your situation, Trailer?” he asks, a small frown dipping his full lips.

His question sobers me. “Nothing, but do you even own a pair of shorts? It’s a thousand degrees in here.”

Disgust slips over his features. “And you’re the one leading this fucking country.”

I attempt to shrug but can’t move my shoulders with the way my hands are tied behind me. Rotating one wrist and then the other, I determine he’s used damn zip ties again. I try to test my feet but find their restraints too tight to move.

I wiggle to sit up straighter in the metal chair, causing the hard plastic ties to slice into the delicate skin of both wrists. I wince.

“What do you want, Shawn?” Between the pounding of my head and the pain in my wrists, coupled with the heat, I’m done playing games. Exhaustion has swept in, draining what little fight I had left and slowing my thoughts. “Just get it over with so I can move on and you can find a new person to torment.”

“But it’s been so fun.”

“Not the word I would choose.” I cough, though it’s more of a wheeze, shoving dry air up my already scratchy throat. “Just tell me what the hell is going on.”

Peering up through my lashes, I find him studying me. Brows dipped, he seems to be considering my words.

“Might as well,” he says, shoving off the wall and returning to his seat. “We can’t start until that sociopath gets here.”

“Pot, kettle,” I huff.

A small smile spreads up his thin lips. Ever so casually—not like he’s holding the president captive waiting for the right moment to kill her—he withdraws a white handkerchief from his pocket and blots his forehead.

“From the start, this was about you. All of it. Making you realize you’re nothing in this town and don’t belong here. That VP spot should’ve been mine. Then the president’s seat when Birmingham died unexpectedly—”

“He was your friend,” I snap. “You were plotting your friend’s death so you could do what... sit at the big desk?”

“Power is a motivator it seems you haven’t the character or drive to appreciate. That’s what was mine. That’s what you took from me. For years I put up with that shithead Birmingham and his family, always staying a step back so they didn’t know I was a threat to their little dynasty.”

“You’re sick,” I whisper.

Fuck, I have to get out of here.

Twisting my wrists again, I attempt to slide a hand through the tight noose, resulting in slashing my wrists even further. Warm, thick liquid slips into my curled hands, pooling in my palm.

“It was a damn perfect plan until those dumbass advisors told him we couldn’t win the election without gaining sympathy votes. Fucking Americans, basing the future of

this country on their damn hearts and social agendas rather than their heads. We were the best match for the ticket, not you and Birmingham.” Shawn’s face flushes a deeper red than it already was from the heat. “After you won, he had a plan to get rid of you, and I would step in after you were gone. I wanted to put a bullet through your head, but unfortunately, I was overruled.”

“Ah, yes, unfortunately.” Each word burns in my throat, drying my already parched mouth and tongue further. “Was it you? Were you behind the attacks in Saudi Arabia and Egypt?” I have to know, even if I’m about to die and can’t do anything with the information.

“You’re jumping ahead,” he snaps, like he’s relishing the retelling of his story.

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“You’re boring,” I huff back.

Fuck me. Why can’t I keep my damn mouth shut?

No instigating the sociopath into killing you sooner than later, Randi. There is no unicorn army on their way to save you.

“The poisoning was highly entertaining.”

“Fuck me, you’re still going.”

“You think you’d appreciate me prolonging what’s to come by allowing me to divulge what was going on in the background.”

“And what’s to come again?” I ask, trying and failing to arch my brows. Did I get hit in the face at some point, or is it just swelling due to the heat and whatever the hell they’ve given me?

“Torture, drawing it out by making sure your fuckstick of a boyfriend knows what you’re going through, more torture, then you calling your VP and telling him you’re stepping down.”

“Fuck. No.”

“To what part there, Trailer?”

“Um, all of it.” I shake my head, immediately regretting it as my brain seems to slosh

with the movement. “You know, growing up the way I did, where I did, I met a lot of disturbed people in my childhood. But you take the fucking cake, Shawn. The whole damn cake. Meth addicts, drug dealers, slimy-ass men, and yet you... you’re the worst of them all. Parading around in your expensive suits and plastic face. You’re the picture-perfect person on the outside and fucking nasty on the inside. You can’t even consider for a second that I might be a better fit in this role and the VP’s because of my background. You never considered how I could help millions because of how I grew up and finally had a platform and position to do something about it all.”

He scoffs. “Of course I didn’t. Because they don’t matter, just like you don’t. What you’ve failed to see this entire time your poor ass has been in DC is that no one matters but those with the money and power. I have the money. I just needed the power.”

“Then thank the unicorn gods that I took it from you.”

“What the hell did you say?”

“Wait, are you referring to the unicorn comment or that I took it from you?” I swear steam comes from his ears and nose. Seems I’m not doing so great on heeding my own advice of not pissing off the killer in the room. Whoops. “Even through your constant attempts on my life, and whatever sicko plan you have for today, I’ll die knowing I protected the American people from you. I gave them three and a half years of someone actually caring about them and keeping them from your grasp.”

Shawn scrubs at his chin, his dark eyes sliding over my restrained body. The full-body shiver that rakes down my spine causes me to tug on the stiff plastic around my wrist and ankles.

“I didn’t realize your ignorance and stupidity would be this strong, keeping you from

seeing the truth about your inconsequence.”

“That’s what you don’t see. It hasn’t been about me. It’s never been about me. My whole damn life hasn’t been about me. That’s where your ignorance and stupidity are keeping you from seeing the truth.”

His chair topples backward, crashing to the ground as he leaps from the seat. In two long strides, Shawn is in front of me, his hand pulled back with a look of pure rage on his face. Leaning as far left as I can, I attempt to shield myself from the brunt of the blow I know is coming.

The impact of the backhand across my cheek sparks stars in my vision. Pain explodes at the twist of my neck as it snaps to the side. I scream as the half second of shock gives way to a new type of pain I’ve never felt before.

Before I can even try to stop, what’s left in my stomach erupts from my mouth and splatters onto the cracked and chipped concrete floor. A shouted curse blasts through the small space as Shawn leaps backward to keep the spray from soiling his slacks.

“You’re fucking pathetic.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” I rasp before gathering what’s lingering in my mouth and spitting it in his direction.

An icy calm mask slides over his features, concealing the inferno I know is boiling beneath with hate. Only someone as sinister as Shawn can be mentally plotting how to remove your organs as painfully as possible while sporting a pleasing yet blank face.

“You will do as I say or your entire family will meet the same agonizing fate as you. Do you hear me, Trailer? At the end of this, you will call Pierce, and you will demand

I take his spot as VP when he slides into the president spot after you step down. Then, only then, will the pain stop. Once you do that, I will leave you and everyone you love alone, forever. Give me what's mine and I walk away."

My lips part but no sound comes out. I'm torn. Do what he asks and all this stops and I'll never have to live in fear again. But do what he asks and put not only Sam at risk but the American people too. It would only be for half a year, six insignificant months. Or would it? No doubt Shawn has thought this through and has a plan for fixing himself into the next term too if I give in.

Live or die.

Live for my family, or die for millions I don't know and half who already hate me.

"I'll give you time to think it over. I have to go change." With a smug grin, like he knows the turmoil his options have caused, he marches to a side door I hadn't noticed and yanks it open, leaving without a single glance back.

The moment the door clicks closed, I slump in the chair, my shoulders rounding as my chin drops to my chest.

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What in the hell am I supposed to do?

Live or die.

At least there's a 50/50 chance of making the right choice.

* * *

A loud noise somewhere nearby snaps me from the heat exhaustion state I slipped into after Shawn left. Jerking my head up, I blink to ease what feels like dirt coating my eyes and survey the still empty cell. The quick tug to both hands and feet signals I'm still restrained and what might be worse, I can't really feel my fingers anymore.

"If I lose my fingers, I'll be pissed," I hiss. Focusing on my fingers first, I urge them to wiggle, getting some blood flowing to them even though it hurts almost as bad as the bitch slap Shawn delivered earlier.

Time has stood still since I woke in this enclosed room. There's no way to tell how much time has passed without the sun as a somewhat guide. Hell, at this point it could've been days ago that I was abducted, but that doesn't feel right. No, days would be too long. I'm the president. There's half an army out there looking for me, as well as my guys. And probably Sarah at this point.

I smirk at the thought of what she'll do to Shawn if she gets her hands on him. It will be a glorious sight to see him cower to her. Just the image of her kicking his pompous ass has my heart beating faster and a wide smile emerging.

The fantasy vanishes at a squeaking creak as the only door swings open. I squint to ward off the bright sunlight that shines behind the man, dousing his face in a dark shadow preventing me from seeing his features. No, wait. I squint further. It's not just the shadowing but something covering his face, everything but his eyes hidden behind a black wrap of some kind. It reminds me of the covering the man who broke into my suite in Saudi Arabia wore to keep his identity hidden.

The man steps deeper into my little cinder block cell, slamming the door behind him. My eyes narrow the closer he gets. There's something familiar in his stance, something that suggests I've seen him before.

"Do I know you?" I ask as he checks the dark corners of the room.

Silence stretches as he sidesteps to move out of my line of vision. My sides ache as I twist to gain another look, but he's stopped directly at my back, preventing me from seeing him.

"Who are you?"

Silence.

I huff, letting out the frustration, exhaustion, and discomfort in one tight breath.

"Fine. I'll tell you something. They will find me. He will find me. And when he does, you'll have the full force of Trey's wrath on your head. Not to mention I have a button that could launch a nuke up your ass. Or hell, I could just call in a favor to the SEALs. We're friends." I roll my eyes at my own embellishment. "Okay, fine, maybe 'friends' is a little exaggerative, but they know me. I'm kind of a big deal."

I don't hide my snort.

“You did drag me out of a bulletproof town car among a caravan of dark SUVs, so I’m guessing you already know who I am.”

“More than you know” comes a muffled voice behind me.

Stretching my neck from one side to the other, I steel my spine, readying to ask the hard questions. “Tell me, were you behind the attacks in Egypt and Saudi Arabia?”

“Yes and no.”

“Okay,” I say on a pushed breath. “Was it you who said I was responsible for your two friends? One of which you shot because he was assaulting me, I’d like to add.” No one will miss that fucker. Who humps a scalp? I shiver in revulsion. “You did the world a favor with that one.”

I scream as my head is yanked back by a fist gripping my hair.

“I’m worse.” Immediately he drops his hold, and I sense rather than see him retreat a step.

“Your fingers aren’t fucking my throat, and your tiny penis isn’t dry humping my head, so I have to disagree with you on that one.” Maybe I can get to him, make him see I’m a human being, not just a hostage and Shawn’s plaything. That’s what they always say on those crime shows, right? “Do you like unicorns?”

Direct tactic to building a connection. I like it.

“That fucking unicorn obsession of yours is strange.”

My ears perk up at that. So he knows I’m oddly fascinated by the mystical, beautiful creatures. Interesting. Only my inner circle and friends know that. Well, them and

my....

Realization washes over me like a bucket of ice water.

My agents, the ones by me every day and night. They'd all know about my unicorn-loving heart.

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So that means this man, one of the two who abducted me, is not only someone I know but someone who was on my protection detail.

Trey and T were right all along.

But it's worse than a mole.

Way worse.

This agent wasn't just leaking information.

He's a damn traitor who wants me dead.

Chapter Five

Trey

"Come on, hurry the fuck up," I demand as the elevator slowly descends toward the lobby. Worry-filled glances are exchanged among the few business-dressed men and women. My impatience and combat attire, plus exposed guns, warrant their unease.

Before the elevator can level off at our destination, I wedge my fingers between two doors and pry them open. An alarm goes off, but I ignore it and the whispers as I rush through the busy lobby and shove through the revolving door. The morning sun's heat is already brutal in its assault as I step from the shade of the drive-through canopy and onto the sidewalk. Spotting Tank's idling SUV parallel parked up ahead, I increase my pace, eager to hunt for Smith.

“The hell you wearing, Benson?” Tank asks as I slide into the passenger seat. I slam the door shut behind me with one hand and adjust the cold air flow toward my face with the other.

Before I respond, I shift along the leather until I’m comfortable and secure the seat belt behind my back in case I need to make a quick exit. “They brought the war to me, to my turf. Don’t expect me to get dressed up for their fucking funeral.”

He purses his lips like he wants to make another comment. I dare him with a sharp gaze to question the black cargo pants, black T-shirt, and combat boots. Sure, it’s not standard uniform, but neither are all the exposed weapons. But fuck protocol. Fuck uniforms. Fuck the Secret Service right now. I’m getting my girl back come hell or high water, in one piece, safe, and I’ll burn the world down to do it if that’s what it takes.

“No fucking way I could do what needs to be done in a suit.”

“Are you talking to me or yourself like your crazy girlfriend?”

Turning to the window, I smirk because honestly, I don’t know.

“What did you bring me for breakfast?” Tank asks, eyeing my empty hands as he weaves through traffic toward downtown.

Digging into a side pocket of my cargo pants, I toss one of the two granola bars onto his wide lap. Reaching to my other pant leg, I pull out two travel-size protein shakes. After setting both in the cup holder, I lean back and stare out the windshield.

“It’s all I had. Beth was busy feeding that guy from earlier.” I pause, thinking through the events of the morning for the thousandth time. “I think whoever took Randi would’ve doubled back after everyone was gone to make sure he didn’t leave behind

any witnesses.”

“It’s a possibility.” Tank tosses his phone across the console. I snag it midair before it can hit me square in the chest. “Get someone to stake out the area after the scene is cleaned up to watch for any abnormalities.”

With more force than necessary, he flicks the blinker, signaling as we enter the highway.

Running a hand through my hair, I observe the trees and other cars whiz past the window as Tank speeds along the shoulder of the road to miss all the early morning traffic. “We need to be a hundred different places at once right now. Fuck!” I yell, pushing all my frustration into the one word.

“It’s why we have a team, Benson. A solid team. We’re doing the digging while the others are at the site working the investigation with the FBI and Homeland. From there they’ll peel off and search elsewhere. But we’re here. This is our focus. You’re no good to me, or her, scattered.”

A slight vibration along my thigh signals an incoming text or call on my phone I’d shoved deep into a pocket of my cargo pants before running out of the condo earlier. To miss a stalled car, Tank jerks into the HOV lane before weaving in and around the congested four-lane highway. One hand gripping the “oh shit” bar for dear life, I rummage around the few pockets in search for the now silent phone.

Flipping it one-handed, I press the side button to see who reached out. A text box appears from a number not saved as a contact with a thumbnail-size picture attached. Loving a distraction from Tank’s Fast and Furious style of driving, I swipe the screen and open the messaging app.

What fills my screen is so unexpected, I can only stare at it for a few seconds.

Everything shuts down. My lungs, my heart, my mind—every cell is nonfunctional as I fixate on the picture of the woman I love. Fear and shock resonate behind her hazel eyes. Blood soils her hairline and speckles her cheeks like red freckles. A blueish tint darkens the fair skin along her forehead down to her cheekbone.

“What’s going on?” I don’t respond to Tank. I can’t. “Trey, answer me.” Eyes wide, I rip my stare from the screen to look unfocused at the driver seat. “You’re scaring me. What’s going on?”

It’s only now I realize trembles are racking my body, the phone in my hand shaking. Pitching forward, I rest my head between my knees and gulp down air to keep me from passing out.

“Randi,” I say between gasps. I hold the phone across the console for him to get a quick glimpse.

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“Shit,” Tank barks. The SUV’s tires screech as we fishtail along the shoulder. Only when he regains control does he slam on the gas pedal, sending me flying against the seat. “It’s fine. It means she’s alive. Shoot it over to our guys at the FBI to get a track set up on that number and analyze the hell out of that picture.”

I nod numbly as I send the picture to our FBI contact. Against my better judgment, I enlarge the picture of Randi again. “She looks fucking terrified. What the hell did they do to her?” The picture blurs as wetness gathers in my lower lids.

“You’re letting your relationship and feelings for her cloud your judgment again, Benson. Stay focused. My guess, whatever you see on the screen is from the wreck, not them. We saw the town car, the splintered passenger window. They’re not hurting her.”

Yet. That’s the word he leaves off for my sake. But he’s right. I am letting my feelings for her and our personal relationship hamper any unbiased, unemotional thinking. Not that knowing I need to detach myself can actually help me do it.

She’s scared and hurt. My girl, the one I swore to protect as my job and as the love of my life. I failed her. This is proof that I don’t deserve her or the love and trust she so freely offers me.

“Snap out of it, Trey, or I’ll pull this fucking truck over and beat some sense into you, which will waste valuable time. Time she doesn’t have.”

He’s right. Like always.

Fuck, I need a cigarette. The craving hits hard and fast, making my fingers tremble with need for nicotine to calm my restless nerves.

To help realign my focus, I swipe the picture, ready to delete the entire text. If it's still here, available for me to look at whenever I want, it'll keep pulling my focus. Maybe that's why whoever sent this....

Wait a fucking minute.

"My number isn't listed anywhere, and not many people have it," I muse while raking my hands through my hair over and over again like it might help me think faster.

"Only half of the women in DC."

I shoot an annoyed glare his direction. "Not the time for jokes, asshat."

"Just an observation."

"Fine. I'll rephrase that. Not many people capable of kidnapping the motherfucking president under the watchful eye of her Secret Service agents have my damn number."

"Agreed. So who does that leave us?"

My eyes shift back and forth, my sight unfocused as I mentally go through the list of names. "Well, all of our team, but they were at the crash site." My knuckles turn white from my clenched fists. "All but one." Fury builds in my gut, heating my blood and skin. "That motherfucker is a part of this. I know it. I just fucking know it."

The most logical explanation is he's been the one on the inside this whole time, leaking our information to those who wanted to harm Randi. I don't know why, and

to be honest, I don't fucking care. All I want is her back safe and whoever responsible to have a bullet between their eyes.

"It all points toward him," Tank muses, jerking the wheel to the right. We take the exit that will take us straight to the agency's main office. "We'll know more in five minutes. Hold on."

With that quick warning, he slams on the gas, sending us hurtling through the streets. Other drivers honk, and a few even raise their hand out the window to flip us the bird. Not that I care. Fuck them and their need to get to work. We're on a mission to save a life—hell, maybe even save the country.

Not that I think Sam would do a poor job in the president role, it's just not his role to fill. Randi, as much as she can't see it, has done a phenomenal job as president and still has so much she wants to accomplish before the end of her term.

The SUV's tires squeal as Tank slams on the brakes, finagling the large vehicle into a compact car parking spot around the corner from our destination. I'm out before the engine is cut, racing through the packed downtown sidewalk, shouldering my way through as I zigzag toward the front door of the agency's building. Heavy footfalls and barked commands behind me to get out of our way tell me Tank is hot on my heels.

The glass door nearly shatters as I slam it open, the metal handle clipping the other side door with the impact. Not waiting for the elevator, I make a beeline for the stairwell and bound up the steps three at a time until I reach the floor where I know we'll find the director.

With everything that happened this morning, between the president being taken and so many agents dead, I doubt I'll find her holed up in her office. More than likely she'll be in the war room surrounded by other high-ranking officials and those she

trusts.

That's my destination.

I grip the cool metal lever and give it a hard yank, but the door doesn't budge.

Locked.

The door rattles under the pounding of my fist. I relentlessly beat on it until the unmistakable click of a lock releasing reaches my ears. An inch of a gap appears between the door and the frame—all I need. Wedging a steel-toe boot into the small crack, I thrust a shoulder and hip against the thick wood.

It bursts open from my assault, and a pained cry comes from somewhere between the door and the wall, not that Tank nor I care as we storm into the room. A quick assessment of those in the room verifies what I assumed earlier. Ten directors and higher-ups sit or stand around the long conference table, folders, pictures, and documents scattered along the dark surface.

Ten sets of eyes blink in shock at the interruption. All except the director, who looks more resigned than surprised at our rude entrance.

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“Agent Washington, Agent Benson, what is the meaning of this?” she shouts from where she leans over the table, a stack of pictures in front of her.

“We need answers,” I snap, not releasing her furious yet exhausted look. A sliver of guilt eats its way through my conscience. I’m being a dick when she just lost many good agents.

I shrug a shoulder at my internal turmoil, dispelling the thought on softening my tone.

“We’re working on that now. Go back to the crash site, wait for further orders—”

“No,” I state through clenched teeth. “We need answers now on that shady-ass agent you put on our team last year. He’s associated with what happened this morning somehow. Now we just have to find him.”

Her shoulders rise at my words as several tension-filled lines form along her forehead and between her brows.

“We can’t find him... again,” Tank adds from where he stands calm and collected beside me, his tone and stance the picture-perfect professional agent.

Fuck that shit. We need answers, even if I have to be an asswipe to get them. I’ll apologize after I save Randi and lock her away for the rest of her life to ensure something like this never happens again.

A shake of her head sends several short blonde strands cascading forward, creating a makeshift shield to hide her emotions from us and the rest of the room.

“Give us a moment,” she says with a sigh. The order hangs in the still room, everyone still standing exactly as they were when we barged inside. “That means now.”

The shuffling of papers and scrape of chair legs along the worn paper-thin carpet fill the room as the ten people surrounding the table jolt into action. Everyone files out of the room, the one I nearly flattened to a pancake with the door the last to leave, casting a glare in my direction before slamming it closed behind him.

With everyone gone, I move deeper into the room and pause across the long conference table from the director. Pressing the tips of two fingers against a photograph, I slide it along the smooth surface toward me for a better look. Hopefully they know more than Tank and me. That way we can combine information and piece this puzzle together faster by working together and sharing intel.

“First of all, it’s not what you think with Agent Smith,” she says, staring at a picture on the table. It’s one of the entire scene, three wrecked cars, the chaos and destruction palpable even on paper. “Second, I want you both to know I take full blame for this. I never should’ve approved the smaller convoy when she went out to visit her”—she flicks a wrist—“special friend.”

Tank’s cough has me peering over my shoulder, his sly smile there and gone in a flash. Good to know the boys have kept who Randi was visiting private. Who knows what the director would say if she found out Randi’s “special friend” was actually me.

“No one expected this to happen, ma’am.” Tank steps closer and folds his arms along the back of a chair left pulled away from the table. “It’s no one’s fault except the people who orchestrated the attack and abduction. Which brings us back to Smith and our suspicions that he’s a part of this somehow.”

“What makes you feel you have enough evidence to accuse a fellow agent of

treason?” The bite in her tone signals we’re walking on thin ice. True, it is a heavy allegation, but we do have proof.

“There was a witness who saw—”

“What witness?” Her sharp scrutiny levels me from where she sits. “No one has mentioned a witness being found in any of the reports that have come through.”

“That was our intention.” Shoving the picture away, I press both hot palms to the table’s cool surface and lean forward, pressing most of my weight onto my hands. “Based on the information this man gave us, we suspect the men who attacked had inside information. Information only an agent would know. If no one knows there’s a witness, then the agent responsible for leaking the president’s route and the new surveillance we had installed won’t know we’re on to them.”

“Who is it? And how do you know he’s telling the truth?”

“On our inspection of various connecting alleyways—which is how we believe the attackers escaped without the backup convoy seeing them when they arrived—we came upon a homeless man.” Now in full alpha team lead mode, Tank’s words are cold, calculated as he recites what we know to the director. It doesn’t pass my notice that his gaze hasn’t dropped to the table where the pictures of our dead friends and agents lie haphazardly spread out. He’s hurting at the loss. Hell, I am too, but that can’t shift our focus from the current objective—finding the president.

“The homeless man stated he saw two men fleeing down the alley. One was carrying a woman, and the other, leading, was wearing a suit. A suit, Madam Director. Who do you think that suggests?” I narrow my eyes at her, hoping this information will help break down the wall of protection she has around the mysterious agent. “Based on his behavior on other assignments, disappearing when needed and now being unavailable, we suspect it’s Smith who’s the inside man. We find Smith, we find the

president.”

The chair creaks under her slight weight as she leans back and steeples two fingers beneath her chin. “You think it’s an agent.”

“Not just any agent. Smith,” I correct. “He was forced onto our team without any say from our team lead, Davis. Then, during the couple times the president’s life was in danger, Smith was conveniently unavailable or missing. We know nothing about him. Hell, I don’t think I even know his first name.” My chest heaves from the exertion of holding back the roar that my voice wants to morph into. Yelling at my boss won’t win me any favors, so I keep my tone in check.

“It’s not him specifically,” she states all calm and collected, the very opposite of the war of emotions raging inside me. “But based on the witness statement and the execution of the incident, an agent leaking the information makes sense. I’ve been sitting here trying to piece together how these fuckers knew her route to and from the residence.” She flashes an accusing glare my way. Okay, maybe she does know I’m Randi’s special friend. Whatever, I’ll deal with those consequences later. “And they knew about the smaller agent force and new surveillance. It didn’t add up until now. So yes, Agent Benson, I concur that the circumstances coupled with that witness statement, even though unreliable, point to an agent assisting with this morning’s attack on the president. But who is the—”

“It’s fucking Smith.” The table rattles under the weight of my fist slamming against the top. “Why are you covering for him?”

“It’s not Agent Smith. Move on, focus on other possible suspects.” Her delicate brows draw close. Tugging at a small necklace, she runs the charm along the length of the thin gold chain. “I’ll gather the full beta team roster. It has to be one of them or an incident would’ve been reported that an unscheduled agent was on premises before the attack. They know the rules which are in place to prevent things like this from

happening.”

“Why the fuck are you adamant that it’s not Smith? The evidence since he was forced onto the alpha team all points to him.”

“I know it’s not Agent Smith.” Dropping the necklace, she casually folds her hands beneath the table, but not before I catch their small tremble. “Tell me what else you saw at the scene, what other evidence you found.”

“No,” I growl and shove away from the table, ready to stalk around to her side and shake some sense into her. A grip on my shoulder stops me from advancing on our boss.

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Our female boss.

Fuck, what am I doing?

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I breathe in deep. “Tell me right now, Madam Director, right fucking now why we shouldn’t issue a search and destroy for Smith. Explain why he shouldn’t be hunted down and hung for being a traitor.” Beads of sweat dot my forehead and slip down the back of my neck with my rising anger and restraint.

Her head dips in what seems to be either defeat or acceptance.

I dare a look to my friend, who appears as confused as I feel.

“Madam Director,” Tank urges, his tone clipped. “The president is running out of time.” I fight to hold back the gut-wrenching panic his words triggers. “If you know something about Agent Smith, why we shouldn’t consider him as a suspect, tell us. Then we can move on to find the bastard who not only betrayed Randi and his country but this very fucking agency itself. Tell us. Now.”

Whoa. The controlled anger in his deep voice and expression makes me flinch, and I’m not even the one he’s talking to.

“I know it’s not him,” she murmurs, now massaging her temples with two fingers.

“How? How can you be certain. Do you even know his background?” I snap.

“Yes.”

“Tell. Us. Now.” I’ve never wanted to cause harm to a woman until now. Why the hell is she holding back? We need this information.

Sitting up tall, she collects herself, straightening her shoulders. “I do know his background, and yes, Agents Washington and Benson, I know for a fact he’s not our traitor. And I know all this with 100 percent certainty because....” Turning the chair, she puts her back to us and faces the row of dark-tinted windows that look out over the city. “Because Agent Smith is my son.”

What. The. Ever. Loving. Fuck?

Chapter Six

Trey

“What?” Tank and I say in unison, the shock of her confession deflating the earlier tension from the room.

With the director’s back still to us, I shift to face Tank, eyes wide, my mouth opening and closing as I search for words. But what in the hell do you say to that? Didn’t see that coming, because it makes zero sense.

By the narrowing of my friend’s eyes and the sharp hitch of his chin toward the woman across the table, it seems Tank is on the same wavelength.

Grinding my teeth, I sort through what to say or ask to help clarify the million questions I have, but she beats me to it.

“He was with Homeland before I transferred him to Secret Service. I won’t go into

the long version, because as Agent Washington mentioned before, the president doesn't have much time. But I can tell you he was top of his class at MIT, recruited directly out of college. You have to know he's a good man and an even better agent with his observation talents and ability to pull apart truths and lies quickly." Her weighted pause has me inching closer to the edge of the table, waiting for more. "He's always had this... edge to see through things others can't. Homeland used his talents, put him in difficult scenarios right out of training, ones that still haunt him.

"Two years ago, he stopped by for a visit, and I noticed he was different. I couldn't put my finger on it, but there was a darkness weighing him down. I came to the conclusion that the years he'd put into Homeland and the types of ops and requirements needed to tackle the stateside terrorists were taking a heavy toll. Then he started showing up injured." I hold a breath as she rotates the chair around to face us. Dampness lingers along her lower lids. "I asked him what happened, asked what was going on, but he refused to open up. He didn't... doesn't have anyone. No wife, no girlfriend or friends. It's just him and me. So I knew it had to be me to save him, even if it was saving him from himself.

"I had him followed shortly thereafter. The first agent I assigned to tail him was ditched in less than ten minutes. The second even faster than that. It took months to figure out how he was gaining the injuries when he wasn't on assignment. And when I found out..." Her short blonde hair shifts along her jawline with a shake of her head. "He was in deep. I didn't confront him, knowing he'd deny any involvement or simply walk away from me and never come back. Nor did I ask for permission when I went above his head and called in a favor, having him transferred to my agency. With Ray unraveling on and off assignments, they willingly transferred what they assumed was a too-far-gone agent to the Secret Service."

Ray. So that's his first name. If I had a hundred guesses, I would've never gotten it correct. That asshole looks more like a Frank or Dave or Charlie than a Ray. No wonder he hasn't told us his name. Poor fuck is embarrassed it doesn't match his

persona. Unlike mine that totally fits. I think.

“Unraveling?” I question, my voice deep with focus. It’s a nice story and all, but what if she’s too close to this, considering the relationship, and can’t see the blaring signs that her son did unravel completely and abducted Randi?

“Taking greater risks than needed, almost as if he’d lost all self-preservation. Which is why he started....” She paused a moment, then looked at Tank. “You said you tried reaching out to him?”

“Correct, no answer.”

She nods. “I’ll keep trying him. In the meantime, what other leads can you pursue? With the suit tip, agent is one angle we can dive into. I’ll look at the beta team roster, compare it to those who were killed in the attack, and go from there.”

“What aren’t you telling us about Smith?” Gripping the chair back beside me, I squeeze until my knuckles turn white. “Why shouldn’t we suspect him? What’s with the disappearing? You say you know.”

“I do, but I’m not sure it’s my story to tell. I found out by going behind his back, which cost me months of us not speaking.”

“Madam Director, tell us, or I can’t give up on the idea that Smith is behind this somehow. The disappearances are a huge indicator that he’s up to something shady.”

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She huffs in seeming frustration as she purses her lips. “Fine. But not a word to him.” I hold two fingers in the air with the universal sign of trustworthiness. Unfortunately for her, I was never a Boy Scout, but she doesn’t need to be reminded of that right now. “Ray is mixed up with an illegal underground fighting circuit.”

“Huh?” I tilt my head in complete and utter loss.

“I don’t know all the details, more bits and pieces through my own digging. It’s a gruesome, everything-goes type of fight club. Every time he steps into the makeshift ring, his life is at risk. Blades of any kind are allowed. No gloves, no tape, no padding. Anything goes until one person concedes to defeat or dies. And from my informants, the latter happens often.”

“How does this tell me he’s innocent in all this? Sounds like he has an anger problem and is off his fucking rocker.”

Her thin lips press into a line at my disparaging comment about her son. “They’re everywhere, these circuits. All he has to do is put his name in the pool. And with his record, it wouldn’t surprise me that every time he’s interested, they find a fight for him to enter.”

I stare blankly at the director, needing a bit more than that to piece together whatever web she’s weaving.

“Let me ask you this. After these disappearances, did you notice any signs of injury? A flinch, a bruise, or cuts?” she asks.

I start to shake my head until a flash of memory stops me short. That time in the Oval Office, and a few others he seemed stiff almost like he was sore or healing.

“I’ve never seen him with bruises on his face, anywhere visible,” I muse. Tank paces behind me, no doubt trying to process all this new information on Smith while devising a plan for the next few hours. This isn’t getting us anywhere closer to finding Randi and punishing those responsible.

“That’s because most are unable to land a clean hit. He protects his face before everything else, which leaves other parts of him vulnerable, but from what I’ve gathered, he’s the only undefeated opponent in the circuit.”

There’s no stopping my slack-jawed expression. Well, hell. Now that’s fucking impressive.

“This doesn’t change the fact that I don’t fully trust him, but it does make me question if he’s the one we should be focused on. You say you trust him?” I ask her.

“He has his issues, but yes, I trust him not to betray me or our country.”

“Fine. There is a tip we can follow up on while we wait to hear from Smith,” I state as I shove off the back of the chair. It tips forward before righting itself and slamming back to the floor. “You’ll focus on the beta team and let us know if you find anything suspicious in their backgrounds or whereabouts last night. We’ll circle back when we’re done with this other lead.”

“What’s this lead?” she asks.

“A suggestion from someone we trust.” Tank stalks toward the door. “Let us know immediately if you obtain any new information or leads.” Hand on the door lever, he pauses and shifts to face the director. “I’m not happy that you hid valuable insight

from me regarding Agent Smith which put my team in danger.” Her lips part as she readies her defense, but Tank puts his back to her. “We’ll discuss this after the president is found.”

The door hurls open under the force of his yank, slamming against the opposite wall with a loud crack. Bits of drywall sprinkle to the ground from the divot the handle created.

Tank and I stomp down the stairs to follow through on Vlad’s tip about Secretary of State Todd Rosen.

Halfway to the lobby, I realize my earlier doubt and suspicion of Smith has morphed into something resembling respect after the director’s explanation. Respect and excitement. If he was Homeland’s go-to agent for intelligence gathering, there’s a chance he might have some suspicions on who our traitor is.

Now all we have to do is find the bastard.

“We interrogate the secretary of state together,” Tank says as I slide into the passenger seat. He jams a finger against the Start button like it personally offended him.

“Interrogate or question?” I chuckle.

“Question. If anyone outside of this truck asks, that is.”

A ghost of a smile pulls at my lips. “Noted. You know where you’re going?”

He nods and yanks on the wheel, throwing the SUV into the heavy flow of traffic. A weighted silence settles around us as he weaves through the rush hour traffic. If he’s like me, he’s probably lost in his own thoughts, processing what was revealed in that

office.

If what she says is true, then Smith truly is the badass fucker some have suspected him to be. I have no qualms with how he goes about managing his anger; it's his body, his life, his choice. From what little I know, the circuit is all consenting adults. The men—and who knows, maybe a few women—who put their name in the fight selection hat have to understand the rules and risks involved. It's violent as fuck and not my scene, but we all have to find our own way to process what we've done in our job to protect the millions of innocent lives in the US.

Do I judge him for the violence he dispenses to save himself?

Fuck no.

Hell, I might even respect him a little more now.

Not because of the violent way he deals with his anger but the fact that he is dealing with it in some way. The easy way would be to drown your conscience with alcohol and move on to the next soul-darkening operation, letting it all build until you implode. Him choosing another path shows dedication on his part, even if it seems a bit suicidal.

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A sharp ring blares through the SUV's speakers, cutting my rambling internal thoughts on Smith and his life choices.

Both brows shoot up my forehead at the name listed on the display screen.

Agent Smith.

With a quick press of a button, Tank ends the near shrill ringing. Static crackles through the empty space before settling into silence.

"Smith." Tank's deep voice rumbles through the cab. "Where the fuck have you been?"

"Unavailable. I just caught the news. Where do you need me?" If he can sense the impatience from Tank's clipped words, he doesn't let on. Hell, his even tone makes me think he's bored, which pisses me right the fuck off.

"Why don't you call your mom and get caught up to speed with her side of the investigation first?" I snap.

A long pause fills the car. I watch the little time counter tick up in seconds, waiting for him to respond to my jab.

His heavy sigh blows over the mouthpiece. "What all do you know?"

"Everything. She told us everything. Now get your motherfucking shit together, Smith, and help us find her." A full-body tremor racks my body with the impatience

racing through me. “We’re headed to check out that fuckstick of a secretary of state.”

“Good thinking. There’s something off about him,” Smith muses, clearly unruffled by my obvious anger.

“We have a witness who says one of the men running away from the scene was in a suit.”

“You’re thinking it was an agent and was in on it somehow.”

“We do. Any thoughts on where we should focus after we question Rosen?” I hold in a breath, allowing a slow burn to tighten my lungs. We need another lead, something other than a damn inkling from the Russian president.

“I do,” Smith responds calmly.

“Care to share?” Tank snaps, slamming the heel of his left palm against the dash, startling me. This man treats his SUV like his only child normally and never takes his anger out on it. Seems like it’s not only me with emotions running unchecked. “She’s running out of time.”

“She is. I’ll call you back.”

Without another word, the bastard ends the call.

Tank shoots a dark look my way, promising retribution on Smith for hanging up on us, before turning his attention back out the windshield.

As he drives us toward Rosen’s place, we use the downtime to talk over what we know and strategy for interrogating the secretary of state. By the time the large spacious estates with perfectly groomed yards and mature trees fill every window,

we're forty minutes from downtown and have a solid plan in place.

We're still not moving fast enough. We need to be doing more, finding more. We're racing a doomsday clock, the time seeming to tick faster as the hours pass without her in my arms. I can't shake the feeling that we're running out of time. That she's running out of time.

Stay strong, Mess. Stay strong and wait for me.

* * *

Unease churns my gut, twisting my insides as we speed down the pristine drive of Todd Rosen's massive home—mansion, really. There's no way this fool Rosen makes enough from his salary to afford something like this in this area. Before Birmingham pulled him out of obscurity, Todd Rosen was a nobody, so how does someone like him have all this?

"Family money?" I question, my hand hovering over the chrome door handle, readying to push it open the moment we come to a halt.

"Not that I know of. You know that tool would've mentioned coming from money when he made a try for our girl that time a couple years back when she was still VP. Remember that?"

"Don't remind me," I growl at my friend.

The SUV slows to a crawl as we round the front drive and come to a stop directly in front of the steps leading to the wide double front door. My boots slam onto the pristine white concrete drive moments after Tank shifted the SUV into Park.

I survey the entire area as I approach the steps and begin the short climb to the front

door. Professionally sculpted hedges and brilliant flowers line the circular pull through. A high-tech security camera points directly at me with another two or three lining the edge of the brick home.

I squint, fighting off the late morning sun as it sears my eyes, making me regret forgetting the agency-issued sunglasses at home. “But the rest of that statement was true about him being a tool and flaunting his money if he had it. So then what’s all this?” I wave toward the colonial-style home, immaculate grounds, and... fuck, is that a fountain I hear nearby?

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“No idea, but something feels off about it all,” Tank says over his shoulder as he marches up the steps.

A red monstrosity looms before us at the top. Well over ten feet tall and just as wide, the double doors feel like a warning of some kind. A hint that if you pass through the doors, you might not come out alive.

Shaking off the eerie feeling of being watched, probably from the security cameras and the person monitoring the feed, I forgo knocking. The large brass doorknob barely fits into my hand as I give it a twist, hoping to find it unlocked hoping to catch the bastard off guard. Legal ramifications of doing this without a warrant be damned.

Of course I’m not that lucky.

Grumbling under my breath, I pound a fist against the door, the thick wood barely vibrating under my onslaught. The side of my hand burns as I continue to demand entry until it swings open, leaving my hand hovering midair. A man in a black suit stands in the middle of the doorframe, his glare darting from me to over my shoulder where Tank stands.

“Secret Service,” I state, shoving my credentials an inch from his nose. His scrutinizing gaze rakes over my information. “We need to question Mr. Secretary on his involvement with the incident this morning involving the president’s disappearance.”

The guard’s eyes widen a fraction, slack jaw erasing the earlier indignation.

Using his surprise to my advantage, I shove him aside with ease and step into the foyer.

“Where is he?” I question as I take a quick scan of the opulent foyer, searching for the fucker we’re here to question. A deep ache pulses in the muscles along my jaw from the constant restraint from roaring and releasing all this held-back wrath.

“In his office,” the guard states, shaking his head. Suspicion creeps in at how quickly he accepted the idea that his boss would be a part of the attack. Either he’s setting us up or has seen enough while on duty to warrant our accusation. “He’s been holed up in there all morning.” He waves a hand up the curved stairwell. “Come with me. I’ll show you the way.”

Tank slaps a hand to the guard’s chest to stop him from moving. “No need. We’ll take it from here. All we need are directions.”

The guard’s eyes flick up the stairs and back to Tank. Rubbing a hand along his clean-shaven jaw, he hitches his chin toward the second level. “Take a left at the top of the stairs. It’s the last door on your left.” He slides his hand to the back of his neck and tightens his grip. “I’m not sure about his involvement with what you’re here about, but I’ve been on this rotation for six months, and....”

“And?” Tank prods when the guard clams up.

Tension builds in the open entryway, Tank and I both on edge as we wait for him to continue. Hopefully it’ll be something we can use during the interrogation. My tight chest and racing pulse tell me we’re on to something here, but we need to hurry.

Eyes downcast, finding the black-and-white marble stone floor suddenly riveting, he raises his shoulders in a noncommittal shrug. “Things don’t add up. But the pay is good, and he offers dental.” He lets out an amused chuckle. “Should’ve known it was

too good to be true.” Like he’s found his courage to give us the details, he raises his gaze from the floor and levels it my way. “The people who come and go from here, at all hours of the night, aren’t the type of people you’d expect the secretary of state to be associated with. I’ve seen my share of shady businessmen, and these have it written all over them.” He shakes his head. “I’m not sure what he’s involved in, but there’s something not right going on. And I suspect the others before me felt the same but were paid to keep quiet or knew if they spoke up about it, they wouldn’t be living very long.”

Done fucking waiting and hearing even more evidence for why I never liked this fuckstick, I storm to the stairs and take them two at a time. The dark wooden steps take the brunt of my urgency with each heavy pound of my boots. At the landing, I turn toward the hallway, but a tight grip lands on my shoulder and twists me the opposite way I was originally headed.

“Your other left, you idiot,” Tank huffs with a mix of exasperation and humor. He gives me a shove in the new direction, and I stumble several feet.

Side by side, we stalk down the hall, guns drawn, ready for anything. After the guard’s confession, we’re not taking any chances at being ambushed. Rosen is mixed up in something, but what and who, only time will tell.

We clear two pristine bedrooms and one bathroom on our way toward Rosen’s office. The dark oak door at the end of the hall is the only obstacle before I gain some answers that will hopefully bring us one step closer to finding Randi.

The metal knob bites into my hand under my tight grip.

Fucking locked.

Unease surges, clenching my gut. Something feels even more off up here than it did

downstairs.

My breath catches at a hopeful thought. What if it's her? What if Randi is being held here?

Hand still gripped around the doorknob, I pitch back, gaining leverage. My shoulder and the door connect with a thump, and a pained grunt escapes me. A faint crack of wood sounds at the second attempt at using my body as a battering ram. Again I shove my body weight against the door, new fissures and cracks spreading with each hit.

After the fifth or sixth hit, I slump forward, catching my breath and giving my throbbing shoulder a quick break before going back at it.

"Stand back, you skinny-ass fool."

I grimace as I unmold my hand from the knob. Good shoulder against the wall, I wave a hand to the door. "Go right ahead, brute squad, if you think you can do better."

Of course he does. One hit. One fucking hit of one of his massive shoulders and the door splinters to pieces. If I didn't know it was physically impossible, I'd swear on the Bible that the area that took the direct impact disintegrated to sawdust right before my eyes.

"Show-off. I weakened it for you," I mumble, knowing full well I didn't do shit but maybe scratch the dark-stained finish.

Righting himself from where he'd fallen slightly forward toward the door, Tank turns with a cocky-as-hell smile.

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Broken fragments of wood splinter, the larger intact pieces buckling under my boots as I step through the wreckage into the office that hopefully holds the man who can provide us with answers. Stuffed bookshelves line three of the four walls. A rolling ladder catches my gaze as I survey the office in search of that fucker Todd Rosen.

I find him sitting behind an industrial metal desk on the far side of the room. The distinct coppery scent of blood wafts up my nose, preparing me for what I'll find as I dare a few steps closer. The excitement and anticipation at getting answers from this motherfucker fall, sinking in my stomach like a damn lead cannonball. It won't happen unless we call a medium.

Because Todd Rosen, Secretary of State, is fucking dead.

And not just dead.

Executed.

Chapter Seven

Randi

“Who. Are. You?” Each word scrapes against my raw throat, making them raspy and weak.

Hard, warm metal pushes against my temple. I freeze, even my breaths cease as it drags sensually down my cheek. Out of the corner of my eye, the light reflects off the metal, giving it a shape I recognize all too well.

A gun.

“No one of consequence,” he says at my back.

“Your voice is familiar, and you’re petting me with a gun. Pretty sure who you are holds some importance here.”

Damn it, Randi, stop provoking the crazies.

“My voice? Interesting. How observant of you, Madam President. And here I thought you never saw me among the others. Good to know I had somewhat of a lasting impression.” Leather-encased fingers caress the length of my neck. A shiver of revulsion races down my spine. “Good thing I won’t be around long enough for you to identify me. I’m only the kidnapper in this plan, not the executioner, as much as I want to be.”

I bite my upper lip, holding back a terrified whimper.

The leather of the glove, though soft, is like a knife slowly slicing through my skin, leaving damaged flesh in its wake as it moves lower.

My nostrils flare with each rapid breath. I fight the urge to scream and beg.

“So you are like your friend,” I snap. The restraints slice through my already damaged skin as I shift to move away from his touch. “Taking advantage of a bound woman. That’s how you get your fucking rocks off, you sick bastard?”

The scream I fought to hold back erupts up my throat, crackling and breaking as my neck snaps back. His fisted grip on my hair doesn't lessen; in fact, my pleas seem to encourage his hold rather than ease.

“Far from it, Randi. You want to know what gets my rocks off? What I envision while I fist my cock and explode in the shower night after night? This.” He inhales deeply, the fabric covering his face brushing against my ear and snagging a wisp of hair. “This. The smell of fear, the terror in your wide eyes, all because of me. No, Randi, I won’t touch you the way you’re thinking, but your screams and soft little cries and pleas will fuel my dirty fantasies for weeks to come.”

“Fear? You fuck your own hand to fear?” I almost laugh. Almost. The terror he loves so much kills the giggle before it can even attempt to escape.

“That and the memory of the pain I inflicted to cause said delicious fear.” Almost to prove his point, he wraps the earlier caressing fingers around my neck and squeezes. “This, the moment when you realize your life is in my hands and there’s no escape. That your existence is over. The array of emotions that will flash across your face is fucking erotic as hell.” He presses the gun against my temple so hard a stifled cry escapes even with his crushing grip cutting off my air supply. “That is what I’ll fuck my own hand to tonight. That and the fantasies of slicing apart that fucker Benson piece by piece.”

Just like he hoped, terror rockets through my system. Rational thought vanishes, and I thrash in the chair, trying to escape.

His masked face hovers beside mine. Even through the blood pounding in my ears, his excited panting is clear.

“That’s it,” he coos. “Fight me. Fight back like you have a chance.”

His fingers tighten, cutting off my airway. Red-hot burning engulfs my lungs, and I twist along the seat in a failed attempt to dislodge his hold. Darkness grows in my vision, my muscles loosening and trembling with the need for oxygen. A second before I give in to his strangling hold those tight fingers relax. I gasp for breath, my

tears leaking down my cheeks and slipping inside my parted lips.

“Which you don’t, Randi. No one will find you before it’s too late. I’ve made sure of that.”

“Please,” I sob, any hope of not showing this monster how much he terrifies me gone. “Why are you doing this?”

“Why did I plan all this, take you knowing his end plans for you?” The torturous fingers tighten again. I scream before it’s cut off to a gurgle. “Because he paid me. Because they paid me. Because it’s fun. But ultimately it comes down to money. A shit ton of money, all for delivering you.” I scream through panic engulfing my every thought, but nothing comes out until his grip relaxes once again. Too busy sucking down air, despite the sharp stabs of pain that radiate from my right side with each breath, I stay silent and let him continue without another plea or comment. “So really you only have yourself to blame for all this. At some point in your life, you made a bad choice. That decision or action put you in unfavorable light with many influential parties. Which brought me to you.” I slump as his fingers slip off my skin. With little force behind it, he slaps at my already bruised cheek. I can’t even muster enough energy to cringe at the pain. “And I have to tell you, Randi, for the first time in my professional career, I had two contracts for the same damn mark. You. So thank you for living, making those poor choices, and ultimately dying, because in doing so, you’ve made me a very rich man.”

I shut my eyes and pray for a miracle. A realistic miracle like a heart attack or stroke.

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When neither happens, I peel my lids back open, requiring more effort than normal.

“What are you?” I breathe. I’d like to say the “what” instead of “who” was carefully crafted to be a jab, but it wasn’t. In fact, I’m not sure how my overexerted and dehydrated mind is even forming complete understandable sentences at this point in all this.

“You can think of me as an entrepreneur of sorts. I saw a niche market that needed... filling and stepped in. The skills beaten into me by a certain agency helped me become the most efficient and successful of people in my line of work.”

He pauses, a heaviness lingering in the silence like he’s not through with the conversation just lost in thought. “However, with this contract fulfilled, I’ll have to relocate and change up my look a bit.”

“Because you know they’ll put two and two together. And when they do, they will hunt you down. Every agency will be looking for you. They will find you, and they will kill you for the traitor you are.” The last words slur, my exhaustion overtaking my ability to speak.

“Doubtful. I’ve just gotten back from tying up loose ends. And you know what? I have to tell you, that felt good. The slimy bastard was always one I had to keep an eye on. Never knew when his loyalties would shift. But no, after this, I’ll disappear for a while, reinvent myself somewhere new.”

“Sounds lonely.” My shoulders round, the muscles too fatigued to keep me sitting up straight, but the small move tugs my wrists against the restraints. I hiss at the feel of

hard plastic digging deep into my skin and force myself to sit up to ease the tightness. “Any chance you can you take these off? You’ve watched me, traveled with me. You know I pose no threat to someone with your skills.”

Just saying the small praise forces bile up my throat. But if downplaying my abilities by building up his ego helps get these fucking zip ties off, I’ll do it. Hell, I’ll throw him a damn parade if it gets my hands free.

“Not a chance.”

Disappointment surges, but I hold back the tears and instead rack my brain for what to say next. Get him talking, or angry, or hell, anything that might disrupt the plan.

Shawn’s plan.

If inflating his ego didn’t get him on my side, maybe deflating it will push him to make a mistake of some kind.

Or get me killed faster.

It’s worth a shot. Either I die now or later. Neither is ideal, but if dying now means I don’t have to sit in this hotbox any longer, then I’ll take door number one all day every day.

“Yeah, I get that,” I say on a cough. Clearing my throat, I swallow a few times to help my raspy voice. Being nearly choked to death—twice—does a number to your vocal cords apparently. “Especially considering you failed twice before this to get your hands on me. I wouldn’t trust your skills either with an unarmed, bound woman. Too big of a risk of you failing again, am I right?”

My eyes widen at his fast movement. One second he was across the room, and the

next his cloth-covered face is so close his stank breath wafts up my nose even through the black fabric.

“Watch your motherfucking mouth, cunt.” Damn, I hate that word. My hackles rise with distaste and annoyance. “Those failed attempts were not my fault.”

“That’s what they all say.” I raise my brows in defiance. Well, I think I do. Can’t really feel my forehead, or my eyebrows, for that matter. Have I ever been able to feel my eyebrows? Can anyone feel their eyebrows? “Can you feel your eyebrows?”

“I provided the intel.” Okay, so clearly we’re still stuck on his failures and not the eyebrow thing. Fine. If I live through this, I’ll start a government-funded study on the question. “Those idiots hired the ones to execute the mission based on the accurate”—he cuts a look my way—“intel.”

“Like your friend.” I’m going on sheer gut instinct at this point. I have no idea what I’m digging for, but keeping him talking keeps his hands away from my throat, which I consider a win. “Go me,” I whisper so silently my lips move with no sound.

“That night’s failure,” he hisses as he shoves off the chair, going back to pacing the short length of the cinderblock wall. Weightlessness rips out a gasp from me as the chair I’m secured to rocks backward from the force of his move. “That was that motherfucker Benson’s fault. He wasn’t supposed to be in your room. You should’ve been alone.”

Those words. I’ve heard them before, but more formed as a question. Add in the radiating anger and it tickles a distant memory. He’s said something similar to me before. But who, where? Every time I think I’ve wrapped my mental fingers around the memory it slips away leaving me frustrated.

“You killed the guards that night, not your friend who came through the balcony.

You're the one who gave him the key." My voice rises with each accusation. That night... fuck, if Trey hadn't been there....

"They were tools anyway. No loss with their deaths."

"And you're the toolbox." I snort at my words. "I said the same thing to Kyle once." I narrow my eyes at my captor, who's clearly not laughing at the joke. "He didn't find it funny either."

"Speaking of the dead. What did you hold over him?" Something like curiosity sparks in his tone instead of being cold and emotionless. "Did you fuck him?"

"Ew, no. I'd rather die first." I wince. "Wrong choice of words considering my current situation."

A low chuckle rumbles from where he stands now leaning back against the wall, arms crossed over his black T-shirt. It's the same man as earlier; guess he switched his suit out for this mercenary look. All black, even down to the turban-type covering wrapped around his face and head. "Believe me, that fucker Birmingham felt the same way, even at the end."

"How...?" Realization sucks the words right out of my throat. A cold chill races through my body, freezing me to the bone. Tears pool before escaping out of the corners of both eyes. I was right, Kyle didn't commit suicide. This asshole killed him. "Why?" I choke out.

"Money. Money is always the answer to the 'why' question. Don't let anyone ever tell you otherwise."

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“You. It was you. All of this was you.”

“Ah, see, that’s where you’re wrong. All of this was you. I’m simply the man hired to execute what was already put in motion. All those people, all the death that’s happened in the last year, was all because of you. Those agents dead or injured—your fault. The death of that pompous ass Birmingham—your fault. And today, your death—your fault.”

“Unless I agree to his demands.”

Silence. I swear it’s so silent I can hear the sweat dripping between my breasts.

“What?” he asks calmly, but the change in his stance from relaxed to defensive with my simple statement tells me otherwise. I watch in fascination as he begins to pace again.

“What the what?” I respond innocently, even though I know exactly what I’ve just uncovered. Shawn is a sociopath and willing to lie, steal, and kill whoever to get what he wants. Apparently this idiot in front of me took Shawn at his word that I’d be dead by morning.

A hysterical laugh tickles in my lungs, wiggling its way up until it bursts from my dry lips.

“You actually trusted him?” Another fit of giggles shakes my shoulders. “Oh, you are so fucked.”

A bone-crunching backhand lands squarely on my right cheek. I scream at the impact, the force like razors up my throat.

“No one plays me,” he snaps. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“He’s playing you.” Swiping my thick tongue back and forth, I gather the sticky liquid filling my mouth and spit the blood to the floor. “You have no idea who you’re dealing with.”

“Wrong, Randi. Fucking wrong.”

“Right, and unicorns aren’t real.”

“Stop it with the fucking unicorn shit,” he bellows. Lacing his fingers behind his head, he paces from one end of the room to the other. “You’ll be dead by the end of the night, and I’ll get to rip apart your boyfriend in the very near future. I deliver you, keep you compliant until the next stage of his plan, and then I leave and kill Benson. This is the plan.”

My heart lodges in my throat at the idea of Trey being in danger—because of me. “Don’t hold it against me that I hope you’re wrong about the me being dead bit. Don’t take it personally, but I like this thing called living and want to keep doing it.”

“Fuck, you’re strange.”

“Thanks?” The rhythmic clip of his boot heels against the hard floor fills the quiet as I debate my next move. It’s like chess. No, screw that. I don’t know how to play chess. Checkers. This is like checkers. “The big-set ones like they sell at Cracker Barrel.”

“If you don’t stop talking to yourself, I will kill you now despite the amount of

money it'll cost me if I do."

"Or you could kill Shawn," I suggest. "He told me he'd let me go if I willingly stepped down and he moves into the VP role when Sam moves up to president. Which means I'll have to step down publicly. Which means I'll have to be breathing, as in alive."

"I know the difference between dead and alive, you idiot."

"Just wanted to make sure I was clear." I roll my eyes. "What about Egypt? Was that your fuckup too?" Totally on a roll. I can't feel my fingers or toes, but damn, I'm on top of it with my psychological game.

Who knew, right?

"I. Don't. Fuck. Up." The pause between each word emphasizes his disagreement to my accusation. "They did. Not me. Those motherfucking idiots wanted me hands off, said anything else would be too obvious it was me, which would lead the FBI straight to their door. But you took care of that anyway, didn't you? Which, I must say, helped me in the long run. Got those fuckers out of my hair so I didn't have to keep playing their information game, allowing me to do what I do best."

"Monologuing?"

I flinch at his menacing step in my direction.

"Kill. Slowly."

"Why do you hate him so much?" I ask. This I'm truly curious about. "Trey, that is? Why hold such a grudge when all he was doing was his job? And me, I guess." I wiggle in the chair to ease the numbness in my ass and immediately regret it. The

shift puts pressure on my at-max-capacity bladder. “Oh shit. I’ve got to pee. Can I get a hall pass?”

“Then pee.” He nods to the chair I’m sitting in.

“Ew. Surely there’s a spare bucket or cup or tin can lying around this place that I can use? Come on, do you really want to torture me wet and stinky with my own piss?”

That makes him debate the pros and cons of allowing me this one small freedom. With an exasperated huff, he reaches an arm back, withdrawing a menacing-looking blade. With two steps, he crouches in front of me. I wince as the ties holding my ankles to the chair tighten before releasing altogether. Relief floods through me at the little bit of mobility as I flex and straighten my feet.

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I stare at the covered face still kneeling in front of me. His dark eyes narrow, no doubt waiting for me to attempt an escape. Lucky for me I'm not that stupid. My hands are still fucking tied, which means I'd get nowhere fast. Plus with the exhaustion and dehydration, I'm in no condition to run or fight or even stand on my own.

A tightening followed by a rush of blood shoots to my fingers at the loss of the zip tie. Leaning forward, I shake out my hands before bringing them up to inspect the damage.

I cringe at the slices of ruined flesh marking my wrists and shy away from looking at my ankles. A tight grip under my arm hauls me upright before I'm immediately released, like he can't stand the thought of touching me longer than necessary. Each step is agony, but I rejoice in the freedom of walking free.

Bright sunlight assaults my sensitive eyes as we stumble out of the windowless room. I squint to ease the pain, using the brief opportunity to take in some of the details of where I'm being held—but there's nothing. Just the same abandoned warehouse as before. It seems I wasn't moved at all, just relocated from one open space to a more intimate one.

A finger pokes between my shoulder blades, urging me forward. I stumble, barely regaining my footing before I fall forward and slam against a wall, my shoulder taking the brunt of the impact.

"There's your bucket." He hitches his chin toward a rickety plastic construction bucket. "Piss."

“Fucking animal,” I grumble. “Turn around, at least.” My shaky fingers are already working the top button of my jean shorts as I survey the damage. As expected, both ankles look as sliced and raw as my wrists. Both legs have long-dried red streaks crisscrossing the skin, along with some that still weep crimson, possibly injuries from the wreck and the broken glass. The jean material of my shorts is stiff with dark red. I pause the inspection and shoot my captor, who’s still facing me, a questioning look. “I asked if you’d turn around.”

“I wasn’t born yesterday, Madam President. Piss with me watching or don’t piss at all.”

“Don’t watch. That’s fucking creepy,” I snap.

“Not a chance.”

“Creep,” I mutter as I place my back to him and tug the stiff shorts and underwear down to midthigh. Palm pressed against the cracked drywall, I balance myself as much as possible and squat, then focus on peeing. At this awkward angle. With someone watching. Hell, I can’t perform like this. A burning sensation radiates in my bladder, an urgent demand to pee. “Can you hum or something?” I huff over my shoulder. “I can’t pee when it’s this quiet.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“You’re the one who took me, so don’t get all pissy that I ask for a little tune to help me pee.”

“I could always stab you in the thigh. I’ve found excruciating pain triggers the release of all bodily functions.”

Almost like my body understood the threat in his deep tone, the barrier holding me

back vanishes. I nearly groan at the delightful sensation of my full bladder releasing. By the time I'm done, both thighs tremble from the exertion of squatting, and the pain in my side and neck have gone from ouch to debilitating.

All thumbs and no fingers, I work the top button of my shorts, failing three times to push it through the small slot before giving up. I turn, mouth open to tell this asshole to kill me or leave me be, when a groan of metal has both of us turning toward the sound.

I stagger back, my backside pressed hard against the drywall as I dart my gaze around the warehouse, desperate for an exit. A sinister smile plays on Shawn's handsome face, the promise of pain brightening his eyes as he strides to where we stand.

"Well, well, well. Look who's on her feet. So glad you're awake for this. Now the real fun begins."

My knees wobble and give out. Sliding down the wall, I sink to the floor, unable to do anything other than make myself as small as possible.

"I've waited too long for this, Trailer." Hand raised, he gestures back toward the windowless hellhole I just walked out of. "Don't keep me waiting."

I swallow hard, relishing the burn along my dry tongue and throat. This cannot be happening. I thought I'd have more time, a chance to escape.

Now, with both men and the wicked gleams in their eyes, I understand the gravity of the situation.

This is the day I die.

Chapter Eight

Trey

“Fucking hell,” I mumble under my breath as I methodically creep toward the slumped body of Todd Rosen, checking each small section of the floor for evidence before stepping closer. “What the hell happened here?” I rake trembling fingers through the longer part of my hair and yank the ends.

The metal desk within my reach, I pause my careful steps to stare at the dead body. It’s slouched, somehow still sitting in the leather office chair, head tossed back, jaw slack, and mouth open wide, the expression resembling ecstasy, as if someone unseen was blowing him off beneath the desk. Well, it would look like ecstasy until you took in the one-inch blackened hole between his thin brows and fragments of brain and skull splattered over the back of his chair and wall.

Shaking off the disturbing scene, I shift my focus to the desk. A single black laptop sits open. Not able to see the screen from this angle, I tilt over the desk and find the screen is black. A single cell phone lies haphazardly nearby, plugged into its charger with another exact replica charger a few inches away. Odd. Why would he have two chargers for the same type of phone? Unless he had two, one conveniently missing from a room with a dead shady politician.

Nothing seems amiss, no signs of a struggle happening here or anywhere around the spacious office. Leather armchairs are upright, magazines and papers neatly stacked on top of the glass coffee table, and even here on the desk, the pen holder and other small objects sit undisturbed. In fact, the only thing in this office that looks out of place is the body, blood, and gore.

Bending at the waist, I put myself closer to the desk’s surface, looking for... fuck, who knows. I’m an agent, not a detective. The surface shines, minimal dust gathered around the unused areas, but a large area around the laptop seems smeared. As if a dirty cloth was used to clean instead of one with polish or cleaner.

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Standing back to full height, I glance over my shoulder and point to the desk. “Whoever did this wiped this area clean of fingerprints.” A single step to the right offers a different angle. Then another and another until I’ve rounded the desk and am standing just outside the blood splatter congealed on the oriental rug. This close, I scour the body without touching in hopes of finding more clues to what happened here. “His fingers look to be broken, unless they always had a ninety-degree angle that I didn’t notice.” Swiping a pen from the desk, I lean closer to the right hand and use the pen to carefully lift a stiff finger. “I’m no coroner, but there seems to be bruising and blood around the worst breaks, meaning it was done before the bullet to the brain.”

Tank’s silence at my brilliant discovery draws my attention from the dead secretary to where he stands in the middle of the room. Head down, phone in hand, his thumbs fly across the screen completely absorbed, clearly not listening to my findings.

“What are you doing?” I question, annoyed at my friend for being distracted by whatever’s on his phone.

“I’m calling the FBI,” he snaps. Cutting those dark eyes my way, he tosses a hand toward the body. “In case you haven’t noticed, a fucking political figurehead was executed in his uppity fucking office.”

“No, not yet,” I grunt as I step away from the desk. Marching toward Tank, I rip the phone from his hand. “Did you hear me? Don’t call them yet.”

“Benson.” The deep rumble of his voice is laced with warning. “Give me back the phone.”

“Five minutes. Give us five minutes to piece together what we can on our own before you call.” Only thinking of the need to delay that damn call, I shove the phone in my hand down the front of my cargo pants and nestle it neatly into my boxer briefs right beside my balls.

“Bastard,” he growls. “Get my phone away from your dick. That screen touches my face.”

“I know, and I’m sorry, but it’s Randi’s life on the line, Davis.” I angle my head toward the body. “It isn’t a coincidence that Vlad said he didn’t trust Rosen, believing him to be dirty somehow, and the man turns up dead the same day the president is abducted. Something isn’t right here. You know it and I know it. Give us a five-minute window alone with the evidence to see what we can find, then call the FBI. You know as well as I do those bastards will swoop in, take over the scene, and give us shit for answers. We need the answers now, not later. Please, we need this to help us find her. I know it.”

Dark, assessing eyes glance from me to the body and back again, each time looking more resigned to the fact that I’m right. With an exaggerated sigh, he crosses his arms over his chest. “You have your five minutes, Benson. Find something useful.” Disgust crosses his face as he hitches his chin toward my crotch. “And you’re disinfecting my fucking phone.”

“Is it on vibrate?”

“Yes,” he answers, brows tugging inward. At my growing smirk, he tosses his hands in the air, knowing full well why I asked. “Fuck you, Trey. That’s disgusting.”

“What? I’m just saying I hope someone calls.”

“Four minutes thirty seconds. Use your time wisely, you idiot.”

Smirk still stuck to my face, I stride back to the body, this time with a little more confidence, and squat low to the floor to inspect the area beneath the desk and chair.

“Benson.” I pop my head over the desk’s edge. “Don’t leave any damn fingerprints.” A pair of latex gloves comes flying at me. I snatch them midair before they can smack me in the face.

“You really need to wash that mouth of yours out with soap,” I say loud enough for him to hear as I examine the worn oriental rug. “Sarah will have your ass if she hears you picked up cursing as a new bad habit.”

Hands to my knees, I push up with a groan. There’s nothing on the damn floor that looks abnormal. I skip over the laptop, not enough time in my small five-minute window to crack the password and to access the data inside. I move to the iPhone and quirk a brow. I don’t need a password for that if I have the owner’s thumbprint, which I do. Well, I actually have the whole thumb, but all I need is the print.

“First of all, I’m fucking stressed, so cut me some slack. Second, my Sarah knows how you talk. She’ll blame you as the bad influence.”

I scoff as I snap on the latex gloves. “Even more reason to clean up your act before you get home. You wouldn’t want to be responsible for my death, now would you.”

“Depends on the day, Playboy.”

“Ouch.” I chuckle. Phone in hand, I draw it closer to the dead body and hold it below his right hand. “Just so you know, I do feel bad about this,” I say to the dead man. “But not enough to not do it. You understand, right?” The wrist bends under my slight grip; the guy hasn’t been dead very long if he’s still movable. It takes a few tries to maneuver the limp digit, but finally I find the right angle and apply pressure, clicking the phone unlocked.

Excited to see what the device holds inside, I release the hand. It falls to the side, clipping the armrest on it's fast descent.

"Careful, you idiot. Don't leave any bruises we can't explain."

I nod even though I have zero clue what he just said. I'm too invested in what I'm not finding on the dead man's phone.

Nothing. No texts, no emails, no calls or contacts. Everything is gone.

With a groan of frustration, I click on the Pictures app, hoping there's something in there that can tell us what the hell Todd Rosen was mixed up in that ended with him shot in the forehead.

"Fuck me," I grumble.

"What? What did you find?" Tank's by my side, ripping the phone from my gloved hand and cradles it in his own. His eyes widen on the screen. With a hiss, he slams his eyes shut and drops the phone. It clatters to the desk before falling to the floor. "Little warning, asshole."

"I feel sorry for whoever was receiving those dick pics," I grumble as I retrieve the phone to continue flipping through the photos. Holding it at arm's length in case more pictures of his tiny junk appear, I swipe through the pictures. "Hell, nothing here either."

“The text history wiped?”

“That and his call logs and search history, but I doubt this was his only phone. There’s a second charger with no phone attached. This one was probably his personal one based on the pictures and the other government issued. That one seems to have been taken from the scene.” I set the phone back where I found it, plug it back in, and proceed to strip off the gloves. “There’s no sign of a struggle here or anywhere around the room. Based on the brain splatter along the wall behind him, this is where he was killed. So what? He was restrained while whoever put a gun barrel between his eyes and pulled the trigger?” I shake my head and move away from the desk to stare out the windows overlooking the back gardens. “Something doesn’t add up here, Tank. He’s dirty.”

“No doubt about that, but that’s not why we’re here. Give me my phone so I can call the FBI. They’ll do their digging and find out what this sleaze was up to. I don’t think the evidence in this room will help us find Randi.”

My heavy shoulders slump in defeat, knowing he’s right.

“Time’s running out,” I say through grinding teeth. “She’s been gone for hours now. What if...? I have to find her.” Turning from the window, I allow the wide array of emotions to bleed through my eyes. “I have to find her.”

“We will—”

I jump with a giggled curse at the tickling sensations against my balls.

“Um, you seem to be getting a call,” I say with a little bit of remorse. Jamming a hand down the front of my pants, I tug it free. I cringe and wipe the screen off on my pants before extending it between us. “Sorry, it was a little sweaty.”

“You’re not sorry, you ass,” he snaps. “Thank fuck I still have gloves on.” Swiping a thumb across the screen, he answers the call and switches it to speakerphone. “What?”

“I have something.” I snap my attention to the illuminated screen. My pulse races with hope at Smith’s words. “Benson asked me months ago, right after the Cairo incident, if I’d help find the leak. Since then I’ve watched, listened, and monitored every agent on the alpha and beta teams. There were ten possible agents on my list of suspects.”

“Why didn’t you bring this evidence and list to me?” Tank questions, a hint of annoyance in his grumbled tone.

“It was all circumstantial and a damn Hail Mary. I couldn’t tell you I suspected someone of treason because they littered one day at the park while walking their dog.”

“Seriously? Litter?” I question, breaking into his speech.

“It’s a lack of respect and empathy for what their actions will do on the environment.”

“It’s a stretch,” I muse.

“Exactly why I didn’t bring this list to you months ago. But now we’re here and need to find the fucker who leaked information regarding the Cairo trip. Something tells me the person behind that attack and the president being kidnapped are one and the

same.”

“Agreed,” Tank and I say in unison.

“Give us the ten names and we can—” I start, but Smith continues, cutting me off.

“I called the director—”

“Your mother,” Tank clarifies.

Cold silence pours from the phone. I smack Tank’s shoulder and flip him the bird. Idiot. He needs to keep his mouth shut until we get that fucking list of names. If the director was telling the truth about Smith once being in Homeland, I trust his gut, which means one of the men on his list is our guy. The one we have to locate to find Randi.

And when we do, the fucker dies.

“We thought you were the one who betrayed us,” I say to clarify why the director let their relationship slip. “It’s why we went there initially, since Tank couldn’t reach you.”

“Me?” he says, wonder in his voice. “You think I’d betray the team, the president, my country?”

“Someone did, and your disappearing acts haven’t helped you appear innocent in all this.”

“Noted.” Smith clears his throat. “I spoke to the director and asked for backgrounds on the ten I suspected. Five are on the alpha team and have reported since the incident this morning. I’m willing to bet the person who took the president won’t leave her

alone just to make appearances at work.”

“Those five are out, then,” Tank says.

“Agreed. Which leaves us five others, all on the beta team.”

I want to strangle the phone. To slip through the damn device so I can wrap my hands around Smith’s neck and demand he spit it out. Fuck this explaining, I need a name. The name. The name of the man I have every intention of killing with my bare hands. And enjoying it. “Two were pronounced dead this morning. One is on vacation with his family. Two are alive and have checked in but haven’t been seen.”

“Two,” I say on an easy breath. “We can cover two suspects. One of them—”

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“There’s more. I asked the director to look into their files. To locate how long they’d been on the team, where they came from, test scores, hell, anything. And that’s when she found an anomaly. One of the two is a recent hire. A hire that was personally vouched for by a part of the White House team—Secretary of State Todd Rosen.”

Tank and I turn in silence to face the dead body. I cringe knowing what Smith is about to ask.

“We need to talk to the secretary, find out why he referenced this agent and ordered him to be put on the beta team—”

“That won’t happen,” I say as I massage both temples.

“Aren’t you both on your way there?”

“We’re here.”

“Even better.”

“He’s dead.”

Silence. A heavy breath weighs down my lungs as I wait for his response to that bomb.

“Have some of your contacts look into him,” Tank suggests. “We were sent here by a tip that Rosen wasn’t to be trusted. Based on his estate and finding him shot point-blank between the eyes, he was deep into some shady shit.” I narrow my eyes at Tank

and his cursing. He's really on edge if he keeps using language like that. Foul mouth and consistently irresponsible is my job, not his. "More than your normal politician, from what I can tell."

"Who's the agent, Smith?" I demand, ripping the phone out of Tank's hand. "Who is the final suspect on your list?"

"I have a few... associates digging through the application and profile submitted to the agency when he applied. I already found one inconsistency, which I'm on my way to check out now."

"Where?" I ask.

"The address listed on his application and the townhome I've followed him to on a few occasions for surveillance are different. I'm headed to the place where I know he lives instead of the one listed."

"Good idea." Tank nods.

Anger and frustration surge, making me tense and on edge. "Who's the agent?" I beg to the phone. "Give me anything to go off of."

"If I tell you, do not engage with him until we know more. Do not call, do not search him out. If he knows we're on to him and he has the president, he will kill her."

"I understand," I mumble. "Who is it."

"Agent Ponder."

The name booms through my brain like a giant gong being struck. I stare at the phone; Smith's voice is still pouring through, but I don't hear any of it. I'm too busy

flipping through every memory I have with Ponder in it, trying to come up with anything that will help us in our hunt for him.

“After Saudi Arabia, he was openly angry at me for being in Randi’s room the night of the attack. At the time, I thought it was because he had a thing for her and didn’t want me around because of that. Which was why I told the beta team lead to move him to the shitty shifts and stations. I didn’t want him around her.” I shift my focus to the details surrounding our trip to Cairo. “There were several beta team agents sitting close when Tank and I discussed the new sniper placements outside the embassy. I don’t remember Ponder specifically, but he could’ve been sitting close enough, making him privy to the changes.” My eyes snap to Tank’s. “We’re missing a big piece to this puzzle. The why? Why in the hell would Rosen go to so much trouble to get him on a Secret Service detail? Why try to abduct the president knowing the risks?”

“He doesn’t want a female president?” Smith offers as an option.

“That’s a weak reason to finagle your way onto the Secret Service when you could take her out anytime she was out in public.” Phone cradled in my hand, I pace from one end of the office to the other, carefully missing the shards of broken door still littering the ground. “It has to be more than sexist idealisms.”

“Revenge.”

I shake my head at Tank’s suggestion only to stop short. The rug catches beneath the rubber sole of my boots as I twist back the way I came. Eyes wide, I hold a breath to quiet the thundering in my chest at the new thought.

“What if it’s nothisrevenge? What if it’s someone else’s revenge that he’s helping enact by taking the president? Someone we know would go to any lengths to see her miserable and taken out of the picture?”

The corner of Tank's lips curls in a disgusted sneer. "Whit."

I nod instead of answering out loud. Smith's gruff voice blasts through the speaker, demanding to know who we're talking about.

"This asshat who's had it out for Randi since she started campaigning with Birmingham. Shawn Whit was Kyle Birmingham's original VP choice until Randi came into the picture. He's resented her ever since and has done everything possible to destroy her, even going as far as poisoning her a while back hoping she'd be too sick to continue serving in the VP role. If he's the one behind this, then Ponder isn't doing this for himself." I shake my head as all the pieces of the puzzle fall into place. "He was hired."

"Shit," Smith grunts. "I'm pulling up to the town house now. Doesn't seem to be anyone home."

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“Break in,” Tank commands.

“Really?” The sarcasm in that one word makes a stiff chuckle erupt from my chest. “I was just going to knock and hope someone would let me in.”

“Smith,” I say with surprise, blinking at the phone. “Was that a joke?” Maybe hell has frozen over.

“I’ll let you know what I find. You do your digging on this Whit fucker. Maybe we can find something that will tell us where they took her. It can’t be far. That’s one thing we have going for us.”

“Why do you say that? That they didn’t take her far?” Optimism surges at his claim. If she’s close, then we’ll get there in time. I can save her.

“Just a hunch. If it were me, I’d want to spend what little time I had with her—knowing an army is out there looking for her—on fulfilling my objective.” And just like that, my rising optimism plummets, deflating me to the core once again. “No, he’ll want to torture—”

“Call us when you have something.” Tank snatches the phone from my hand and hits the Off button while Smith continues describing all the ways he’d use his time with her, making her pay. “Don’t listen to him. Look, this guy here hasn’t been dead long. The larger puddles of blood aren’t even tacky yet. Which means if Ponder is our guy, he came here recently to tie up loose ends. We’ll get to her in time, Trey. I swear we will get to your girl before it’s too late.”

I clear my throat. “Our girl.”

After removing the black latex gloves, he slaps a hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

“Yourgirl. Now let’s go somewhere we can do some digging on Whit while Smith checks out Ponder’s place. Your place or mine?”

“Yours,” I say as I follow him out of the office. “Don’t forget to call the FBI. Maybe they can pull something from Rosen’s laptop or get a warrant for his phone records.”

“Already sent the text,” Tank says, looking up from his phone with his thumbs still flying across the screen. “Come on, let’s go find that fucker Whit.”

A slow sinister smile pulls up my lips, bunching my cheeks. “And then kill him.”

Anticipation races through my veins as the vivid images of him bloody and beaten from my pounding fists flash through my thoughts. For too long that asshat has tormented Randi. For too long he’s gone unchecked.

No longer.

Today I execute justice for what he’s done to her and many others.

Death.

A nice slow, tormenting, grueling death.

I should be terrified at the excitement and joy that brings me. But I’d sell my soul to the devil himself if it means getting Randi back unharmed.

With Whit in the picture, that’s exactly what I might have to do to save her.

Who needs a soul anyway?

Chapter Nine

Randi

My ass slams to the unforgiving seat of the chair I'm to be secured to again. Ligaments and tendons stretch awkwardly, screaming in protest as both arms are wrenched behind me. Panic surges and kicks up my fight-or-flight instinct, supplying enough to fight against his hold. Not that it does much; his grip doesn't even falter. A hard yank draws my hands farther back than my fatigued muscles can handle. I scream through clenched teeth as the discomfort turns unbearable.

"Did you send the picture?" Shawn asks, like I'm not sitting here being manhandled to the equivalent of drawn and quartered. Well, hopefully not the quartered part. That would really suck. There's no coming back from that.

"Have to have your guts to live." My head falls forward, rolling from side to side with each tug to my arms as the one wearing the head scarf secures the zip ties. Each breath hisses through my teeth as I breathe through the pain, not wanting to give them the satisfaction of hearing my cries again.

"Yes, sent the picture," says the still unknown traitor at my back before moving on to my ankles. With the last tie secured, he stands. With a minuscule nod at his work, he turns to Shawn. "Destroyed and ditched the phone a second after hitting Send. I'm not a damn amateur."

"Do you have another?" Shawn questions, a snap in his tone.

What if I can get them to fight? That way they'd ignore me for a while, giving Trey more time to find and save me. Which I know they will. Trey, T, and the rest of my

loyal agents will find me. I know it deep in my gut.

The mystery man mumbles something I can't make out with the cloth still secured around his face.

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“Take that shit off your face,” Shawn barks. “She dies in the end anyway. Doesn’t matter if she sees your face.”

“Maybe it’s not me he’s worried about.” It’s a shot in the dark, thinking these two haven’t met before.

“Shut the fuck—” Shawn bellows, his loud voice echoing in the small, now even more cramped room, only to be cut off.

“She’s right.”

“Boom.” Out of instinct, I attempt to raise a hand to high-five my captor only to remember it’s tied to the chair. “Imaginary high five, then.”

“Shut up,” both men shout in my direction.

At the taut tension and palpable anger filling the room, I seal my lips shut. I dart my somewhat blurry gaze from one man to the other, trying to judge how this will turn out.

“You paid me to bring her to you and keep her compliant until the others come. That is what I’ve done and will do, but there is nothing in our agreement that states you get to know who I am.”

“Wait,” I say more to myself than them, forgetting their demand for my silence. “If Shawn isn’t the one who helped you secure a position on the Secret Service team, then who did? This isn’t making a whole lot of sense. I feel like we need to back

this—”

His eyes narrow on me, almost like a silent command to shut the hell up. Which I do.

Shawn adjusts in his more comfortable-looking chair a few feet from where I sit tied up. His gaze rakes the mystery man up and down before zeroing in on his face. “You were on her security team.” Shawn slides his hollow gaze to me. “That’s how you pulled the abduction off. Seems an elaborate ruse for taking one woman.”

“The most protected woman on the planet,” he adds.

“Who helped you?” Shawn demands more than asks.

“Doesn’t matter,” the masked man grumbles as he leans a shoulder against the far wall. The stance makes him appear to be calm, but the tension radiating off him, the tightness in his shoulders and crossed arms, tells a different story.

“It does if it leads them back to you, to here.” Shawn stands, sliding both hands into the pockets of his dark-wash jeans. Guess he wasn’t joking earlier about having to change out of his puke-spattered slacks.

“It won’t. I tied up those loose ends earlier.”

“Except me,” Shawn bites out. “Am I a loose end after this?”

“That’s the reason for the face wrap. This is how I’ve always done contracts that request the client to be on-site during the interrogation. It stays on so you can’t identify me even though others can if they put two and two together. Do not tell me what to do or how to do it. This is my domain. This is where I excel and why you paid me. Command me again and I’ll kill you, then her.”

I shiver at the promise in his bored tone. There's no doubt this man would withdraw the nine millimeter secured in his waistband and pop a bullet between Shawn's brows without thinking twice.

"Does he know about the other client who wanted me dead? The one who paid you for intel and helped you finagle your way onto the Secret Service?"

If it's possible, the man's eyes harden more than before, that hatred zeroed in on me. Shoving off the wall, the mercenary strides to stand directly in front of my chair, the hard rubber of his boots grazing the bare tips of my toes. He pulls his fist back, readying a killing blow. I shy away, my eyes closing on instinct at the hit I know has the potential to loosen a few teeth. But instead he aims lower. That heavy fist sinks into my relaxed stomach, shoving every minuscule amount of air out of my lungs in a forceful heave.

I can't breathe.

Eyes wide with panic, I try to suck in oxygen but can't get anything down past the constriction in my throat. I gasp, cough, and squirm until my body responds to my desperate demands and eases the tight hold, allowing slivers of air to finally slip through.

The first full gulp of air cuts like splinters down my throat before embedding in my lungs. A pitiful whimper escapes as I breathe through the agony, knowing suffocating or passing out around these two would be worse than dealing with the pain each gulp of oxygen brings.

As the world and my surroundings come back into focus, gruff, demanding words reach my ears, but I can't make out what's being said through my own panting. Desperate to have a foothold on what's going on around me, I force myself to take smaller breaths, quieting the thundering in my own ears.

“That’s what took you so long to fulfill the contract. You said it was timing.”

“It was.”

“Who was it who hired you? And how did they secure you a spot in the Secret Service?”

“Someone they hired. A mediator of sorts.”

“Who?” Shawn’s voice is clear now that my breathing has quieted. There’s no way the man who took me doesn’t hear the annoyance in his rising voice. Sounds to me like Shawn’s patience is wearing thin. Maybe it won’t be too hard to get these two to turn against each other after all. It’ll still leave me with one psychopath to deal with, but hey, one psycho holding me captive is a hell of a lot better than two.

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“Even I can do that math,” I croak, then look up to find the two men have stopped talking, their annoyed faces turned to me. “He’s playing you.” Fuck, each word hurts. I’m in desperate need of water for more reasons than staving off dehydration. “Shawn isn’t someone to trust.”

A soft sarcastic chuckle rumbles through the nearly vacant room. Both corners of Shawn’s lips tick upward as he shakes his head.

“No, Trailer. I didn’t play him, I played you. Did you really think I’d let you out of this with your pathetic excuse for a life? I will get what I want, and then you will.”

“What’s that?” But I know the answer. And it’s terrifying to think he might be right.

“For the pain to end.”

With a whisper and nod toward me, the other man advances on me once again. A harsh cry trembles my lips as I brace myself for another hit. This time knuckles slam against my right temple. The force snaps my neck to the left, both eyes rolling to the back of my head as the dark cloud of unconsciousness engulfs me, cutting off other sensations. Yet even with the hard impact of his fist, I subconsciously know he pulled back or I’d be dead.

I work to stay awake, to push back against the demanding need to black out. I can’t do that, not here; who knows what they’ll do to me if I’m that vulnerable? But the sweet pain-free calmness, the oblivion of nothingness, calls to me.

Sounds, smells, even the feel of the heated air along my bare skin fade. Two shadows

hover over me, muffled deep voices barely reaching my ears. Something scrapes beneath my nose, making it twitch out of reflex. At least I think it twitches; considering I can't feel the tip of my nose, there's no way to know. Fuck, that hurt. Hurts. There's no end in sight for the relentless throb of agony that now has its own slow pulse along my cheek and jaw.

I reach deep within myself, searching for an ounce of energy or emotion that will keep me from pitching over the edge into oblivion. But there's nothing there. Even the small glimmer of hope that's been a constant companion since the wreck has almost faded into nothing as the hours have ticked by and no one has found me.

Like a Red Bull to my veins, energy rockets through me, jostling every cell awake. The world comes roaring back to life, every sound, taste, and smell more vibrant than just moments before. I blink away the dryness crusting my eyes, every muscle thrumming with the need to move as my heart races with excitement, thumping heavily against my ribs.

Nothing hurts. How in the hell does nothing hurt?

Fuck, I could do anything right now if they'd just let me loose.

"Give her more adrenaline. I need her awake."

"I didn't hit her that hard, I thought." I stare at the man whose voice seems soft with concern. Concern about me, probably not, more about getting paid. Like he so eloquently stated before, this is business, not personal. "You're not the first one who's requested a woman to be beaten. I know what I'm fucking doing."

"I'm starting to question that."

I force my focus on the man's eyes as they search my face. "She's coming to. I'll

save the next dose in case we need it later.” With that, he steps out of my sight, but with every nerve ending on overdrive, I can almost feel him standing close.

A heaviness settles in the long strands of hair hanging down my back before it’s yanked and my face is forced to face the ceiling. That should hurt, but it doesn’t. I feel fucking fantastic.

Shawn’s sneering face looms above, his searching gaze sizing me up and no doubt finding me lacking like always.

Maybe it’s the adrenaline speaking, but I feel his hate, loathing, and unending selfishness that bleeds through his eyes into my own. My stomach rolls with a queasy feeling. With nothing in it, only stomach acid rises up my throat, burning in its ascent.

I rip my gaze from his, breaking the connection.

“Make the call to Pierce. Tell him exactly what I tell you to say, and then this ends.”

With his fingers wrapped through my long strands, I don’t dare move to shake my head.

“No.” The word is more of a breath than anything.

The hold in my hair tightens before my head is slammed forward. The room blurs as the tip of my chin connects with my collarbone. I grit through the screech of pain that escapes.

“Make. The damn. Call.”

“How. About. No?” I spit whatever’s in my mouth to the floor, a string of saliva

hanging on to the edge of my snarled lips. “Go. To. Fucking. Hell.”

At his rage-filled roar, I squeeze my eyes shut, not wanting to feel whatever they have planned for me next.

“Again.” Shawn’s voice is harsh, the single word like the crack of a whip.

The mystery man obeys. I hear his heavy exhale and brace myself for what comes next. Just like Shawn ordered, the blows come again, followed by the same demand that I call Sam. Which, of course, is followed by the same response.

Again. And again. And again. This cycle continues until all I know is pain, fear, and hopelessness.

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Until all I want is for it to end.

Chapter Ten

Trey

We've got something.

Both feet bounce with anticipation, my knees bobbing relentlessly with the movement as we speed back across town. I rake my fingers through my disheveled hair for what might be the thousandth time today, my nerves maxed out with the news that was relayed only moments ago.

Good news.

Fucking finally.

We were just pulling out of Rosen's estate after passing off the scene to the herd of FBI agents when the call came through, disrupting our original plan of posting up at Tank's to dig into Whit's background while we waited for a new lead. But that research will have to wait.

Because we have a fucking lead.

Tires screech against the blacktop as Tank swerves through the light traffic, slamming his hand on the horn, urging people to get the hell out of our way. The call came from one of Smith's buddies at Homeland who was able to approximate a four-

block radius from where the person was when they sent the photo of Randi to me.

The way this technology finds a location without the phone physically being on and with a more precise radius than ever before is new and only available to Homeland. Which means whoever took Randi didn't know about it or they wouldn't have sent the picture in the first place. It's amazing—and a bit creepy—what Big Brother is capable of these days in its ability to spy on American citizens.

The shrill of an incoming call pierces through my rambling thoughts. The ringing blares through the speakers again, cutting off halfway when Tank answers the call with a push of a button on the steering wheel.

“What did you find?” No hello or how you doing, Tank's no-nonsense wording mimics his cold tone.

“Nothing good.”

“Tell us,” I snap to the speakers, wishing it was Smith's face. I swipe both clammy palms along my thighs, wiping the cold sweat onto the black fabric of my cargo pants. We're close to finding her and those responsible. I can feel it.

“He wasn't planning to stick around if he is the one associated with the abduction. I found two duffel bags packed, the kitchen cleaned out, and what I assume was a makeshift armory empty.”

“Prints?” It's a wonder Tank can even follow along with the conversation with his full concentration out the windshield, making sure we don't wreck or cause someone else to.

“Dusted a few doorknobs and switches. Sent the pictures over to my buddies. We'll know more about him soon, but I don't think that will help us find the president. If

he's a contract assassin, it doesn't matter about his background, only where he is now. And nothing here tells me where he would've gone."

"We're headed to check out a lead now. ETA ten minutes." The front right of the SUV comes within inches of clipping a semi's trailer. Knowing he hates it when I react, I hold in my curse and death grip on the "oh shit" handle. "Make that seven," I grumble. "Get us there alive, for fuck's sake. We're no good to her dead."

Tank grumbles something I can't make out as he leans against his door with an arm propped up like he hasn't a care in the world.

"Text me the location and I'll meet you there." Static crackles down the line before the SUV is doused in quiet again. Well, except for Tank's honking and the offended cars honking back.

"Bye to you too, motherfucker," I mutter. "After everything we've learned today and seeing him in action the last year or so, I'm damn glad he's on our side."

"True. He could've ended up like the bastard we know as Ponder, taking what he learned at Homeland and using it for his own gain. I wonder if that happens more than we realize."

"Maybe." I yank a bottle of water from the side door and twist off the cap. "We need more than this lead though. I don't think it'll be enough for us to find her in the time frame we're working under. Who knows how long she has?" Just saying the words causes my throat to close up with emotion.

His bald head dips in agreement. "There's one thing we haven't considered."

"What's that?" I ask incredulously. "I've gone over this so many damn times in my head it's all I fucking know."

“Her.”

“Her? Randi? What do you mean? She’s all I’ve been considering. All I’ve been consumed by since you called me. She is the only thing that matters in any of this.” The hand not holding on for dear life fists along my thigh.

“I’m saying we haven’t considered her as the hostage and what that means to all this. What do we know about her? What have we witnessed since we were assigned to her security detail?”

Inhaling deep, I fight the irritation at my best friend’s words and attempt to process what he’s suggesting.

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What have I noticed since that first day we met when I hauled her out of that burning limo?

Natural beauty.

Desperation to help others.

Witty sense of humor and crazy as hell.

Lips that beg for you to kiss them or have them wrapped around your cock.

A pussy that tastes like honey and feels like heaven.

I adjust along the leather seat to keep my growing hard-on from being noticed.

But the side-eye glare Tank's shoots me signals I wasn't as covert at adjusting myself as I hoped.

"Stop thinking like that, you horny ass. I'm talking about Randi being Randi. Everyone who knows her falls for her. Not in love with her, thank fuck, or you'd have a murder rap sheet a mile long, but they care for her. They see her kindness in a city and profession where there is none. People who know her gravitate to that naïveté from not being raised in politics. That's what we're not considering, what we haven't added to the equation."

Well, fuck. Here I was thinking about all the physical aspects I love about Randi and forgot about the reason I fell for her in the first place.

“You’re right,” I say, scrubbing a hand down my face. “So where does that leave us? If it is Whit, he knows her and still loathes her.”

“But not the men who took her.”

“If we’re right about Ponder being the one who was behind the abduction for Whit, then yeah, he does know her. He’s been with her for the past year on the beta team detail. He knows her and still took her.”

Tank runs a hand over his sweaty bald head before slamming it to the steering wheel. “You’re right.”

“But,” I say as I think through the various ways Randi being Randi could be a benefit, “he’s never seen her like we do, considering I had him moved to the shit list on the beta team. He’s never had one-on-one time with her, so if he stuck around after the abduction, she could influence him then. So you’re right, maybe Randi can sway Ponder. But that’s only if he didn’t drop her at a location and leave her alone for Whit to find. Fuck.” I groan. “There are too many variables and not enough solid leads. We need something to turn in our favor.” I glance out the window to the early afternoon sun, its bright rays a complete opposite to the darkness consuming me. “What if we do find her and she’s...? What if he’s broken her by the time we get there?”

“Would that change anything for you?” Tank asks. I lurch forward, the seat belt catching against my chest with our sudden stop. I blink, realizing he’s just whipped us into a parallel parking spot along a street lined with shops and business. He turns in his seat to stare me down. “Answer me.”

“You think that little of me?” I snap, the hurt leaking through my harsh tone. “Of course not. I love her no matter what. I just want her back. If he’s broken her mind or her spirit, I will help her heal. I’ll be there for her every step of the way. I just want—” I shake my head. “I need her with me. I need her by my side for the rest of

my life and me beside her for the rest of hers. This is it for me. She sit for me.”

“Good.” Without another word, he swings open the driver side door and climbs out into the afternoon heat. I follow suit, stepping onto the sidewalk and scanning the few pedestrians scurrying about. “We’re in the center of the radius where the picture was sent. This is where we start our search. If we find the phone, it could have prints, maybe even enough juice left that we can use it to backtrack where it’s been. We find that phone, we’re one step closer to finding her.”

With a determined curt nod, I split from Tank, heading straight for the trash can at the corner of an intersection while he slips back around the SUV and cuts across the street.

The stainless steel dome lid clatters to the ground with an erupting bang loud enough to be heard several streets over. A few curious and apprehensive glances come my way as people walk by, giving me a wide berth as I rummage through the full trash bag. Cold, lumpy coffee, something sticky like old yogurt—yep, I’m going with yogurt to keep my sanity—and crumbs of food slide through my searching fingers, caking beneath my short nails. Halfway through, I force myself to lean away from the stench and suck in a lungful of fresh air before continuing digging. At the bottom, I curse at not finding the cell phone, those wasted efforts and minutes. Hot metal burns a line across my palm as I shove off the rounded edge, sending the can crashing to the side of its metal protective cage.

Fat drops of thick, semi-solid liquid dribble from my dangling fingers onto the warm concrete sidewalk as I stride to the next visible trash can. Halfway through the third trash can, I hear my name bellowed from somewhere close by. My head snaps up, hands still embedded in the refuse as I search for Tank. Across the street, he stands beside a pile of trash, holding something high in the air. I squint, resting a disgusting hand above my brows to shield the glare.

A cell phone.

Hell to the fucking yeah. Finally.

The rubber soles of my boots pound on the pavement as I jog across the street, nearly getting run over twice. The yelling of the furious drivers fades in the distance as they continue on. I stop beside Tank, whose focus is on the small device.

“It’s smashed,” he says, defeated. Those large boulder-like shoulders slump.

“What do you want to bet Smith’s friends at Homeland can still pull information from it?” I keep a cautious eye on him. If he becomes too frustrated and launches the phone, there’d be no coming back from that. Carefully pulling the broken device from his hand, I place it gently on the brick window ledge of the nearby building. Only after wiping the layers of gunk off my hands do I dig through the side pocket of my cargo pants and retrieve my phone. Thank fuck I sent Smith’s contact information to my phone from Tank’s earlier in case I needed it in the future. Hitting the Call button, I set it to speaker and hold it face-up between me and my pacing friend.

“I’m five minutes out” are Smith’s first words.

“We have something we need your buddies at Homeland to work on. We think we found the cell phone used to send the picture of Randi, but it’s smashed.”

“They’ll be able to pull something. Everything is traceable.”

The screen flashes, signaling the call has ended.

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“Now what?” I ask the universe.

“We use every available contact, every fucking favor owed, to dig up information on Whit.” Before the last word is past his lips, his cell phone is gripped in a grime-covered palm. “The director sent a message stating they’re in a standstill like we are,” he says, his eyes scanning the screen. “FBI as well. Everyone is on standby waiting for a location.”

“It’s our save. My kill.” My jaw works back and forth. “Ponder and Whit are mine.”

“You find them first, you kill them first.”

“Will there be a second killing?” An almost smirk plays at my lips.

“I won’t let you have all the fun.”

The smirk grows wider into a full sinister smile at his need for revenge almost matching my own.

Both our heads whip in the direction of a roaring engine. A bright red vintage Chevy Camaro barrels down the street before screeching to a halt along the curb. Dirt, clouds of smoke from the tires, and the scent of burned rubber float around the car as I bend down, leaning into the passenger side through the open window.

Without a legit evidence baggie, I finagle the cell phone down into an unused latex glove and tie the end to keep it from slipping out.

“Here.” I toss our only lead onto the black leather seat. For a split second, I allow myself to appreciate the car and the care Smith’s obviously put into restoring it. “Find us something.”

I barely have a second to lean back out of the window before the engine revs, tires squeal, and the classic car shoots into oncoming traffic like he has zero fucks to give about the possibility of a head-on collision.

At my back, Tank’s deep voice snaps and directs orders. I watch him pace at a fast clip with his phone pressed to his ear, face in a deep scowl.

I tap my own phone against my thigh in quick rhythm, matching my pulse. With a deep inhale, I tilt my face to the sky and close my eyes.

I’m coming, Randi.

Hold on, baby. I’m coming for you.

Chapter Eleven

Randi

Everything aches. My bones, my skin, my head and ringing ears. After that initial neck-snapping punch to the face, the man who I still haven’t identified eased back—even further than he had before, if I believe what he told Shawn about not hitting me at full force. The smacks to the face and punches to the gut still hurt like hell, but they’re not nearly as bone-crunching and brain-rattling as that initial hit.

What worries me the most is that after the third or fourth hit to the gut, it hurt to breathe deeply. Hell, it hurt to breathe at all because of the stomach shots, but this is different. There’s a pinch or a stabbing sensation every time my lungs fully fill with

air, almost like a rib or something else is jabbing into it.

I've lost count of how many times they've revived me either with smelling salts—which should be renamed as smelly salts because they're nasty—or a quick adrenaline shot. Those I'm growing to like with the way they amp up my body enough to forget the pain for a few short minutes.

After multiple punches, backhands, taunting, and threats, I still haven't given in to Shawn's request. And I won't. Why does it matter at this point? I'm not getting out of this alive unless Trey finds me. And there's a piece of me that's taking sick pleasure in watching Shawn's anger rise with my resistance to his demands.

Does that make me a masochist? I'm not getting wet on the pain, just finding a sliver of joy in this fucked-up situation. So maybe that makes me an opportunist?

“Opportunist masochist?” A sharp stinging sensation bites across my lower lip as I mouth the words, deepening a split along the edge.

Thank goodness there's no one to respond to my ramblings or give me hell for talking to myself. I'm finally alone after what felt like hours of being a human punching bag and thinking up creative ways to tell Shawn to fuck off before the two men stormed from the room.

The moment the door slammed shut, I sagged in relief. In the movies, now is the time I'd figure out a way to escape the bindings holding me to the chair and bust out of here, rescuing myself.

But that's in the movies, and I'm no heroine.

I'm trailer trash Barbie playing dress-up in DC. I've had a lot of time to think about the choices I made to bring me to this point. The two biggest life-changing decisions

were going to Harvard and convincing Kyle to put me on the presidential ballot as his VP. Both are what set all this in motion. Or maybe it was dreaming of having a better life away from the trailer park I grew up in that started all of this.

Whatever it was, put me here.

Fate? Destiny? The plotting of a sociopath?

Call it whatever, but it doesn't change the outcome. Or the good I've done since arriving in DC or the good that will continue to be done once I'm gone from office—either dead or replaced during the next election. Not going to lie, my hope is on the latter.

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Plus, on top of all the good I've done while in DC, I met him.

Trey Benson.

Mischievous, fun-loving, hot-as-hell Trey Benson. He's mine, and I'm his. Even if I die today knowing my past choices could've kept me from all this pain, I'll never regret a single one because they all led me to him.

A single warm tear slips down my cheek, leaving a stinging burn in its wake as the salt aggravates the slices across my skin. I should've known someone like me wouldn't be allowed a happily ever after.

All I want is one more kiss, one more smirk, the feel of his protective arms wrapped around me. Just once. Half a second is all I'm praying for. It's all I'll need to say goodbye.

Hot dry air wafts across me with the opening of the door, moving the few strands of hair that aren't stuck to my sticky skin, but I don't look up. Lids drooping, I continue to stare unseeing at the cracked floor now dotted with drops of crimson.

Soft murmurs reach my ears along with the stomp of feet. Something gentle yet firm slides beneath my chin, raising it off my chest until I'm staring into a set of searching eyes.

My breaths rattle in my lungs. "Don't do this," I rasp. "You see it. See he's crazy. Let me go, please."

The corners of his eyes wrinkle. He breaks the intense gaze to scan my beaten face, no doubt appraising the work he's done so far.

"I'll kill you, end it now before I leave." The words are low, muffled through the fabric wrapped around his face.

"No thank you?" In my attempt to shake my head, it lolls to the side, my chin slipping off the two leather glove-covered fingers holding me steady. His grip tightens, keeping me upright. "He can't win."

"Protect yourself. Give the fuck in." There's an urgency in his voice, one that hasn't been there before now.

"I have to protect them."

"Who?" I swear his head angles in a curious tilt.

"Everyone." Exhaustion makes my words slur, or maybe it's the swollen lips and blood clotting in my mouth. "I swore to protect."

"You're a fool," he hisses.

Looking him dead in the eye, I summon what courage and defiance I have left. "No. I'm the president, and I don't negotiate with assholes."

The door swings open, banging against the wall before slamming shut. With zero energy left, I can't physically turn to identify who's entered. Instead I cut my eyes to the left and search my periphery to find the asshole himself stomping back into the room.

"I've misjudged your tolerance for pain, Trailer. We've discussed, and it's time to

change tactics.” I stop tracking Shawn’s calculated steps to search the gaze of the man still crouched in front of me. Eyes narrowed, he stays silent. “We’ve decided to...force you.” Shawn’s Joker-like smile spreads up his cheeks, crinkling the corners of his eyes.

A chill races down my spine at Shawn’s ominous choice of words and the almost desperation emanating from the mystery man.

“No,” I whisper. In my gut, I know what Shawn’s referring to, and I’m not sure I’ll stay strong if one of them forces themselves on me. The pain in my face will fade, my ribs will mend, but the mental damage from being raped by my abductor and captor might never heal—if I live long enough, that is.

“Please,” I beg the man in front of me. Saliva drips off my trembling split lips. Something in the way he’s holding back, not as overly excited like Shawn, makes me wonder if he’s not as keen on this new turn of events. Tears leak down my cheeks as I tug at the restraints, this new horror giving me a shock of desperation-laced panic and making me thrash, cutting the plastic farther into my skin. “You said you weren’t like your friend. Please don’t do this. Kill me, hit me, but not that.” My cries turn into sobs, strangling the words to nearly unintelligible.

The man stands from his crouched position and faces Shawn. “I told you I’m a mercenary for hire,” he states. “I will torture, kill, hunt, and threaten, dishing out whatever the client paying wants, but not that—not what you’re asking. I draw the line at lowering myself to a rapist.”

“You are who I pay you to be.” I flinch at the vehemence in Shawn’s bellow.

“Just let me kill her, get this over with, and we’re done here.”

“You’re the employee, you fool. I hired you. I pay you. You do not tell me what to

do.” Nose to nose, Shawn’s yelled words echo off the cinder block walls. “Fall in line or you won’t get the last of the payment. I have more planned for her after this.” His dark eyes find mine from across the room. “Others who will be more than happy to have their fun with our little president.”

I’m a blubbering mess, begging for the man not to do it, to hit me instead or just leave. But one thing I won’t allow to cross my lips is the surrender to Shawn’s demands.

The arguing voices fade into the background as I mentally curl within myself, frightened of what’s to come. The door opens, a waft of hot air drying my tearstained cheeks. A bolt of hope stutters my heart at the thought that it’s Trey breaking down the door, finally here to save me. But it’s not. The man with his face still covered stands with his hand on the door, back to the room, pausing half in and half out when Shawn calls out to him.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“Keep your damn money. My final payment of this contract will be seeing that bastard Benson dead at my hands. Do what you want with her. I did my part, and now I’m out.” Without turning the man continues into the larger part of the abandoned warehouse disappearing as the door falls shut with its own weight.

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Shawn's dark chuckle at the man's response chills my blood and churns my stomach. "Sounds like your boyfriend has made a bloodthirsty enemy." He sighs and dusts off his hands. "That bastard leaving saved me a million dollars. Too bad for you it didn't save you from shit. The others will be here soon. Then we'll start the real fun."

My heart races, thundering in my chest as he steps closer. The vileness in his eyes, malice in his smile, and genuine hate in his dark aura have me flinching back, doing anything to put distance between me and the sinister man, but there's nowhere to go.

With far too much enjoyment, Shawn slips on one blue latex glove before tugging one on the opposite hand. The legs of the chair he once occupied scrape along the rough floor as he drags it close. His gaze never leaves mine as he folds into his seat, our knees brushing.

"All you have to do is make the call to Pierce," he mutters. Those dark eyes dip to my lips before tracing lower, leaving a dirty feel in their wake. "I can't say I wasn't hoping it would come to this. I'll find my own enjoyment watching them break you."

I sink my teeth into my bottom lip in an attempt to keep my terror-filled tears at bay.

A barely there touch ghosts across my road-rashed knee, eliciting a pathetic whimper even with my jaw locked and lips sealed. The countless scrapes along both legs, from the wreck, fighting my captors, and rolling around like a rag doll in a trunk, snag the soft latex glove as the tip of a single finger tracks higher. At the edge of my bloodied jean shorts, two fingers dance along the hem, dipping beneath before retreating just as quickly.

A scream builds in my chest, desperate to be let loose, making my revulsion known. But I clamp it down, sealing my lips even tighter and breathing hard through the one nostril that's not clogged with tacky blood. I will not give him the satisfaction of hearing me scream, of hearing exactly what his touch does to me.

Those same two fucking fingers fiddle with the top button of my shorts where it still hangs open from my earlier bathroom break.

"Convenient," he mutters. "Did you two start the fun before I got here, hmm?"

The tendons and muscles along my neck protest as I twitch my head left and right.

"Good. That's good." The hem of my shirt rises just enough for him to dip beneath. "I want to hear all your screams," Shawn whispers in my ear. Nothing in the world could hold back the desperate cry of agony that erupts from my soul and pours past my parted lips. "Make. The fucking. Call."

Make the call.

Make the call.

It could all end. Right here, right now. I wouldn't have to endure another second with him too close. Wouldn't have to temper the revulsion rolling in my stomach or the dark thoughts that are racing through my mind. All I have to do is make a simple call. A difficult decision, a simple act.

But ... then what?

It doesn't feel right. Something is keeping me from folding, from giving in despite my body begging me. Maybe not something. Maybe a someone. Trey. I know he's out there searching for me, and he will come. He will always come for me. I just have

to stay strong a little longer to give him time.

I have to believe in him.

“No.” The word is a hiss as it passes through my clenched teeth.

With a rage-filled yell, he wraps a gloved hand around my throat and squeezes. The pressure triggers my instinct to fight back, both arms twitching in earnest, desperate for release. But still I don’t scream, don’t make a sound as I glare right back at Shawn, pouring as much hate and loathing and disgust into our stare-down as I can muster.

“You fucking cunt,” he screams in my face. Spit sprinkles across my cheek, but still I don’t look away. “You’re nothing—nothing—compared to me. You do not deserve the role that was handed to you by that fucker Birmingham.”

I’m sorry. What?

Okay, so now I know my line.

Call me a cunt, talk about raping me, beat me to shit. But tell me something washandedto me? To Randi fucking trailer trash Sawyer?

Hell. To. The. No.

“You listen and you listen good, you pompous piece of shit.” My voice is strong, my words like a damn whip. “I’ve worked my ass off my entire life. Scraping by, doing whatever I could to make a better life for myself and my daughter. Nothing, and I mean nothing, has been handed to me. So get your pink panties out of your ass and realize you fucking lost your shot to a hell of a woman who is twice the man you are and will ever be.”

My nostrils flare as heated blood pumps through my veins, warming my skin and causing sweat to build along my neck and forehead once again.

Two seconds. That's what it takes for him to process my declaration.

Three seconds. That's what it takes for him to shove against my neck so hard that my windpipe almost snaps from the pressure and the chair rocks backward on the two back legs.

My eyes widen as the sensation of falling flips my stomach and steals the little air left in my lungs. Shoulders tucked in tight, I lean forward as far as I can with my hands tied behind me to prepare for the impact I know is coming. The chair slams to the floor, my back smacking the metal immediately after. The force snaps my neck, whacking the back of my head against the unforgiving dusty floor. All the air whooshes from my lungs and stars spark behind my open eyes even as the darkness of unconsciousness creeps in.

My head lolls to the side in time to see a tan loafer sailing toward my side. A scream crackles through the stale air, scratching and tearing out of my throat at the impact of his kick against my already battered ribs.

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“You think you’re fucking tough, do you? Have this all figured out how you’re the one with power?” A roaring evil laugh bounces off the walls. The toe of his loafer nudges my cheek until I’m facing the ceiling where his sneering face looms over me. “I’ll have him fuck you in the ass dry, how about that? Make him bleed you from the inside out, shoving in deep until you’re hoarse from the screams.” The slight movement of him adjusting his hardening dick catches my eye. Bile slides up my throat, burning as it settles just behind my tongue before I can swallow it back.

“I’ll even record it for that rent-a-cop boyfriend of yours. Let him relive this over and over again, knowing he couldn’t do shit to stop it. Because I’m the one with power here, Trailer. Not you, not him, not Birmingham. Me. And I will get my way even if I have to fuck it out of you myself.”

The way his tongue swirls around his cheek, I know what’s coming before his lips purse and the thick wad of saliva and mucus splatters against my cheek and neck. Without the use of my hands, I can’t wipe the disgusting glob from my face; instead I’m forced to feel every centimeter it slides down my skin until it drips to the surface.

Chest heaving, he continues to lord over me, contempt burning behind his dark eyes. His lips part, no doubt ready to let loose another stream of hatred my way, when his attention slides to the door. His brows furrow. “Where the hell are the others?” With a quick check down to me, he turns on his heels and makes for the single door.

Only once he’s gone do I give over to the agony pulsing through every part of my battered body and tattered mind. He’ll be back with other men, which means the worst is yet to come.

I swallow back the tears clogging my throat. If I'm to live through this, come out whole on the other side, I have to prepare for the horrors I'll face under their ministrations.

Focusing on a dark corner of my mind, I feed all the good, happy memories into the tiny corner, shoving them deep and preparing a happy cavern to escape to when the torture begins again. It's not much, but it's all I have.

My tiny corner filled with Trey memories will have to work until the real one comes to save me.

Chapter Twelve

Trey

Nowhere. We're wasting valuable time and getting fucking nowhere. After an hour of calling in every favor to gather information on Whit, all I've found is validation that he's a shady-ass politician who's used his power and money to escape multiple accusations of assault, extortion, and one battery charge. All those cases were dropped; none of the accusations stuck or saw the inside of the courtroom.

Fucking rich bastards thinking they own the damn world because of what they're worth.

Sure, I was a rich bastard too, but I never used my family name or money to cover my mistakes. No, I spent it all on clothes, shoes, and fast bikes and cars. But it seems I'm an anomaly.

Mid-afternoon sun blazes high in the cloudless blue sky, its unrelenting rays scorching the exposed skin of my neck. Even with the material of my T-shirt wicking the sweat from my back as soon as it forms, I've sweated through the entire shirt from the

intense summer heat. I've stood here, feet from where we found the cell phone, calling and digging for information on Whit while waiting for Smith's Homeland buddies to give us another lead to track.

Tank's deep voice rumbles from across the street, where he chose to post up in the shade. But me, I couldn't move from this spot. For some reason, the thought of crossing the street to be more comfortable made me angry. Why in the hell should I be comfortable, not sweating like a pig and dying of thirst, when Randi is out there probably feeling the same way without any option of escaping the heat?

That's why I can't bring myself to move. It makes no sense, but in the back of my mind, it feels like I'm betraying her if I search for relief from my discomfort.

The thin, solid metal of the phone slides beneath my tight grip with the sweat slicking my hands. I tuck the device into the back pocket of my cargo pants and wipe both soaked palms down the front of my shirt, which only wicks up the sweat from my chest, dampening the shirt further. I could wring the thing out at this point.

"Fuck," I mutter under my breath. Drops of sweat sprinkle from the tips of my hair as I rake a hand through the damp locks. "Where are you, Mess? Where the fuck are you?"

A tickle against my ass draws me out of my discomfort. I retrieve the vibrating cell phone, flip it around, and check the screen.

My eyes narrow at the call coming through.

UNKNOWN

A line of smeared sweat is left along the bottom part of the screen as I hastily swipe to answer Vlad's call.

“Please tell me you have something.” I hold my breath, tugging at my hair as I pace from the brick building to the curb and back again.

“Do not expect me to ever tell you how this information was found.”

“Yes, yes, of course. I don’t give a fuck if you have damn spies lurking around DC and that’s how you got it. Just give me what you have.”

“Coordinates will be sent to this number now. You make him pay for this, yes?”

“Without a doubt.” I growl.

“Good luck, then.”

The glass peels from my ear as I pull the phone forward, eyes glued to the screen. A text flashes, the coordinates Vlad promised. But coordinates to what, he didn’t say. All that matters is this could be the location where I’ll find her.

Gripping the phone so tight the frame bends, I shake out of the stunned stupor I’d frozen into and race across the street toward the SUV. I shout at Tank, yelling at him to hurry the hell up. At the first tug, the chrome door handle slips from my hand, rocking me back on my heels. Narrowing my eyes at the door like it personally offended me, I yank it open with more force than necessary and slide into the passenger seat before slamming the door closed behind me.

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The driver side door slams shut immediately after. “Where are we headed?” The engine roars to life. Warm dry air pumps from the vents before changing to lifesaving air-conditioned cold gusts.

“Here.” I plug the coordinates into my phone and link the screen to the navigation system on the dash. “It’s a lead from the Russian. He told me not to ask how or where he got it.”

“Probably has spies everywhere.” Without checking the mirrors, Tank slams on the gas, shooting us onto the street. The tires squeal as he makes a tight U-turn, unconcerned about the cars coming straight for us. Their brakes lock up as they come to a screeching halt to not T-bone us.

“That’s what I said, but I don’t give a fuck right now. All that matters is her.”

“It could be nothing, or hell, a trap.”

I nod in agreement, but the feeling in my gut tells me the information is solid. “Vlad likes Randi, as strange as that relationship is. I think he’s actually concerned with her well-being and probably called in a few favors of his own to gain this information. I doubt he’d send us into a trap.”

Tank shoots a cautious glance my way. “We need to let everyone know what’s going on. We have to call in backup.” The navigation voice tells us we’re ten minutes away. “We’re so far from the crash site they probably won’t have enough men over to us in time. We should wait—”

“We’re not waiting,” I growl. “I agree on the backup. I’m texting the director now to send whatever air and land power they can drum up to this area. But we’re not waiting.” After messaging the director, I shoot a quick text to Smith with the same coordinates. A response comes almost immediately with his ETA. “Smith is twenty out. He’ll go in with us.”

“Make sure they send an ambulance with her blood type—”

“I fucking know what she might need,” I snap as my thumbs fly across the screen, texting back and forth with the director. “I’m not a fool. I know what I might be walking into and what I might find. But I’m not going there right now, Davis. Right now I’m focusing on the fact that we have a lead, and that puts us one step closer to her and me murdering those fucksticks.”

“I get where your head needs to be now, but if we’re going in without backup, you cannot turn into a possessive, protective boyfriend when you see her in rough shape. I need Agent Benson with me covering my ass.”

“It’s a big one to cover,” I slide in, trying like hell to laugh through the panic inside me.

“Seriously. We clear the area, get the president somewhere safe, and then you can freak the fuck out.”

“I know what I’m doing,” I say as I will a cool calm to wash through me. It’s the same focused calm I learned to settle into during the few battles I engaged in during my stint in the army. It covered all emotions with a blanket, readying me to do whatever it took to save my own life and those of my brothers fighting alongside me. And I’ll do whatever it takes now to save her. “Just remember what we agreed.”

“I remember.”

“I don’t care if the place is crawling with cops and agents. I get my alone time with them.”

Outside the windshield, well-kept buildings and businesses fade from this part of town, replaced with warehouses. The farther we drive the more deserted the area becomes. Litter collects along the curb, spilling over onto the sidewalk in some areas. Twenty minutes from where we found the phone, we’ve gone from trendy business district to the forgotten side of the city.

Vacant warehouses with missing windows and doors line the street. Tall dried weeds sprout between the numerous cracks along the street and pieces of sidewalk that remain. A few buildings that are clearly abandoned are protected by hole-riddled chain-link fences that have failed at their job of keeping looters and vandals at bay.

Gravel crunches beneath the SUV’s tires as it slows to a rolling stop. Tense silence swells, only broken by the grind of metal as I engage the slide on one of my nine millimeters. In the driver seat, Tank checks a clip before slamming it into place and doing the same with another three handguns. Tension rises to a near snapping point as we finish the last of our checks.

“Ready?” His tone is gruff with worry. “Trey, if this—”

“Ready.” There’s no need to voice both our fears. His is that this could be a trap, mine that this is a false lead. Neither fear will help the situation; we have to suck it up, shove it back, and do what we came here to do.

Save the president.

The specific warehouse smack in the middle of the coordinates Vlad sent is still a block away from where Tank parked the SUV, carefully hidden between two buildings. Even with the distance between us and the warehouse, we soundlessly ease

the doors open, careful to not break the desolate quiet that's engulfed this place. Remnants of asphalt, litter, and shards of glass crunch beneath our quick steps as we creep closer, using forgotten dumpsters, stairwells, and sides of other buildings as cover.

At the corner of a tall brick wall, Tank's dark fist bolts into the air. I skid to a stop, nearly slamming my nose against his back. Chest ballooned out with a fortifying inhale, he peers around the building for a visual on our goal. Gun held tight between my hands, I seal myself to the crumbling brick while he debates our next move.

Tank taps my shoulder moments later, pointing forward and then right, indicating which way we'll zigzag heading for the new cover. Without hesitation, I follow behind him as he slips around the corner and dashes across the crumbling blacktop. The glare blinds me momentarily as I shift from the cool comfort of the shadows to race across the empty parking lot, dodging panes of glass and empty bottles to keep our approach silent.

Breathing hard from the anticipation thrumming through my veins, I crouch beside Tank, who's pressed against the building. Just steps away, around the corner, we're concealed behind a set of steps leading up to a closed army green dented and rusted door. Elbows resting on my bent knees, bouncing on the balls of both feet, I wait for him to detail our game plan. Because that's what he does. I'm the jokester who everyone loves, and Tank's the planner. It works for us.

"Let's assume there are at least five armed men in that building plus the president. There's no way Ponder took out all those agents, detonated the blast, and took out the surveillance system on his own. That team plus Whit." With a quick glance around the corner of the building to the front door, he ducks back. "We need another point of entry," he mutters low enough for me to hear but keeps his voice from traveling. "If this is a trap, they'll be expecting us to come through the front door."

“There’s a low window around back.” Both our guns whip to the right at the first muffled word, our sights zeroed in between Smith’s brows. “Don’t shoot.” You’d think a man would be terrified with two guns pointed at his head while he stands unmoving, no gun drawn, but not Smith. No, that dumbass just stares us down with a hint of a smile tugging at his lips.

“Tempting,” I mutter while lowering the gun. How the hell we didn’t hear him approach is either a testament to our focus on saving Randi or his training. “Did you see anything else?”

Crouching low next to me, he shakes his head and leans back against the building. “Just that one point of entry besides the massive loading dock doors, but those look rusted and would make a hell of a lot of noise. I peeked through the window before finding you two, didn’t see any movement.”

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“My gut tells me we’re at the right place.” I incline my head back toward the warehouse.

“It could just be the two inside and that’s why we don’t hear anything. Maybe they killed off those who helped them this morning already. If I were them, that’s what I would do.” I raise both brows at Smith in surprise at his statement. “What? The fewer people involved, the less likely for things to leak or go sideways. If it were me, I’d only want me and the client to be breathing after this.”

“Fucking hell,” I mumble. “Ten, five, two—who the fuck cares how many are in there? We need to get inside now.”

“True. She might already be dead.” I lunge toward Smith, ready to snap his neck, but two strong hands grip my shoulders and hold me back. “Is the backup on its way?” Angling his head one way and then the other, he cracks his neck, the picture of casualness in this tense-as-hell situation.

“Ten minutes out. I asked them to hold back until we give the signal.” A worried look crosses Tank’s sweaty dark features. “I don’t want to risk them feeling cornered. Shit will go sideways real quick if they do. If it is Whit behind that door with Randi, he’s liable to kill her and then himself before surrendering.”

“Good pep talk,” I hiss. Moving the gun to my opposite hand, I flex my fingers in an effort to get the blood flowing from my white-knuckled grip. “Let’s be realistic here. If Whit sees me, he’ll immediately know Tank isn’t far behind.” The various potential scenarios shuffle through my thoughts. “But he doesn’t know about you.” I incline my head to Smith. “You take the window you spotted and lie low until

absolutely necessary. The longer he doesn't know you're around, the better." Turning on the balls of my feet, I face him square on. "Whit and the fucker who took her are mine. If you have to intervene, wound them, but do not take the kill shot. Understand?"

His light eyes search mine before he nods and slips back the way he came.

I wait until he's out of sight before turning back to Tank.

"I'm going through the front door. You can come with me or find another way in. I agree about not making Whit feel cornered, and if it's several of his hired guys against one, he won't. There's no way that fucker is in there alone, which means all their attention will be turned to me. That will give you a chance to slip in and get Randi somewhere safe."

"You're a fool."

"You love me."

He shakes his head. "For some fucked-up reason."

"Again with the language. I really don't want to get on your wife's shit list."

"How about I make you a deal, Playboy?"

Despite what we're about to walk into, I smirk. "I'm listening."

"I won't tell my Sarah about you teaching me such foul language if you make it out of here alive today."

The smirk turns into a full-on smile. "And if I don't?"

“Then I’ll let them bring you back to life just so she can kill you herself.”

I cringe. “Deal. No dying or I’ll die twice. Now there’s a motivational speech for you. You should cross-stitch that shit on a pillow.”

Not waiting for his response, I stand, suppressing a groan as my knees crack, then switch the gun back to my dominant shooting hand.

“I’ve got your back, Benson. But please, for everything that is holy, don’t do anything stupid.”

Glancing over my shoulder, I offer him a smile. “Same, bestie.”

“Gotta go and make it all weird.” He shakes his head, but a hint of a smile pulls at his lips.

This is what we needed. A beat to relax, forget about the potential death we’re walking into, to ease the pressure the task of saving the president has resting on our shoulders.

Brown weeds drape over the crumbling sidewalk and fill the thick cracks running along the cement as I walk along. I take the three steps in one leap, putting me directly in front of the door. On a burst of hot, dry wind, it swings open half an inch before squeaking closed once again.

I pause, trepidation filling my gut and turning it sour as I stare at the unlocked door. No one would be that careless unless it’s part of the trap, allowing easy access to the inside of the building so they can ambush whoever is dumb enough to walk through that door.

The heated metal burns my palm as I place a steady hand on the rough surface, but I

hold it there despite the pain while I give myself a final inhale to focus every thought and muscle on what's about to happen.

Thoughts clear, I step forward, inching the door open, when a loud curse from the other side has every muscle locking in place.

I know that voice.

Hatred and loathing infiltrate my earlier calm at the sound of Whit's string of curses.

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A slow, cruel smile spreads across my cheeks as his voice filters through.

He's here, which means she's here.

I've found her.

Time to play, motherfucker.

Chapter Thirteen

Randi

Ashout, or maybe a string of shouted words, breaks through the peaceful darkness I'd slipped into. Nothing hurts here. No fear, no pain, no... anything. Just the calmness only the deepest shadows of my mind can offer, protecting me from what waits for me out in reality. I should remember this dark corner for the next deficit budget meeting.

Reality creeps closer as the shouting intensifies, shattering my little unconscious haven. Shawn's raised voice and quick curses assault my ears, almost like he's yelling directly beside my head. I cringe as he continues, demanding me to get up. A whimper escapes at a hard jostle of my shoulder, shaking my entire broken and bruised body and sending agony shooting along every bone, joint, and muscle.

"Get up," Shawn demands with a swift kick to my hip. I roll with the impact only to flop back to the floor.

I can't move. From the fact that every inch of my body is in pain, I know I'm awake and able to feel, but for some reason, my attempts to lift myself off this floor fail. Maybe I'm broken, too far gone inside my own mind, or perhaps my broken body has finally given up completely, leaving me defenseless to what's to come.

The conversation from earlier blares to the forefront of my mind, reminding me of what my unresponsive body has left me vulnerable to. A trickle of fear slithers through my veins and weighs in my gut like a lead ball, but still all I can do is stare unseeing at the far wall, my body limp.

A shudder racks through my weak body at another incentivizing nudge against my side. My body moves with the motion, rolling halfway only to flop back to the floor like a limp rag doll.

A distant part of my mind screams at me to wake the hell up and fight, to not give in this easily. I've put up a good fight; would it be that terrible to give in to the pain and fear, let it suck me under, never to breach the surface again?

But the sadness of the truth holds back that fight. The truth that my whole life, everything I've done and worked for, no longer matters. I'll never see Trey again. Never hold my grandbaby or hug my beautiful daughter again.

Even with the end looming, I focus on the good memories. I've lived a good life with lots of love, struggles, and successes. The best part of my life started with that positive pregnancy test all those years ago and ended with Trey asking me to marry him.

Grief's claws shred my heart knowing we'll never get our happily ever after. Never have lazy Sundays on the couch binge-watching Netflix or consecutive mornings waking up next to one another. Grieving the life I'll never have but always wanted hurts and offers more physical pain than the injuries I've sustained so far. I have to

accept the end of Randi Sawyer is near. No one will find me in time and save me from this terrible fate. Because even though it hurts to accept that we won't be together until we're old and gray, it hurts worse clinging to a false hope that all this will be over soon.

If they get their way and take my body against my will, I won't recover. Not from that. I'm not strong enough like other women who've been assaulted and come back from the dark wells of despair and self-loathing as a survivor instead of a victim. I'm strong in a lot of ways, or I was, but that... that will wreck me beyond recovery.

A blurred face appears above me.

"Get up now, you worthless cunt." The words are hollow, like they've traveled through an empty barrel from far away to reach me. More words are spoken, a few shouted, but they're too fast, too loud to understand in this state of teetering oblivion.

The blurry form shifts closer, now hovering mere inches away.

The inflexible plastic bindings tighten around my wrists before loosening, the sharp edges peeling away from my damaged skin until I can't feel the zip tie at all. The brief feel of freedom breathes renewed strength into my soul, encouraging me to not give up, not yet. The back of my head rolls along the concrete as I shift to get a better view of the man now bending toward my ankles still secured to the chair.

Several fast blinks clear the lingering glaze from my eyes. Shawn slices through the zip tie around my left ankle before moving to the next. Both legs immediately slip, falling to the floor and leaving me somewhat spread eagle around the chair's legs.

My frantic gaze flicks from the clearly tense Shawn to where my legs lie spread open. I still have shorts on, but I sure as hell don't want to be in this position, even with clothes covering my lady bits. Hissing through the pain, I wiggle back enough to seal

my thighs and knees together.

His perfectly plump lips press together in a thin line.

“Good, you’re not comatose. Now get the fuck up. It’s time to leave.”

The quiet crunch of leaves or debris beneath my hair sounds as I shake my head along the cement floor.

“That wasn’t a question,” he bites out. “The others will be here soon, and we need to be ready to haul out of here.”

“I won’t break, Shawn.” Speaking burns, each word torture. “Leave me. And if I were you—” Connecting our gaze, I wait a moment, ensuring I have his full attention.

“—I’d run. Run, because he will find you, and he will kill you for what you’ve done.”

“I’m not afraid of that clown you call an agent.”

“You should be.” Love and conviction strengthen my voice. “You really fucking should be. And maybe this makes me a bad person, but I hope he takes his time, like you’ve done with me. Reenacts exactly what you’ve done, what you’re planning to do, on you. But it will be worse for you, because you’ll know.”

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“Know what?” he huffs, crossing both arms across his chest, careful to keep the knife he used to cut my restraints away from his skin.

“You’ll know no one cares enough about you to even attempt to find you. No one will care when you’re lying broken and rotting somewhere. Because your whole life has been about manipulating those around you and lying to get your way, leaving you unremembered and forever forgotten.”

It could be the light playing tricks on my tired eyes, but I swear a hint of color leaches from his unnaturally tanned skin. His throat bobs with a hard swallow.

Well, shit, that even left a chill slithering along my spine. Guess my hate for the man runs deeper than I ever knew. The last few hours have really driven those feelings home, though it’s not like I’ve carried this hate and loathing baggage with me since day one of meeting Shawn. “I’ve got enough baggage on my own without adding that asshole.”

“Not if he kills Benson first.” Rolling his shoulders, Shawn looks down his nose with an evil gleam. “Or maybe he’ll do me the favor and kill himself after he sees what I did. How you begged for me to stop, to kill you and end the pain.” Heat singes my lungs as my breaths turn to short gasps. “I wish I could be there when he sees the recording you and I will do together. What he’ll think when he sees his trailer trash girlfriend fucked in every hole until only a sliver of life remains.”

“Why?” The word leaves my lips before I can stop myself.

Shawn rolls his eyes. “Because I can’t deal with this heat. And I never planned for

this to end here, Trailer. We're going somewhere far away, where they will never think to look."

"He'll find me no matter where you take me."

"Maybe, but it'll be too late to save you." He bends closer, fingers delving into the thick of my hair and tightening into a fist. There's zero warning before he yanks hard enough for several chunks to rip from my scalp. I scurry along after him, attempting to alleviate some of the pressure as Shawn drags me toward the door.

A cracked shriek erupts from my throat. Wrenching my arms up, muscles screaming in protest, I clumsily smack at his forearm and wrist before wrapping it in a tight hold to help support my dragging weight. Bright sunlight sears into my overly sensitive eyes as I'm hauled from the small dim room into the main warehouse. Bare heels scrambling to gain traction on the dust-slick warehouse floor, I thrash from side to side, struggling to dislodge his grip.

Each of his steps is slow with my added weight and the fight I'm putting up. Shawn yells over his shoulder for me to stop, but that only reinforces my efforts, knowing it's causing him more work.

My cracking voice is barely a whisper as I try to call out for help while also cursing Shawn and his pencil dick.

Between shallow inhales is when I hear it. It's faint, but I'd know that sound anywhere after riding in Marine One so many times.

Helicopters.

I hold in my loud breathing, straining to hear the sound again, hoping like hell I didn't imagine it. This time the distinct rhythmic thump of the blades sounds closer,

like they're flying as fast as they can in this direction.

Shawn's hurried steps halt as if he also heard the sound.

Releasing my held breath, I pant, joy and relief now flowing through my veins.

They found me.

Despite the pain I know the movement will cause on my scalp, I twist to watch an army of soldiers and agents bust through the door and high windows. Frantic, I flick my gaze around the empty warehouse, but no one crashes through armed and ready.

"You won't get away with this. They're here." I fight Shawn's grip, this time digging jagged nails into his skin, ripping and shredding as I scratch like a deranged kitten. "Get off me, you psychotic freak," I snap at the top of my lungs, which comes out more like a rasp.

Instead of releasing me—let's be honest, that was a false hope anyway—Shawn raises the fist wrapped in my hair, hauling me upright. The concrete slides beneath the soles of my feet as my noodle-like legs scramble to find footing.

The deep groan of heavy metal scraping against stone halts my frenzied attempts to break free. A furious curse vibrates in my ear as my back seals against Shawn's chest and hard, warm metal digs into my temple.

Scanning the desolate warehouse for whatever made him tense, my eyes land on a man dressed in all black, an angel of death, standing in front of a closed metal door, gun raised, the barrel pointing slightly above my head.

"I suggest you drop my girl."

Chapter Fourteen

Trey

The fact that I haven't pulled the trigger and splattered the bastard's brains against the dingy warehouse wall is a testament to my willpower. Before Randi, I would've fired without thinking of the consequences. But now, my life literally stands between me and the man I want to slowly torture to death.

The gun grip digs into my palms, my fingers aching at the firm hold.

I could take the shot. I would make the shot. But that slim chance Whit could move, putting Randi in the direct path of my bullet, keeps me from pulling the trigger. The odds of that happening are slim, but if it happened, then the next bullet fired from my gun would be lodged in my own skull.

I wasn't prepared for the first thing I saw after slipping through the door being fucking Whit himself dragging her behind him by her hair. I almost lost it then, almost went apeshit like Tank was adamant I not do. Since that one glimpse, I haven't dared look at her again. That was enough to recognize the treatment she's received up to this point in her captivity.

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“I won’t ask again.” My voice is cold, calm, deadly. “Release the president.”

“The president or your girlfriend, Benson?”

“They’re one and the same. Drop her.”

“Not a chance.” For emphasis, he tightens his hold, adjusting her limp body tighter against his. A whisper of a pain-laced whimper reaches me. I grind my teeth, tightening my jaw from the force to keep my eyes on Whit. “How does it feel, rent-a-cop? Knowing there’s nothing you can do to stop the inevitable?”

“Half the military is on standby just a couple miles away, waiting for my command. Three helicopters, a few fighter jets, and more guns than in all of Russia are ready to blow you into dust, yet you think you’re the one holding the cards.”

“Ah, but they won’t attack, just like you, with her in the crosshairs.” Her grip on his arm tenses at his demanding shake to my girl. Breaking our stare-down, he surveys the abandoned building. “Now where’s your friend?”

“Didn’t come.” He knows it’s a lie, but I have to give Tank and Smith time to get into position. Even if that means having to keep hearing this fucker’s annoying-ass voice.

A harsh laugh rattles in the emptiness. “Lie. You two fuckbuddies never go anywhere alone.” An evil glint flashes in his eyes as he leans forward, putting his lips beside her ear. Fury builds, fighting for escape as his lips move, his malicious gaze locked on me. “Call out for him.”

Randi shakes her head, then winces as Whit jams the barrel of the gun harder against her temple. “No.”

Whit tsks. “Wrong answer.”

A broken scream erupts from her parted lips. Unable to fight it any longer, I steal a glance down at Randi’s battered face. Eyes sealed, a pain-filled grimace scrunches her features.

What the hell is he doing to her?

“Stop,” I shout, the word out before I can hold it back. “Stop whatever the hell you’re doing.” Sighing in defeat, I call out to Tank. “Davis, come out where he can see you.”

Randi pitches forward with a relieved gasp only to be snapped against his chest once again. Her head lolls to the side, but still that gun stays firmly held to her head.

To the left, several feet from where I stand, a shadow shifts. Davis moves into the light, his own gun raised and trained on Whit.

A commotion in the back of the warehouse catches my attention. The way Tank inclines his head in the direction of the new voices suggests he hears it too.

“Ah, perfect timing.” From somewhere in the back, coming out of nowhere, a group of men dressed similarly to me swaggers closer. “Now. You two will put your guns on the floor and kneel.”

“Fuck you,” I seethe, but my confidence is waning as more men pour into the room—none of them ours. “Let her go, Whit, and take the last few minutes of your life like a man not hiding behind a woman.”

“Hmm.” The sound and sight of him running his nose through her hair makes every muscle twitch in eagerness to wrap my hands around his throat. “For a trailer park whore, she’s a damn good fuck. I don’t mind being behind her.”

No. I don’t dare search Randi’s face to see if his words are true.

“Get on the floor and remove all your weapons. She and I have some... unfinished business.”

A pitiful whimper and string of begging pleas snap my full attention to Randi. Pain laces her features, and tears streak her dirty, bloody face.

Desperate to find the cause of whatever excruciating pain he’s causing, I scan the two. The gun barrel hasn’t moved from her temple, still digging into the tender flesh. The other arm is wrapped around her ribs, Whit’s forearm and bicep flexed.

“You don’t have long,” Whit says, snapping my attention away from his hold. “I’m assuming it’s a broken rib that’s on the verge of puncturing a lung based on her excruciating pain and short breaths. It hurts, doesn’t it, Trailer?”

Those split, bloody lips press into a thin line in defiance before parting for another pain-filled scream.

“Stop. Fucking stop,” I shout. “Fine.” This is a mistake. He’ll have me shot the second I put my gun on the floor. But maybe that’s the opening we need. If he moves the gun to shoot me, Tank can take his own shot. Then there’s also Smith out there somewhere who can pick off the group of men watching, waiting.

If I die for her to live, that’s fine. She’s the one who matters. She’s all that matters. No one will miss a disinherited playboy like me. But millions would miss her. Taeler would be devastated, and that sweet baby needs to know her grandmother.

Me, no one will miss.

Her, the world would tip on its axis with the loss. Not because she's the president but because she's Randi Sawyer. Crazy, beautiful, foul-mouthed, and heart of gold. The impact of her death would be a ripple spanning out from this warehouse to the world.

"Don't," Randi pleads. "Trey, don't." The last word is more of a sob.

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Bits of crumbled cement and a thick layer of dust brush against my fingertips as I place the gun on the floor. Glancing up through my lashes, I lock onto those wet hazel eyes and wink. Straightening, I give her a confident smirk.

“Don’t worry, Mess. We’ll get you out of this.” A hard mask slips over my features as I shift to Whit. “You won’t get away. Even an arrogant ass like you can see that. You’ll be dead before you even step a fucking foot out that door. There are at least a dozen snipers out there itching to take out the fool who took her. And when they see her, see what you did?” I click my tongue and shake my head. “Not only did you hurt the president, but you hit a woman. A bastard like that doesn’t deserve a quick death. No, that bullet will hit where it hurts, to incapacitate. The killing will come later.”

“Good thing I don’t plan on walking out of here. On your knees,” Whit growls, the confidence in his tone and choice of words confusing me. “Hands behind your head since I know you have more weapons on you than that one.”

Slowly lowering to the ground, I don’t look away from Randi. Dust wafts up in the wake of my knees crashing to the floor.

“Baby, you’re okay. Maybe need a shower and a couple ice packs, but you’re okay.” Something blooms in my chest at the sight of her lips twitching upward in an attempt at a smile.

“That’s what you’re going with?” she wheezes. “Get off the floor, Trouble. Kill him. Don’t let him take me.” The tremble in her usually strong voice shreds my heart. “Don’t let him take me. I can’t—” A scream vibrates through the still air. “Fuck you,” she pants like each breath is more difficult to take in than the last.

“Later.” He laughs into her hair while raising a single brow in my direction. “Your turn, Davis, or Trailer here will have a perfect bullet-sized hole in her ignorant little head.”

“T, kill him.”

“Can’t do that, Randi,” Tank’s deep voice rumbles.

“Think of your wife. You can’t leave her. He’ll kill you and then rape me,” she cries.

My shoulders stiffen at that word. Sweat slips down my spine and temples from the need to kill burning through my veins and the stifling heat inside this shithole. Eyes narrowed, I shoot a glare across the room to my friend, begging him to do what that fuckstick asked.

A minuscule nod eases the grasp fear had around my chest. Smith is out there, watching, waiting. I know that, Tank knows that, but Whit does not. He thinks he has us trapped, but we might still have the element of surprise on our side.

The moment he swings that gun to me, thinking both Tank and I are unarmed and the threat’s only outside these doors, Smith will take the shot.

In my periphery, Tank sets his gun on the ground, then sends it skittering across the floor with a hard shove.

Deep breath. This is it. We’re both disarmed, prime targets for Whit to take the kill shot.

But the shot doesn’t come.

Shifting my focus from Randi, I narrow my brows at Whit, who’s still focused on me,

a wide smile on his face.

“Don’t look so surprised. You’re worth more to me alive than dead. Plus, taking you will make that coward livid that I took your life instead of him. Serves him right for leaving before the contract was fulfilled.”

Come on, move the gun. Move the motherfucking gun from her head.

All Smith needs is one clear shot and all this will be over. Once Whit is dead, the merry band of idiots along the wall will run back the way they came.

“Trailer here wasn’t as... forthcoming as I hoped. Yes, you just might break what little resolve she has left.”

“No.” Randi’s cry is a bullet to the heart as she jerks in Shawn’s hold. “I’ll do it, whatever you want.”

“We’ll see about that,” he says as a new guy, walking with an air of importance, strides from an office-looking room. Whit chuckles at Tank and me on our knees. “If either of you make a move, I’ll paint the walls with her blood.” The new man, dressed in all black like the others, stops beside Whit and whispers something in his ear. “Good. We’ll need it after all. Search those two, leave cell phones and any guns you find, and then tie them up. They’re coming with us.”

The man beside Whit calls out to the others. They shove off the wall, eager to do his bidding. Five march in my direction while eight or ten head for Tank.

Where did these fuckers come from? There’s no way they got through the secured perimeter the military and agency have set up by now, and their laughter and sick jokes tossed back and forth would’ve been audible if they were here earlier, even with the thick walls of the warehouse.

Two of them scan Randi with a blatant lust-filled once-over as they pass Whit. My jaw muscle pulses from clenching to keep me from bolting off the floor and cutting their eyes out of their heads. But that wouldn't do me or her any good. I'd be dead before I stood from the floor. No, to help her, I play it safe and stay alive. I fought all morning to find my girl; I won't risk dying, leaving her alone once again.

A stolen look across the room to Tank tells me he agrees.

The five stop directly in front of me. One toes my discarded gun.

"Ten dollars." One eye squinted to block out the blinding light, I smile up at the bastard. "It's the government's, so really I'd be making money. Not like I bought it."

Brown stains coat his crooked teeth, his rank breath pungent even from a couple feet away. Stale body odor floats on the air as another one of Whit's hired hands steps closer. Features scrunched with disgust, one spits, the brown sludge splattering on the floor near my knees.

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“Keep yer mouth shut, pig.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. At least these fuckers will be easier to dispatch than trained men. With the sounds, smells, and looks of these stragglers, Whit picked them up at the local Bad-Guys-R-Us store and went for the cheapest option available.

A grunt rumbles in my chest as I’m shoved and stretched every which direction with their search for my many weapons. Four guns, two knives, and my cell phone clatter to the ground as they pat and dig down my body. When the last of the guns is tossed to the floor, both wrists are secured behind my back. Thin bindings dig into my wrists.

“Clean,” one shouts before shoving a boot heel to my shoulder, sending me toppling forward. Concrete approaching fast, I twist to keep my face from slamming into the unforgiving floor.

“We leave now. The whole fucking army will be here soon.”

Fragments of rock and other debris dig and scrape along my arm as I search for Randi and Whit. Hauled upright by hands beneath both armpits, I attempt to throw their loose hold. Something hard slams against my back. Grunting, I stumble forward, barely keeping myself upright.

“Move.”

I barely hear the command over my harsh inhales and exhales as I breathe through the pain.

One hand firmly grips my elbow and another shoves my back, forcing me forward. I shoot an annoyed glare to Methhead Fucksticks One and Two as they drag me toward a small alcove Whit and Randi slipped into disappearing from sight.

I take the opportunity to scan for any sign of Smith. He has to be in here witnessing all this. A shift in a shadow, so minute I almost miss it myself, makes me pause. Examining the dark corner, I crane my neck to see any additional signs of our only hope.

Gray eyes reflect the light, the rest of his face remaining concealed. “Wait.” My lips move without sound, a silent plea to Smith before I’m dragged between two walls. The stench intensifies a thousand percent as we cram into the tight space. Sweat slicks every inch of skin sandwiched between these two assholes.

At an opening in the floor, I’m forced to descend the wooden steps. At the bottom, loose dirt shifts beneath my boots, and a musty, stale air engulfs me. It’s pitch black except for the few flashlights up ahead.

The prick at my back slams against me for the hundredth time since we squeezed down this tight tunnel. “Is that a gun, or are you just happy to see me?” I snap over my shoulder.

“Nah, pig. Just thinking about how that cunt up there will feel once we get where we’re goin’.”

Nope.

With a feral growl, I dip my chin before knocking back right into Fuckstick One’s face. Bone cracks beneath my skull, the impact sending a vibration through my brain all the way to the tip of my nose. A howl of pain pulses down the gouged-out dirt walls. Thick tacky liquid snakes along the back of my neck, mixing with the rivers of

sweat before gliding beneath the crew neck of my shirt.

Shouts erupt ahead of us, asking what's going on in the back.

“Motherfucker.” A damp, coarse hair-covered arm wraps around my neck, the crook of his elbow tightening around my windpipe, cutting off my air supply. “Just for that, I’ll make you watch.” Spit sprinkles my ear and neck with his rage-filled words.

Stars spark in my vision as his choke hold tightens.

With both wrists secured, I’m at his mercy. Digging my heels into the shifting dirt, I lean back and twist to dislodge his hold. Pins and needles explode along my legs and fingertips.

“Enough,” someone up ahead shouts. Dirt rains down from above, sprinkling my face. His sweaty-as-fuck arm loosens, sneaking in an elbow to the jaw before slipping away entirely. Not giving him the satisfaction of seeing me struggle, I inhale short gulps through my nose and release through tight lips.

A heavy hand slams between my shoulder blades, forcing me forward. A few inches separate me from the man ahead, the same with the motherfucker behind me. Blinking away the blur near asphyxiation causes, I try to focus on anything that could help us if we manage to escape these bastards.

Dirt. Below me, along the walls, above me.

We’re underground.

A tunnel of some kind. A tunnel leading us far from the military force surrounding the warehouse, waiting to swoop in and save us and the president at Tank’s command.

A command that will never come.

Oh hell, this is bad. Really, really fucking bad. We barely found Randi in time before they moved her to the new location. What are the odds the director and Smith can find us if Whit smuggles us out from under their noses?

At the thought of Smith, optimism flares within me, cutting through my thoughts.

There is some hope. Smith is still out there and probably saw us leave. He could be following us now, or better yet radioing to tell the others we're on the move so they can follow. It won't take them long to find the escape hatch and—

An eardrum-shattering boom blasts down the tunnel. My knees buckle at the ground trembling beneath my feet. With a curse, I lean to the right, my shoulder taking the brunt of the impact as I fall to my knees. The men in front of me all stumble and fall, some leaning against the shaking walls, others flat on their asses in the dirt. Chunks of dirt fall from the ceiling.

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Ears ringing, body still vibrating, I shift along the tunnel to look the way we came only to whip back around and shield my face as best I can from the approaching cloud of dust.

Shouts of confusion cut through the ringing in my ears. I shake my head, trying to clear away the fog, coughing and sneezing from the dust tickling my nose and throat.

What the hell was that? As I lean against the tunnel wall, more vibrations travel along the dirt, but they're much weaker than before.

"Could've fucking warned us," the asshole at my back shouts, probably thinking he's whispering. "We were too close to the explosion, the fucker. I won't be able to hear for a damn week."

Explosives?

There's no way. I think back to what the one guy said to Whit, and a knowing feeling sinks my gut. He blew the warehouse. That bastard Whit never planned to leave any evidence of where he escaped to. And we—no, I played right into his hands.

He blew the warehouse with Smith, our only hope, presumably inside.

Now what the fuck are we going to do?

Chapter Fifteen

Randi

Cool air chills my bare, sweaty arms and legs, goose bumps sprouting in its wake. The same steady throbbing beat that's been a constant pain drums against my skull. My lips part on a soundless cry at a simple move of my head.

But it's not just my head, or my neck, or even the sliced-up skin of my wrists and ankles. Everything fucking hurts. There isn't a single muscle, bone, or patch of skin that doesn't hurt like hell. I should come to terms with the fact that this will be my state of existence for the rest of my short life. However long that will be. Damn, that's a depressing thought. A very clear depressing thought. Of course, nothing else makes sense around me except that little ticking clock in the back of my mind reminding me my life is in danger and I might die soon.

"Thanks for the encouraging thoughts, brain." My voice is hoarse and raspy, barely above a whisper.

Each shallow breath is a hiss through clenched teeth. A quick tug of my wrists and ankles confirms both are still bound. Thin material—sheets, maybe—slides beneath my sticky cheek, the smoothness an unexpected sensation. Where am I? This is obviously different than the hotbox warehouse.

Continuing to breathe through the pain, I struggle to remember the last thing I saw or heard.

The ground trembling beneath my feet, dust and dirt pelting my face.

Someone carrying me, the stench of weed and body odor a distinct contrast to the musty scent that surrounded us.

Blinding light, welcomed fresh air. Trees. Lots of trees and men.

Shouting. A familiar voice yet filled with a rage and fear I'd never heard it hold

before.

Then... nothing.

Not a single memory, just darkness and peace only oblivion can offer.

Compelling one lid open, then the other, I blink to clear the blur and focus on my new unfamiliar surroundings. Soft rays of dusky sunlight stream through a single rectangular window along the far wall, the only one on this side of the room that I can see. Unfinished walls, wires, insulation exposed, a simple concrete floor, wooden stairs leading up to a single door, and a low ceiling above. A basement, maybe? I have zero clue where I am, but at least this place has air conditioning. Even the stabbing pain radiating from my side is manageable without the suffocating heat.

“Mess.”

My frantic gaze bounces around the room, searching for the owner of the hollow voice. A squeak of a mattress spring and the rattle of a flimsy metal bed frame sound as I shift to roll to my back. With a grunt, I flip, the bindings biting into my wrists with my slight weight lying on my secured hands. The white sheet slides beneath my heels as I struggle to gain leverage to flip again. Pushing and rolling my shoulders, I finally rotate to rest on my side, facing the opposite direction from before.

That's when I see him.

My eyes widen in shock at his disheveled state, but it's the sheer devastation behind his dull honey eyes that catches my breath.

“It's okay. We'll get you out of here.” His tone is dull and lifeless, lacking its normal cocky arrogance.

“What’s wrong?” I rasp. The sadness radiating off his slack features fuels my panic. “Trey,” I beg. Fuck, what if it’s him? What if he’s hurt beyond repair? I skim his dark T-shirt and pants in search of an injury.

“Randi, I need you to focus on me.” Reluctantly, I do as he asks. “Don’t be scared, baby. The others will find you, but—” He swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing with the effort. “—I don’t know when. I need you to listen to me, okay?” I nod, too transfixed on his words to utter a response. “They’re going to use us against each other to get what he wants. And I need you to be strong for me, strong for you.”

“I’ll give it to him.” My voice is as panicked as I feel. “I can’t—”

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“You have to, Mess. Whit is....” His eyes flick to something behind me and stare unfocused. “This is beyond what I ever imagined him capable of. I knew he was an evil son of a bitch, but this is... different. His need for revenge on you, on us.... All he can focus on is making us pay for what happened four years ago.”

“I know what he wants, and I’ll give it to him. He wants me to call Sam. For me to step down and have Sam select Shawn as the VP. I’ll give it to him. I’ll give him whatever he wants. I can’t watch—”

“It’s not as simple as the VP spot anymore, you know that. It might have started as that, and you getting that spot instead of him might have been the catalyst, but this is more than that. Now it’s personal to him. He won’t stop this until we’re both....” He shakes his head. “Shawn’s been planning this for a while, and it’s carefully thought out and well-funded. We wondered where he’s been the last year. Well, now we know. Planning all this.”

“How do you know all this?”

His slight sad smile tugs at my already bleeding heart. “You were drugged during the drive here, baby. I wasn’t. I heard it all, I know what he has planned for you and me. The longer they’re focused on me, the better. I’ll be the distraction to keep their filthy fucking hands off you and give Smith and the others time to find you.”

What he’s asking me to do clicks into place. Despite the sharp stab of pain in my neck, I shake my head. Locks of stiff hair fall into my line of vision. “No. I won’t watch them hurt you.” I can’t do what he’s suggesting, can’t let them torture him for as long as possible, with me watching, to give the others time to find me again.

“It’s not a suggestion, Randi.” A sliver of my Trey, that commanding, dominant tone, hardens his voice. “I can’t—” His voice cracks. “I’ll do whatever it takes to keep their focus off you. I can’t watch them hurt you” His shoulders slump. “I’m not strong enough for that.”

“Trouble—”

“You’re the one who matters, Mess. Not me. You have to live. Because if you don’t, I’ll be dead anyway. I don’t want a life without you in it.”

“Where is T?” I whisper, unsure where Shawn and the others are at the moment. T was with us earlier, that I do remember. He’ll talk Trey out of this ridiculous idea. “T, where are you? Talk some sense into him.”

A grief-filled sob swings my attention back to Trey. Head bowed, shoulders trembling, he doesn’t look up when I whisper his name.

“What’s going on, Trey?” I say louder. “Tell me what the hell is going on.” I yank at the restraints preventing me from comforting him, hating them more in this moment than ever before.

“He’s gone.” I narrow my brows, not understanding. “Tank... Davis is gone.”

“Where do they have him?” Deep down, I know what he means by “gone,” but I can’t go there. No, there has to be another explanation. Maybe they let him go. That’s a possibility, right? Maybe Shawn realized he didn’t need T for me to talk and let him walk away.

Yes, T is out there free somewhere, putting together a plan on how to save us. That’s who Davis Washington is, the badass sweetheart who always has a plan.

He has to be okay.

He has to be. I won't accept any other outcome. That's how it works, right? If I don't accept that something terrible happened to Trey's best friend and Sarah's husband, then it never occurred.

"Trey?" I beg but seal my lips at the shake of his head.

The faded memory from earlier comes flooding back, this time brighter, clearer, allowing me to remember every horrid detail.

A sob shakes my chest and shoulders.

I had one part right. Shawn didn't need T for his plans for me.

Shawn's bored voice after we emerged from the tunnel slowly becomes clearer in my memory.

"Take that one and dispose of him... No, I don't care how you fucking do it...."

Then a distant gunshot.

A single shot. The kind where there's no question that the bullet killed its intended victim.

"No." My voice cracks with the surge of grief. Trey nods, still not meeting my imploring stare that's begging him to tell me it's not true. "Did you see it?" My words come fast, spilling from my lips as my mind grasps on to this one sliver of hope. "Did you see them kill him?"

"No." Trey's gruff voice is filled with the same soul-aching emotions rolling through

myself. “I tried to fight them, tried to.... I couldn’t do shit as they carried you in one direction and dragged him in another. I had to choose. And I chose you, Randi. Every day, I choose you. I didn’t want them to take me out too, leaving you alone again with that fuckstick, so I stopped fighting back to make them think I gave up, but really I was going all in.”

“For me.”

“Always, Mess. It’s you or nothing.”

“But he’s... your best friend. How could you—”

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“If you’re asking if it was a difficult choice, no. If you’re asking if it feels like my fucking heart is ripped in two right now, yes. We all know what we’re risking when we sign on with the agency. Davis knew, Grem knew, I knew. I just never expected the choice between them and you to be so easy.”

A roar of voices and laughter sounds above us. Both our gazes lift to the ceiling.

“It won’t be long now, Mess. We’ve been down here a while. I need you to stay strong. Stay strong for me, for Tae, for—” He clears his throat. “For Tank. Don’t let his sacrifice be for nothing. You live.”

“Live for what if you’re not with me?” The jabbing pain in my side turns to more of a burn as my breaths quicken. “You think you’re the only one who can’t picture a life without us together? Without you? No.” I shake my head with the same conviction I put in the short word.

“Did you not hear me, Randi? I’m not strong enough to watch them hurt you. Don’t make me see that. Don’t let that be the last thing I see.”

“Same, Trouble.”

“Mess.” He groans. “Please. Let me do this for you. For Taeler. For our country. Let my sacrifice mean something.”

Hot streams of tears track down my cheeks before dripping to the sheet.

“I don’t want to do this alone,” I whisper.

“Do what, baby?”

“Any of it. I finally have you, finally have someone I can depend on and who sees me. The real me and still loves me despite it—”

“Because of it, Mess. I love you because of the mess that you’re so aptly nicknamed for.”

“I love you, Trey, and I don’t want to live another minute without you in it. You’re it for me. Us, you and me. You promised me a future,” I cry. “You promised me forever.”

“I know. I know I did, and I wish I could keep that promise, Randi, but it’s just not in the cards. We knew Whit was a malicious bastard after the poisonings, but I never thought—we never thought—he’d go to this extent. That was my mistake in underestimating how deep his hate and need for revenge ran for you.” A smirk tugs at his lips. “You couldn’t have chosen a less diabolical nemesis?”

“What can I say? I’ve always had lofty goals.” I sink my teeth into my lower lip to calm the trembling. A fresh trickle of blood seeps over my tongue from the reopened split. “All this, today, the poisoning, the attacks during the campaign... all of it is because of him, wasn’t it? All because I didn’t want to be Kyle’s wife and chose the option that helped better me, better our country.”

“Oh, Trailer.” I twist, a bolt of stabbing pain shooting down my spine as I crane my neck in the direction of Shawn’s voice. “This is about much more than that.”

The creak of wood draws my attention to the set of stairs I noticed when I first woke up. Dressed in a different pair of dark jeans and a pristine white dress shirt with the sleeves rolled to his forearms, he descends the stairs.

“This is a little overboard even for you.” Rolling back to my side, I face Trey, whose whole focus is zeroed in on Shawn, the vulnerability I witnessed earlier completely gone, leaving a hard stone face in its place. “You’ve taken pouting because you didn’t get your way to a whole new level.”

“I’m not pouting,” Shawn says, his voice now directly behind me. “It’s called restitution, and I plan to use you two to fully recover what I’ve lost.”

“Your mind?” I snap. “This is crazy, Shawn.”

“Ah, see, that’s where you’re wrong. I’m focused, driven. I wouldn’t expect someone like you to understand the need to recover what was taken from me.”

“It was never yours to begin with. I was the reason we won. You wouldn’t have made it onto the final ticket. I did that, my background and compassion for the American people. They would’ve seen through your fake exterior to your psycho soul and run the other way. Don’t talk like winning the non-incumbent ticket was a done deal.”

“We would’ve found a way. It was Birmingham’s advisors who suspected we would lose if we didn’t have someone more....”

“Trustworthy?” I pipe up.

“Common.”

“I’ll testify to the fact that there is nothing common about Randi Sawyer.”

“Thank you.” I shoot a small smile at Trey, who doesn’t even notice as he tracks Shawn’s movements.

“You stole the power from me, and power is everything in DC. After Birmingham

chose you for a running mate, I was nothing in that damn city. Connections, business relations, everything went to shit the moment he announced you as his VP candidate. You cost me millions.” The bite in his harsh voice makes me cringe.

“Sorry?” I squeak.

“Sorry?” The chuckle he gives as he rounds the bed makes me shudder. “Sorry doesn't even begin to cover what I've lost because of you. My family name means nothing now. All they see is the man who was passed over for a trailer trash whore. You made me look like a fool. Everything I've worked for my entire life crumbled at my feet that day, then again when you and Birmingham somehow won the election. Which is why you're here, to ease the suffering you caused me, my family name. Rent-a-cop here is a bonus I wasn't expecting. Two birds, one stone today or whenever we finish this. I won't lie, the idea of this extended for a few days sounds perfect to me.”

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“If we last that long, you arrogant fuck. She won’t last another hour or two unless she gets some water. Or did you miss class that day where they taught us humans need water and food to survive?” A devious smile spreads across Trey’s face. “Let me guess, your boyfriend had you bent over the bleachers that day they covered survival in science.”

“Oh snap.” The giggle dies on my lips at the look of fury on Shawn’s flushed face, his narrowed eyes fixed on me. Terrible idea. Really the worst decision I’ve made in a really long time. “What? It was funny.”

“You two don’t get it, do you? You two won’t just die down here. You will suffer—”

“Trembling in my boots,” Trey says on a yawn. “About that water. Do you put an order in with room service? I’d like sparkling, flavored if you have it. Randi?”

“Plain is fine for me.”

Brows raised, we turn our expectant faces to Shawn, who looks like he’s about to blow a damn gasket.

“Now if you don’t mind, we were having a private conversation.” In dismissal, Trey turns, putting his full focus back on me. A slight twinkle in his gaze tells me he’s having way too much fun pushing Shawn’s buttons. We’re idiots, of course, taunting a lunatic, but this is us, and I wouldn’t want my last few hours of life to be without a few smiles and giggles. Trey’s wink tells me he feels the same. “So back to that text I sent. What do you say? Yes or no?”

Ah, wondered when he'd bring that up. Thought maybe he'd let it slide considering our circumstances but apparently not. Such a guy, not letting the hope of anal fade just because we might die a horrible death.

"Think that's allowed in heaven?"

"Probably not. In hell, no doubt."

"Then why does anyone want to go up when down seems to be where the eternal party is held?"

"Fake news fed to us by the churches to keep us from having fun."

"Figured. Plus I'm always cold, so hell might be pleasant for someone like me."

"You mean cold-blooded."

I roll my eyes. "You've always thought that joke was funny."

"It is."

"Enough," Shawn shouts. I swear he almost stomps his foot like a petulant toddler. Someone needs to spank him, teach him not to pout and get all murder-y because he didn't get his way.

"Or what?" Trey's snort sounds as forced as the supposed calm his body radiates. "We both know you won't get your hands dirty now that you've changed. Wouldn't want to ruin that Kmart clearance rack dress shirt. Lord knows it'll disintegrate after one wash."

"It's Armani," Shawn barks.

“Darmani maybe,” I quip, earning me a smirk from Trey.

“Now about that water—”

Shawn’s roar drowns out whatever Trey was going to say next as he lunges, fist swinging through the air. Flesh smacks flesh, and Trey’s head snaps to the right with the force of the hit. For a moment, my own heavy wheezing breaths—note to self: that doesn't sound or feel good; Shawn could’ve been right about the punctured lung assessment earlier—are all I can hear.

The spite-filled glare Trey shoots Shawn as he spits a mouthful of crimson liquid to the floor causes a blast of heat to burn in my lower belly. That promise of death in Trey’s bright honey brown eyes should not turn me on, but it does. I’ve always said there was something terribly wrong with me.

Eh, I’m hours from an excruciating death. Not going to change anything now. Might as well revel in my messed-up fetishes.

“And look, I’m already tied up,” I mutter.

“I like where your head’s at, Mess.” Peeking through my lashes, I find Trey’s bloody lips stretched in a full smile. “Later.”

“You two think this is funny?” Shawn cradles his hand against his chest, massaging the knuckles he smashed across Trey’s face.

“You know what I don’t get,” Trey says after spitting another mouthful of blood to the floor. “The tunnel. Fuck knows you didn’t dig it.”

“Ah.” Shawn drops his hand and sits in a chair I failed to see earlier. “You are correct there. I did not build it. I’ve had a very long time to plan out every detail. From hiring

the best mercenary to abduct Trailer, to securing a private location with an escape route, to here. Where you'll never be seen again after I'm through with you."

"How did you get the asshole we know as Ponder on the beta team?" Trey asks.

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“Ponder?” I mouth. “It was Ponder?”

Trey nods, pressing his lips into a thin line, telling me he has more to say on that topic.

“Ah, see, that was a surprise to me too. I didn’t place him on her security detail, someone else did. Someone else wants her dead, whereas I wanted her... vulnerable. He was to abduct Trailer, help me ensure her compliance during our escape—”

“Is that what you call beating the shit out of me? Making me compliant?”

A shoulder rises and falls with Shawn’s unconcerned shrug. “It worked, didn’t it? I will admit they found you sooner than I expected, but that was why I had a plan C in place on the off chance our location was discovered before we could escape.”

“That’s why you blew the entrance to the tunnel—”

“The warehouse, not just the tunnel entrance. I didn’t want to lead the Secret Service and FBI to investigate why I chose that warehouse in the first place, or then they’d know where the tunnel ended. See, the FBI raided that warehouse years ago. A known human trafficking ring utilized it to receive their shipments, then the tunnel to export them without anyone knowing. Not that it matters now, because even if they do discover the tunnel’s exit, we’re far from there now. Far from anything, actually.” That icy stare narrows in my direction. “No one to hear you beg except me.”

“All this for what?” I croak. “For revenge.”

“No, Trailer. Like I said earlier, for restitution. Which I will bleed from your boyfriend first, then you. But don’t worry, I’ll make sure to take my time so you have a chance to say goodbye.”

I swallow down the tears clogging my throat. “I’ll do it. I’ll call Sam, make him take you on as the VP. Just give me a phone. I’ll make the call.”

In three slow, calculated steps, he pauses in front of my face. Twisting to lean against my bound hands, I stare up at him. A wide smile splits his face—a knowing smile.

“Oh, Trailer. It’s too late for that. There is nothing left, no bargaining chip you hold to stop what’s to come. Not that it ever would have.”

I feel my face pale. He never expected me to make that call. It was a distraction. A reason to beat me into submission and taunt me with what’s to come. Fuck, I should’ve known that wasn’t his endgame after all. There’s no way it ever could’ve happened.

This right here, right now, was his plan all along. Me, alone and vulnerable. Trey and Tank finding me so fast just offered up a little bonus for Shawn and his evil plot. They played into his hands without even knowing it.

Now for the final stage of his diabolical plan.

Trey’s death.

Then mine.

Chapter Sixteen

Randi

Shawn's humorless chuckle seems to echo long after he climbed the stairs and slipped back through the unseen door. The entire conversation runs on repeat as I stare with glassy eyes up at the unfinished ceiling.

My hair slides along the sheets as I shift my angle for a different view of the exposed floor joists and wiring. It's that exposed wiring that holds my rapt attention.

"You know, one time when I was still living with my mom, our trailer almost caught on fire." Shifting again, I study the various rubber-coated colors differentiating the wire's purpose. "It was the burning rubber that I smelled first. Thank the unicorn gods the side window was open or I wouldn't have noticed something was off before it was too late. Two frayed wires near the electrical output we were hooked up to had caught fire, the flames slowly working their way along the rubber coating toward the trailer." Laying my cheek along the bed, I catch Trey's obvious confusion as to why the hell I'm bringing this up. "Did you know you can't put an electrical fire out with water? It has to be some kind of flame suppressant like... flour. It's only by sheer luck we'd learned about it the week before in science class."

"Ah, so you were in science class that day, not bent over the bleachers like that fuckstick upstairs." A mischievous gleam flickers in his gaze.

"No, Ben was not fucking me on the bleachers." Trey's responding possessive growl somehow eases the fear strangling my lungs. "Hey, you said it, not me."

"Don't say his name again."

"Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I bring this up because that wiring above us is exposed and runs along the wall behind you. None of the walls are finished, so everything down here is exposed."

"You're suggesting we catch the place on fire."

I attempt a shrug only to grimace as the motion tugs at my bindings. “If we had a way to cut out of these zip ties and fray the wiring without electrocuting ourselves... yeah. But we’re not that lucky.” If we were, we wouldn’t be sitting down here waiting for our deaths.

“I might have something that would work.”

“Okay....”

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Trey quickly scans the room, zeroing in on the spot we last saw Shawn.

“My boot.” The words are so mumbled and low, I barely make them out.

“Yes, you’re wearing boots.”

For half a second, that focus shifts from the top of the stairs to me. He rolls his eyes and goes back to watching for the evil incarnate.

“There’s a Swiss Army knife in my boot. But I can’t reach it.” I eye the restraints on his wrists and ankles holding him to the chair, very similar to how they had me tied up back at the warehouse. “You’d have to roll off the bed without a sound, somehow make it across the floor to me, swing around so your hands can reach inside my boot....” Not a single dark, wet lock of hair shifts as he shakes his head.

“I’ll do it.” It might not work, but it’s better than lying here waiting to watch my fiancé get beaten to death and then me raped to death. Yeah... I’ll choose zero fucking chances of escape but will die trying than the other option any day.

Pride radiates off him. “That’s my girl. Now roll off the bed—”

“I don’t need a play-by-play,” I hiss. “Let me concentrate.”

“Sorry.”

With a huff, I shuffle to the edge of the bed. Okay, so this is like playing mermaid in the community pool. I can’t separate my feet. Except in that scenario, I was able to

use my arms.

“Hey, Mess.”

“What?” I don’t hide the exasperation in my tone. “What’s so important that you need to tell me now right before I smack my already beaten body to the hard floor without hands or feet to ease the impact?”

“Right, poor timing, but I just wanted to tell you how fucking hot you look.”

It takes a bit of finagling, but I meet his wide, clear eyes and raise both brows in question. “Seriously?”

“Hell. Yes. You have this determined look on your face that’s sexy as hell. It’s the same one you get when you put those pompous assholes in the House and Senate in their place after a rude or derogatory comment.”

“You notice that?”

“Have you not noticed them not coming within twenty feet of you again?”

“Yeah, I just thought they didn’t like having their bigot asses handed to them by a woman.”

“That and they didn’t like having their bigot assess handed to them later by me and Tank to teach them a lesson on how to properly speak to our girl.” A wash of sadness shifts over his features. “Right, carry on.”

“He’s not dead. I know it, Trey. I just know it. Have some faith in, T.” I suck in as big a breath as I can stand before it causes pain. “Okay, here I go. One. Two.” Before saying “Three,” I roll off the bed, hoping I can somehow rotate in the three feet to

land on my back and not my—

Oomph.

“Fuck,” I hiss as all the air whooshes from my lungs at the impact between the floor and my chest. “That did not go like I planned.”

“Are you okay?” Worry and concern fill his whispered words, keeping me from making a quip about being fucking golden despite the shard of rib that seems to be stabbing through my lung into my kidney.

“Yep,” I grunt. “All good.”

“You’re lying,” he hisses. “Fuck, I can’t make you do this. You’re already hurt—”

Lifting my head, I rest the opposite cheek on the ground to see in Trey’s direction. The cool cement feels nice against my swollen cheek. “In case you haven’t noticed, you didn’t make me do anything. I’m doing this on my own because, quite frankly, I don’t want to die down here and... setting this house on fire would really piss Shawn off.” My lips sting as they pull into a smile. “Okay, on the count of three, I’m caterpillar-crawling over to you. One. Two. Three.”

I don’t move. Can’t move.

“Randi?”

“Yep.”

“You didn’t move.”

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“Yeah, about that... I just needed another second.”

“Baby, we don’t have many to waste. I know you’re hurt, and this fucking sucks since you’re the one doing all the work, but if we want this to happen, you need to move.”

He’s right. At any point Shawn could open that door and stop our attempt to break out of this insane asylum. But everything still aches. Breathing really fucking hurts. Blinking... blinking doesn't hurt, so that’s a positive to focus on.

“Flip to your back. That way you can dig your heels into the floor and use the leverage to slide your body instead of... what did you call it?”

“Caterpillar crawling. Wait, too long. Caterpillaring.”

“Whatever the hell that is, it doesn’t sound pleasant. On the count of three, Randi, flip. One.” I bite my lip, readying to hold back a pain-filled yell. “Two.” Quickening my breaths, I prepare my mind to do this, even though I know it’ll hurt like a bitch. “Three.”

With a muffled grunt, I rock side to side until I build enough momentum to roll onto my back. My arms and hands dig into my back and the plastic bites into my skin, but I don’t dwell on any of it. Breathing fast, I bend both knees, dig my bare heels into the ground, and shove.

A soft cry escapes as the rough floor scrapes my raw skin.

“Randi, you’re almost there. Just a little farther.” Over and over, his soft voice and encouraging words console and inspire. Tears and sweat mix, disappearing into my hairline as I continue forcing my way across the floor.

Eyes sealed shut—concentrating on not screaming in pain takes all my focus, it seems—I don’t notice that I’ve reached Trey until my head bumps against his leg. Slowly cracking one eye open and then the other, I stifle a joyful sob at the sight of Trey smiling down right above where I lie.

“You’re doing great, Mess. Now the knife in my right boot.” He taps a black boot on the floor, indicating the one I should aim for. His smiling eyes never leave mine as I rock and wiggle to place my bound hands along his shin. “It’s down near the sole. You’ll have to dig to find it.”

It only takes a few tries to realize I’ll never find it like this. Fiddling with the laces, I concentrate on slowly loosening them little by little.

“Can you wiggle the boot off?” The back of my head hits his knee as I turn to search his face.

“If you can hold on to the heel, yeah, I think I can.”

My slick fingers lose the grip on the boot twice before Trey’s able to work his foot free.

“Shit, I think it was the other boot.”

“What?” I start to shout but quickly remember our situation. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“I am.” That damn smirk. Oh, how I love that damn smirk and the man currently

wearing it.

Grumbling a string of curses, I dip both hands into the wet boot. “Ew, it’s wet. Why is it wet?”

“I’m a guy. Our feet sweat. I’m a little stressed, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Sweaty feet might be a deal killer, Trouble. I didn’t know you had swamp feet.” My fingers fumble with the loose hard plastic of the knife before scooping it up into my palm. “Got it. Now what?”

“Oh, so now you want a play-by-play?”

“Trey, I fucking swear I will sentence you to be killed by an assassin unicorn.”

“You and your unicorns,” he grumbles, but the lightness in his tone belays any annoyance. “Can you get it to me? Put it in one of my hands? I can open it and cut through the tie on my wrist.”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I know from experience how flexible you are, Randi. I believe in you.”

“Oh hell.” I shouldn’t be smiling, not at a time like this, but I can’t help it. It’s him. I should be a bumbling mess right now, terrified of the fate Shawn so clearly laid out for us, but I’m not. Instead I’m fighting, smiling, and, most importantly, hoping. And that’s all Trey Benson’s doing. Knowing him, he knows exactly what his words, jokes, and innuendos are doing.

And I fucking love him a little more for it.

Because we're in this together. A team.

Forever.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:55 am

A warm, comforting sensation tingles up my arm as our fingers touch. The small hard plastic case falls into his palm. Before I can pull away, he closes his fist, sealing our hands together with a quick firm hold. It's over as fast as it happened, allowing me to shuffle back away from the sharp knife his dexterous fingers just flicked open.

From the knife sawing through the zip tie, to his cringing face, to the stairwell, and back again, I shift my nervous gaze as my heart races with the anticipation. Will we get out of this in time? Will Shawn open the door now and ruin everything I just painstakingly fought for?

A faint tap draws my attention to a long string of plastic sliced in half lying close to my bent knees.

The zip tie. The cut zip tie. I stare at it, amazed that it fucking worked. That hard ring of plastic with the slice through it no longer holds Trey's wrist. Or confines our freedom.

Damp palms press to my cheeks, tilting my gaze up from off the floor.

"Randi, you with me?" Trey searches my face as he kneels in front of me.

Kneels.

"You're free," I rasp.

"And so are you. Now come on, we need to fray those wires. I liked your plan of setting the place on fire. Seems a worthy exit, don't you think?"

Chapter Seventeen

Trey

This has to be the craziest thing I've ever done—setting a house on fire with me and my girl trapped in the basement. That's a bold statement considering all the shit I got into during those international trips prior to Randi. Hell, there are several countries I'm banned from ever entering again because of those... creative antics.

What can I say? I was a rich dipshit with short-term goals focused solely on women, booze, and having fun pre-Randi.

With a cautious glance to the sole door leading to the main part of the house, I say a silent prayer that this works. It has to. We don't have any other options, not with Tank....

My heart seizes just thinking his name.

My best friend, the one who's saved me more times than I can count. Gone.

Breathing becomes difficult as the weight of what happened earlier engulfs me, drowning me in waves of grief.

“Hey. Look at me, Trey.” Reluctantly, I tilt my face to hers. I don't want her to see me this broken. Because that's how my soul feels. Broken. Shattered. Unrepairable. All that and more must reflect on my face as she presses a palm to my swollen cheek.

“He would've known what to do.”

“We're doing okay, aren't we? We're free. Plus we don't know if he's actually gone. Have some faith in your friend. If anyone could get out of that situation, it was T.”

I swallow hard. “Okay.” Fingertips to the ground, I push off the cool floor to stand. Careful of her injuries, I scoop Randi into my arms and gently rest her on the chair I was tied to just moments ago. “You stay here. I’ll figure out what we do next.”

Not waiting for a reply, I turn on the one boot heel and wet sock toward the sheet-covered mattress. A shiver of revulsion races down my spine at the sight, keenly aware why there’s a bed and she was lying on it instead of me. My fingers tighten into fists at the thought.

Nails digging into the white sheet, I rip it from the bed and wrap it around my forearm. I tilt my face to the ceiling, surveying the beams and exposed wires. Placing the igniting point far from Randi is a given, but I also need to consider that we’ll need the smoke close to the door; that way when they realize what we’ve done and come storming in, the smoke will conceal us to a certain point. The last thing we want is for them to have a clear shot. If I start the fire and keep the smoke near the door, it could offer the split-second opportunity to disarm the first one through the door before they know what’s happening.

But the smoke....

The sheet will have multiple uses today, it seems. Uncoiling it from my forearm, I use the handy-dandy Swiss Army knife to slice two wide strips. Bunching them together, I toss the small bundle to Randi’s lap.

“Hold on to those. We’ll use them as face coverings for the smoke.”

A somewhat plan in place, I stride across the room, my one boot heel clicking with every other step, to inspect the rectangular window. A frown tugs my lips downward. It’s too small for Randi to wiggle through and too high. Our only way out of here is up the stairs. Through the dozen or so armed men waiting beyond the door. Through a house I’m about to set fire to.

Not great, but it's too late to turn back now, not that I want to. As sketchy of a plan as this might be, it's still a better alternative to dying without even trying to fight.

With the remaining section of sheet, I dip beneath the wooden stairs' supports, shimmying along until I'm directly beneath the landing above. I glance from the wires to my one boot and back again. The sole is rubber, so hopefully it'll prevent me from electrocuting myself and leaving a roasted corpse for Whit to laugh over later. I just have to do all this while standing on one foot.

Fuck me.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:55 am

Wire held between two fingers, I begin methodically stripping a red cord, careful to not scrape the copper wiring beneath. A spark and zap pops, jolting a bolt of electricity all the way up my arm. The wooden support beam for the stair slams into my spine as I'm shot backward, cursing. Eyeing the wire like it's a coiled snake, I sluggishly push to a crouch and start on the next wire. Again a bolt of electric current lashes through my fingers and up my arm, though this time I stay upright on my one foot like a badass, indicating I've hit the mark.

The thin sheet molds beneath my hands as I bunch it into a tight ball and cram it between two studs, situating it behind the exposed wires. Pinching the two wires between my fingers, I carefully guide the exposed sides until they're only a hairbreadth away from one another.

"Fuck, I hope this works." Grimacing and leaning my face as far away as possible, I offer up one final prayer to anyone who's listening and press the two exposed live wires together.

Blue sparks crackle and brighten. Powerful electrical currents surge up my arm and through my body. The force propels me back a couple of feet, my back once again colliding with the wooden stud with a crack. Tingles scurry along my skin while literal shimmering stars dance in my vision.

"Whoa." I cough, gripping my chest and digging the heel of my palm into my sternum. "I think my heart stopped for a second."

"Don't worry, I know mouth-to-mouth," Randi's quiet voice says, sounding closer than it should. Chin to my shoulder, I find her standing just a foot behind me, arm

cradling her waist.

“You know what I’ve heard works better?” I cough again. Each breath feels singed and too warm to be normal.

“Do I even want to know?”

Lips numb my attempt at a smirk fails. “Mouth to dick works even better.”

“Are you suggesting blow jobs save lives?”

I nod. “We should make that a slogan.”

The faint scent of burning fabric turns me back to the wires that almost killed me. Finger slightly shaking, I point at the small tendril of smoke swirling upward. “Look at that. It worked.”

Maneuvering around the beams Randi squats in front of the smoldering embers. Her back rises and falls as she blows a steady stream of air. Over and over she fans the small flame until a soft glow brightens the shadows cast by the ascending wooden stairs above us.

Sitting back on her heels, she glances over her shoulder. “Now what?”

A commotion above us has us both freezing. Heavy feet stop, and shouts and the sounds of a scuffle vibrate down the wall. I hold a tight breath, waiting for the door to open.

“It’s not working fast enough.” Fingertips to the ground, I shove to stand. “We need to give it time to really catch and a flame to build, but if they look down here and find us gone, all of this work was a waste.”

“You’re suggesting we go back to where they left us?” A deep line forms between her brows, her focus on the bed they dumped her on.

“But this time we won’t be tied up. I can fight back when they come at me, catch them off guard.”

“We can fight back,” she corrects.

“You’re hurt. I fight back. I’ve trained for this. I’ve done this. Let me do what I do best, Mess.”

“And what’s that?”

“Neutralize the threat by any means possible.” That lust-filled fire once again flares in her hazel eyes. “I love that violence turns you on, baby. We’re perfect for each other, you and me.”

“Despite your sweaty feet,” she adds with a smirk.

I glance down to the offending foot. “Unless you want to bat for the other team, you’ll always be with someone with sweaty feet. Now come on, we need to hurry.”

At the bed, I ease her down to the bare floral print mattress. The grimace of pain that flashes across her face before she can control her reaction stokes the rage already burning bright. Before, I tempered that need for violence, the need for revenge, because I couldn’t do a fucking thing about it tied up.

But now I’m not.

Now I’m free and able to protect my soul’s other half.

The spot under the stairs has a thin trail of smoke coming from the burnt sheet, but it's still not enough to offer the concealment we need to even the odds. I scan the room for what feels like the hundredth time in search of any accelerant that will turn the small flame into a roaring inferno.

No fluid containers, no cleaning supplies.

The only thing in this room is the bed frame, mattress, and chair.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:55 am

Looks like I'll have to fight without any smoke for cover after all.

The voices upstairs grow louder, strengthening my sense of urgency.

Bending forward, I seal my lips to her hot forehead for a quick encouraging kiss.

“We’ve got this, Mess. Don’t worry, and please, please do not interfere when shit goes down. When you see me fight back, I want you to get as far away as possible. Hell, hide under the bed if you can’t get away. Don’t let them grab you and use you.”

“Trouble?”

“Yeah, Mess?”

“We’re going to get out of this, right?”

“Yeah, Randi. We’re getting out of this. The promise of anal is a hell of an incentive.” I shoot her a wink as I step backward toward the chair. Settling down into the seat, I shake out both hands and roll my neck, mentally and physically preparing myself for what’s to come.

“When did I agree to that?” The smile in her tone eases a part of me that thrives on her being happy and protected.

I open my mouth to respond, but the door swings open, slamming against the banister. Three members of Shawn’s cheap muscle descends the stairs. A held-in snort tickles my nose. Three against one is never ideal for a fight, but these three are

untrained fools, helping my odds.

The one with a pug nose sniffs the air, a line forming between his bushy eyebrows. Fuck. I need a distraction to keep their focus on this side of the room.

“Took you long enough,” I shout, drawing all three men’s attention. “Did you bring my sparkling water? I’m feeling a bit parched.”

“He told us you’d be mouthy,” one snaps. At the bottom of the stairs, he creeps closer to where Randi lies, eyes sealed shut. “Sent us down here to shut you up so he didn’t have to hear it later. But don’t worry, he’ll be back before we break you both completely.”

That sinister leer he grazes along Randi’s trembling form snaps something inside me.

“So you’re his bitch, is that it? Here to rough me up but not able to finish the job until your master gives the command?” Tongue to my cheek, I click it in an obvious taunt. “Fucking pathetic.”

All three puff out their chests, shoulders squaring, ready for a fight. They stomp closer, the scent of something burning and the vulnerable woman both forgotten. Two flank the sides of the chair while one widens his stance directly in front of where I sit, still pretending to be tied up. His combat boots come toe to toe with....

Oh fuck.

I’m an idiot.

My motherfucking boot.

I know the moment he sees it. The boot lying haphazardly to the side of the chair leg,

beside my foot. His brows narrow like its taking all his fucking brain matter to think through how my boot could be off. Behind me, I slowly flick open the knife blade and tighten a death grip on the handle until it becomes one with my skin.

Our eyes lock. Understanding finally smacks him, his features going from confusion to shock in a blink.

I'm out of my chair, the blade swinging through the air toward the bulging vein running down his thick neck before he can utter a word of caution to the other two idiots. The blade slams into his neck, slicing through his jugular, the exact target I intended. Hot red blood bubbles between my fingers, coating my hand and sliding down my wrist and forearm. With zero remorse, I jerk the small blade from his neck with a pop of suction as the metal slides free. Meaty fingers wrapped around his neck, he shoots pleading frantic glances to his two friends. Gurgling, blood spilling from his lips, he falls to his knees.

The other two are just as slow as the idiot clutching the gaping hole in his neck. With brutal efficiency, I lunge for the one on my right, aiming for his neck, while I kick out with the boot-covered foot toward the other man, connecting with his stomach. He stumbles back but stays on his feet. The other sways back, dodging the knife, the sharp blade barely skimming over his neck as he bats my hand away.

Shit.

The stiff red casing digs into my blood-slick hand as I tighten and loosen my grip to work some feeling back into my cramping fingers. I don't dare take my eyes off these two asshats to see if Randi obeyed the earlier order. My sole focus is on these two and taking them out before they're able to alert others of what's going on down here.

In my periphery, a hairy-knuckled fist flies toward my face from the side. I stoop to miss the blow but can't dodge the other man's shoulder from ramming into my

stomach. I grunt from the impact and the shove of air forced out of my lungs. Wrapping him in a bear hug, I stumble backward, slamming into the other guy. A cheap shot comes to my kidney. Gritting my teeth, I keep my curses as quiet as possible. Fisting the small blade still secured in my grip, I slam it into his lower back and drag it up his spine.

His screams rattle around the room as I slice through skin and muscle, keeping the blade deep to do as much damage as possible. Something hard slams to the back of both knees, dropping me to the floor. Slick blood and sweat loosens my hold, and the knife slips from my hand, remaining embedded in his shoulder.

My knees crack against the concrete. I use the new angle to my advantage and wrap both arms around the legs of the man I stabbed and yank hard, forcing him off balance so he falls to the floor beside me. A shriek beats around the room as he falls to his back, shoving the knife deeper. The blade is too small to do too much damage, but being stabbed hurts like a bitch. Not only that but it was probably just deep enough to slice through tendons and keep him immobile with pain for a while.

A shadow descends with a warrior's battle cry. Shifting right, I roll and pop back to my feet, fists ready to defend and strike. Chest heaving, sweat streaming down my face and neck, I take several short breaths and charge the last man standing. My first punch connects with his jaw, cracking his bone and a few of my knuckles. But I push past the discomfort as I pull back to smash into his face again and again. Blood sprays everywhere and bones audibly crack and snap beneath my never-ending blows.

He drops to his knees, cries of pain and pleas to stop slipping from his blood-swollen lips, but I don't listen or care. Gripping his greasy blond hair, I hold his face toward the floor and swing a knee with as much force as I can leverage. A spray of red shoots around me like an arc.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:55 am

A thrill rushes through my veins, both loving and hating the violence. I hate doing this, taking a life, but it's either mine and Randi's or theirs, and that's not even a choice.

Eyes puffy and swollen shut, nose gushing blood and cheeks split, he slumps to the floor, landing in the puddle of his own blood.

A deep groan has me turning to the last man breathing. My one boot stomps against the floor as I approach the bleeding idiot who's attempting to crawl away using one arm, the other limp by his side. With zero hesitation, I jerk the small knife from his upper back. His scream of pain is cut short on a gurgle as I slide the sharp blade across his neck.

Shoving his face to the floor, I slowly stand, wiping the blood from the knife onto my black cargo pants before flicking it back into the casing. The silence sits heavy on my conscience as the weight of taking three lives in less than five minutes settles. I press both hands to my knees, bending forward to catch my breath.

"Forgot how exhausting fighting for your life can be," I mutter, hoping it will relieve some the guilt. There was no choice but to kill them, but it doesn't make the aftermath any easier to process. "We need to get out of here. Now."

"I like that plan," says a soft voice at my side. Turning just my face toward Randi, I search her hazel eyes, looking for signs of disgust or accusations, but I only find understanding. "Come on, Trouble. Take me home."

Sliding her fingers through mine, I study our entwined hands, allowing the

connection to center me. Bring me back to what's important and what I'm fighting for. And that's what will get me through the next step of escape.

Her.

Us.

Forever.

Chapter Eighteen

Randi

Whoa. That was... intense? Not sure if that's the right word or not. A little scary, attractive in a badass way, and awesome. So is that intense? I'll have to look up the actual definition when we get back to the White House.

"Wonder if the library has a Webster's dictionary on hand."

At his hard tug, I stumble against Trey's rapidly rising and falling solid chest. From exertion or the thrill of it all, I'm not sure, but my quick pulse is definitely from the latter. Dry lips seal to my forehead, the arm around my hips holding our lower halves snugly together.

"I love you, Randi. Even the crazy-ass shit you think."

With a smile, I steal a chaste kiss and then step back, putting some space between us before I give in to the need urging me to rip off his pants and straddle his waist.

"Come on, let's go." I nod to the door that remained closed during the fight. "Surprised no one came down to investigate the yelling."

“Those idiots were sent to rough me up before Whit does whatever he has planned. I bet they were expecting to hear some screams and yells.”

“Good point.” Hands on my hips, I slowly turn 360 degrees, my bare heels swiveling easily on the concrete floor. “That door is the only way out, and our fire isn’t anything to write home about. So what’re our options now?”

At his silence, I check over my shoulder and find him considering the mattress.

“If this is an older mattress, then it will be extremely flammable. We could use it to help with the smoke cover.”

One hand in the air, I offer it up for a high five. When he simply laughs instead of returning it, I slap my other hand against the raised palm, high-fiving myself.

“You know that’s seven years bad luck to leave someone hanging like that.”

“I think that’s breaking a mirror,” he replies on a chuckle as he tugs on and laces up his black boot.

How in the hell we can have this conversation in this moment is beyond me, but it’s distracting. And I desperately need it before I implode from the pain and stress. I know the odds of us making it out of here alive, and they aren’t good. There are more of them than there are of us, and right now it would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

“Let’s do this, MacGyver.” I barely have a chance to grip the other side of the thin mattress when his hand connects with mine, batting me away. With a grunt, Trey hauls it over his shoulder, carrying it on his own. I gnaw on a chipped nail, the sharp edges poking into my tongue and gums as I watch his fine ass flex with each step he takes. “You should wear cargo more often.”

“Focus, Mess.”

“I am focused.” I offer a smile when he glances over his shoulder. “On your cute ass.”

The mattress thumps against the wall, covering the area that’s still slightly smoking. Ignoring my comment, he crouches between the wall and mattress.

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“Want some help blowing?” I shuffle from foot to foot, my anxious gaze darting from above the door to directly below it, where Trey attempts to stoke our measly fire.

“Sure. You are a good blower. I know this from experience.” He tilts his head up, a wide mischievous smile on his blood-splattered face.

“Thanks?” On tiptoes, I maneuver around the stairs’ supports and squat beside Trey. The T-shirt’s damp fabric slides beneath my chin as I rest it on his shoulder. I inhale deeply, pushing past the tightness in my lungs and the ache in my ribs before letting out a steady stream of breath directly toward the glowing, charred sheet.

We alternate stoking the growing flicker until it’s bright orange end dances close to the dingy floral cover of the mattress. Crossing my fingers and toes, I watch with hope and fascination as the fabric melts with the heat. Foul-smelling black smoke rises from the burn marks, floating up and over the edge of the mattress.

Additional smoke billows upward as the mattress finally catches and burns without our assistance.

Trey turns with a proud smile, the tips of our noses brushing.

“Well done,” I whisper. Reaching out, I wipe a few speckles of blood from his cheek. “I knew you’d save me.”

“I’ll always come for you, Randi. Always.” A frown dips his lips. Unable to stop myself, I place a soft kiss to each corner. “I tried to get to you sooner. It was actually Vlad who gave us the coordinates to the warehouse. Ponder covered—”

“Ponder,” I huff. “I knew I recognized that voice.”

A profound line forms between Trey’s dark brows. “How did you not know it was him? Was he not at the warehouse with Whit?”

I nod, the small movement rolling my brain around my skull. “He kept his face covered the entire time. But I knew I recognized the voice and figured out he was an agent at some point. I haven’t seen him since Shawn had him smack me around to make me compliant or whatever the hell he was trying to achieve.”

Trey’s face hardens. Placing a palm to his cheek, I shake my head, wanting to chase away the self-accusing thoughts I know are rolling through his mind because he didn’t get there sooner. “Besides a few bruises, I’m fine. You came for me, Trouble. I didn’t let them break me because I knew, Iknewwithout a doubt you’d find me. And look, here we are about to turn the tables on the asshole.” Sitting back on my heels, I give him a smile that probably looks like a grimace. “We really need to get out of here though. I need to get back to work.”

“Everyone is looking for you. It’s the first time I’ve seen all the different agencies work together for a sole focus.”

“What about Sam?”

“They moved him to a bunker the moment we realized you were taken.”

“Taeler?”

“What do you think?”

“Hysterical.” My laugh turns into a groan. Wrapping a protective arm around my waist, I offer a small smile. “Think this is enough cover for you to do your Rambo

act?”

“Rambo act?” Bones and joints crack as he stands. Hands on his hips, he towers over where I still kneel. Heat flares behind those honey eyes as he reaches forward to run a hand over my matted hair. “Fuck, Mess. Even with your face bruised and swollen, you’re beautiful.”

The sound of stomping boots and shouts snaps his attention above us.

The hand cupping the back of my head glides forward, dangling in the air between us. Slipping my hand into his, I allow him to pull me up. He wraps both arms around my shoulders, tugging me into a gentle hug.

“I need you to find cover wherever you can find it and make a break for it the moment you get a chance. Once you’re out of this fucking house, do not stop running—”

“What about you?” His sweat-slick shirt sticks to my chest and cheek.

“I have unfinished business with that psycho upstairs.”

“That sounds ominous,” I say as I pull back to see him staring straight up, almost like he can see through the landing, past the door, and into the rest of the house.

“I’ll enjoy killing him.”

That should not be a turn-on.

“Something is really wrong with me,” I mutter as I step out of his hold.

“That makes two of us, because I’m so fucking hard it hurts.” I track the movement

as he grips his cock over those sexy pants. “If I thought we had time, I would’ve kept you on your knees for a little longer. Now repeat what I said.”

“You're so hard it hurts.” My voice is deeper than usual, husky with the need pumping through my veins and tightening my gut.

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At his chuckle, I rip my stare from his crotch to find a wide smile splitting his face. “Not that, Mess. The part about you running and not looking back.”

“Oh, right. Take cover, run, don’t look back. Got it.”

I open my mouth to tell him not to damage anything important only to have a billow of smoke fill my nose. I inhale on instinct, and the poisonous smoke burns through my nostrils and down my throat. Immediately my lungs revolt, sending me into a full-fledged coughing fit. Each flex of my abs attempting to force the smoke from my lungs sends stabbing pain blasting through every muscle.

Eyes watering, I blindly follow where Trey directs me with a firm hand pressed to my lower back. Soft material wraps around my face twice, covering my nose, mouth, and neck. Using the edge of the clean material, I wipe at my eyes and blink to clear my vision.

The sight of Trey with the white sheet wrapped around his face, only exposing his eyes, startles me. I know it’s not Ponder, I know that, but my subconscious apparently now freaks out at any face covering.

I step back, and my calves slam against something hard, knocking me off balance. I whirl my arms through the air as I tilt backward. In a flash, Trey is there. An arm locks behind my back, steadying me on my feet. Something like concern flashes in his narrowed eyes as he moves back, giving me space.

“I’m sorry—”

The words disappear as a rain of gunfire and male voices sounds upstairs. The distinct crack of rapid-fire shots booms through the empty room as a war seems to have broken out in the upper part of the house. A ground-trembling blast rattles my bones and has me seeking out Trey for answers. Without a word, he grips my hand and gently tugs me toward the base of the stairs.

“Sounds like our friends are here.” The words are distant, muffled through the layers of sheet around his mouth. “Thank fuck. Keep your back to the wall.”

The wooden studs dig into my back every few feet as I follow Trey up the stairs. He pauses at the landing. At his concerned glance over his shoulder, I shoot him a thumbs-up with my free hand. Fine lines crinkle at the edges of his eyes as he shakes his head.

“I’m going through first. You stay back until the firefight dies down, and then you make a break for it. We didn’t go through all this for you to get shot.”

“Good talk,” I mutter.

“I love you.”

Those long finger slip from my grip as he positions himself in front of the door, hand white-knuckling the metal knob. After several deep inhales, Trey yanks the door open.

The ear-rattling noise amps to a deafening level. Without glancing back, Trey slips through. A second later, a body sails through the doorframe, his back slamming to the wooden railing with a thud. The entire staircase shudders with the impact. Blood gushes from his nose, and thin rivers cover his arms and neck, but still he struggles to stand, a gun dangling from a limp hand.

Time freezes as his gaze lands on me. The earlier fear vanishes, turning calculating. With more strength than just a few moments ago, he grips the railing and hauls himself to a somewhat standing position.

A fury-filled roar snaps both our heads to whatever's happening outside the door.

My hero in black storms through, boots stomping toward the man. Without hesitating, Trey slams the heel of his palm against the other man's chest, sending him toppling over the railing into the puffs of dark smoke still rising from below. His bellow of protest cuts short with a hollow-sounding thump. I don't dare look over the railing to see if he's dead.

"Come on." Trey extends a crimson-covered hand, the other now gripping a black handgun. "Time to bust out of this joint."

My knees tremble, leg muscles feeling more like noodles than something that can actually support my weight. I cringe as another round of shots sounds behind my back, where the firefight is still going strong.

"I can't," I whisper. The words are nearly silent with the covering over my mouth, so I shake my head so he knows. I'm weak—mentally and physically. The strain from the last twenty-four hours is finally coming to a head. I've held on as long as I can, but all my fight is gone.

Tugging off the sheet from around his face, he nods. "Okay, baby. I'll help you."

Careful to keep his movements slow, Trey steps closer. Blood-coated fingers pull at the sheet, causing it to lower and then pool around my neck. Mindful of my injuries, he scoops me in his arms and holds me tight to his chest. "I've got you, Mess."

I slide my forearms over his sweaty neck, interlacing my fingers at his nape to help

me hold on. Not wanting to see the chaos we're walking into, I press my nose to his chest and seal both eyes shut.

Then we're moving. Each of his heavy steps jostles me in his arms, but I stay silent despite the agony it causes. The shouted commands, cries of pain, and blasts of large guns assault my ears. I press one ear to Trey's collarbone and attempt to cover the other with a raised shoulder.

A muffled curse has me peeling my eyes open to see what's happening.

Bleeding bodies litter the floor. The heavy scent of gunpowder and blood fills my nose. My stomach rolls, but I swallow back the nausea. We're in what looks to be an unfurnished dining room when Trey turns, taking us into another section of the house.

One of Shawn's douchebag guys tucks into the room at the same time, his focus out the window. He catches our movement, doing a double take.

I watch in horror as the gun between his extended hands swings our way. It only makes it halfway before an ear-shattering boom rings out. He folds to the floor, the gun clattering beside him. Eyes wide, ears ringing, I search the room and beyond for the shooter who saved us when I find the hand beside my shoulder gripping a smoking gun.

"Wow," I say. Or I think I say. Hard to tell when one of your eardrums is busted.

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Keeping the gun raised, Trey restarts our trek through the house. Every so often he hides us around a corner, keeping us out of the direct path of the firefight or from others' view. He does all this, fighting our way to freedom, while mumbling all the dirty-ass things he wants us to try once we're out of here and back at the White House.

The frequency of shots slows, creating a bubble of hope in my chest that the terrifying day is almost done. A long hall looms ahead of us, a door at the end with the top glass shattered. Trey takes a step down the hall, then another. The door busts open, the wood splintering at the hinges before falling to the floor with a loud crash. I shout in terror, curling closer into Trey as men dressed in all black and armed to the teeth pour through the door like ants at a picnic.

I knew this was too good to be true. We're not making it out of here alive. I'll die in this hellhole. Panic rising, I barely hear Trey's shouted words over my own thundering heart.

"Was wondering when you special boys would join the party," Trey says above me. His arms relax a fraction, the gun barrel dipping to the floor.

No one responds to his quip as they continue streaming past us, marching through the house and rounding each corner gun first in a uniform precision only military training can perfect.

Ten feet from the door, I relax my near choking grip on Trey's neck. Half-moon indentions and a few slices from broken nails mark his skin.

Five feet from the door, I breathe easy, accepting that it's all over and we're safe.

Three feet from the door, a massive shadow lengthens down the parquet hall floor as a mountain of a man blocks our exit.

Trey trembles behind me, a silent sob catching in his throat.

Me? My smile is so wide all the cuts along my lips reopen, but I don't give a damn. Happy tears leak from my eyes.

"I told him you weren't dead."

Chapter Nineteen

Randi

T smiles wide as he holsters the gun into his shoulder harness. Trey's heart thunders against my side, his grip tightening a fraction, putting pressure on my hurt ribs. A pushed breath hisses through my clenched teeth as I fight through the pain; Trey's too focused on his best friend being alive to notice he's nearly squeezing me to death.

"Why don't you pass her over to me," T murmurs, keeping his attention on Trey. "I'll get her to the ambulance that's waiting."

"You're here." Tipping my chin up, I try to read Trey's expression. "The fuck?" He barks a laugh. "I saw them—"

"It's a long story, but yeah, I know what you saw, Benson. Now hand me the president, because Smith and I have a present waiting for you."

At the mention of the other agent, I turn back to the door. Smith now stands beside T,

leaning against the doorframe dressed in similar tactical clothing as the small army still sweeping the house.

The house that smells like death and smoke.

Smith's nose twitches as those all-seeing eyes scan the house like he can see through the walls. "Did you set the house on fire?"

I attempt a shrug, but Trey's tight hold prevents the movement. "That was my idea."

"Of course it was." T sighs.

"What's my present?" Trey asks above me, curiosity in his tone.

"Hand over the president and I'll show you." When Trey doesn't make a move to pass me off, T sighs. "You've protected her, got her out alive, but we need to get her checked out by a doctor. I'm sure some of that dried blood is hers, right, Madam President?"

His pointed tone urges me to respond. "Uh, yeah?"

"And you need to see a doctor, right?"

"Yes?"

"And you'll be safe and protected if Benson here puts you in the ambulance and lets them look you over."

"Well, yeah. T, just spit it out. What are you getting at?"

"Look at him, Randi. Really look at him." With a sigh, I do as he asks. Scanning

Trey's blood-streaked face I don't see anything off—well, besides the blood—until I reach his honey brown eyes. There's a wildness swirling, one I haven't seen before. "He's not himself, not after seeing... hell, I don't want imagine what he saw or did to keep you alive."

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“Thanks. And yeah, it was rough, but he was fine until now. Trey?” Leaning closer, I place a hand on his chest, allowing his natural heat to soak through to my palm. “I’m good now. You got us through it all, but now I need to get my ribs checked out.” For the first time since we left the basement, his entire focus shifts to me. “Remember my ribs? They hurt like hell, and I’m pretty sure I have a concussion. My thoughts are way more random than normal, even for me.” I offer him a small smile. “I’ll be fine. Just let me down, okay?”

Earlier I needed him to be strong for me. To carry me when I couldn’t fathom going another step, feeling too weak to carry on, even if that meant safety. Freedom. Now I need to be the strong one and help him let me go. I don’t want to—I want to stay in these safe arms forever—but I know that’s what he needs.

“Mess.” His voice is ragged. “I can’t let you go just yet. I’ll take you.”

“Okay, Trouble.” Turning to T and Smith, I dip my chin. “Lead the way, boys.”

Against my better judgment, I take a deep inhale the moment we clear the threshold and step out onto the small wooden porch. Enormous trees surround us, a thin gravel driveway the only break between them. Above us, the thump of several helicopter blades fills the early evening air. Pale pinks and blues highlight the sky in a peaceful feel that contradicts the twenty or so SWAT vehicles and SUVs surrounding the cabin.

Trey clomps down the few stairs, his hold tight to keep me from jostling around. We stay close to T as he leads us through the crowd of people now staring. In true Randi fashion, I hold up both thumbs like the idiot I am.

The small gesture cracks the ice surrounding Trey. The deep lines along his forehead lessen; the concern and focus surrounding his narrowed eyes lifts. His footsteps smooth, his strides slow to a less urgent pace. Against my shoulder, I feel his chest balloon out with a deep inhale.

T directs us to the red ambulance, its lights still flashing, where two familiar faces wait.

“Oh goodie it’s Bert and Ernie,” I grumble.

The back doors are already open when Trey pauses in front of the doctors. Inside, another team of medical personnel stares, eyes wide. Based on their expressions and those we just passed, I must look way worse than I realize.

Bert... or maybe Ernie... whoever steps forward, gesturing inside the ambulance. Trey’s hold tightens a fraction.

“Why don’t you sit with me?” I offer as I tug on Trey’s shirt to gain his full attention. “And then you can find out what present T and Agent Smith have for you. I bet it’s a unicorn.”

“That would be a present for you, not me. Come on, up you go.” A heavy breath pushes over my matted hair as he steps into the ambulance and squats low, maneuvering past the awaiting medical staff and stretcher.

Sighing in relief, I close my eyes, anticipating him lowering me to the stretcher.

But he doesn’t. Those arms cradling me to his lean chest don’t loosen a fraction as he sits down on a bench. Shifting, he leans against the shelves of supplies, his hold never wavering.

“Sir, we need—” Ernie says as he wrings his thin fingers, glancing from me to Trey.

“Do what you need to do, but she’s staying right here.” Athunkreverberates around the ambulance as Trey slams the stolen gun to the bench. “Do we have a problem?”

“No, no problem, Agent... Agent—”

“Benson,” I chime in. “Agent Benson.”

“Right, okay. Well, let’s see what we have here,” Bert says as he steps into the ambulance and shuffles toward us.

He stills at Trey’s inhuman growl.

“Agent Benson, we need to—”

“Her,” he grunts and nods toward the quivering female medic in the back. “Not you, not him. Her.”

“Okay, big boy,” I say, softly patting his chest. I shoot T a panic-filled glance, which only earns me a shoulder shrug. “Seriously, T. Help me out here.”

“I would, but I’d be doing the same thing with my Sarah. Let him have this, Randi. Once he feels comfortable, he’ll be back to the same old idiot we know and love.”

“If I weren’t in so much pain and at the point of near exhaustion, I’d balk at this behavior, Trey Benson.” I jab a finger to his sternum to let him know I mean business. But the answering smirk tells me he sees through my bravado. “Okay, fine, I love it.” Shifting to face the still terrified female medic, I extend both arms, palms up. “Do your worst.”

“Or best.”

“Right.” I tilt my head toward Trey. “What he said.”

Her hands shake as she takes mine. “Madam President—”

“Randi, please. I’m covered in blood. I think we’re past the formalities.”

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“Um, right, Randi. Let’s start with what hurts the most, and then we’ll do a full-body scan and workup when we get to the hospital.”

“Um, okay, so let’s see here. It hurts to breathe. Seriously, every breath feels like someone is stabbing an ice pick into my lungs. Not fun. Oh, and my ears are ringing from Rambo behind me shooting his gun too close to my ear.”

“Saving our lives, I’d like to add.”

“Noted. What else? Oh, I think a few teeth are loose, my head feels like there’s a high school marching band tryout bashing and clashing in my skull, and there’s something going on with my pinkie toe.”

Everyone in the ambulance glances at my feet. I wiggle the sore toe.

“Yep, that one. Other than a few cuts, bruises, and maybe a busted kidney or two, I’m good.”

Her long dark lashes slowly lower in an exaggerated blink.

Awesome. This should be fun. And quick.

* * *

After what feels like fourteen and a half hours later, my ribs are wrapped and not broken—yay, me—most of the blood is cleaned off my arms, legs, and face, and all the cuts have been cleaned and bandaged. My pinkie toe is broken. Sadly there’s

nothing they can do about that; it just has to heal on its own.

Sitting on the bumper of the ambulance, I stare at the tiny swollen appendage, feeling sorry for the little guy. During the exam and treatment, Trey loosened his death hold and slipped out of the ambulance. Well, after he put approximately forty heavily armed men around the mobile hospital and a few snipers sprinkled about for good measure.

Men.

Overprotective men.

But let's be honest: I fucking love it. His firm yet gentle hold keeping me safe while they worked on my bruised and broken body had me hot and ready for him to take me on the stretcher even with people watching.

A few happy tears might have slipped out as I watched him and T hug. It was beautiful. Not that I'd ever tell them that. At least not today. No, I'll use that later when they're not expecting it or still riding the emotional high the last day has brought.

Even now, with the last of dusk slipping into the night, those two talk, Smith awkwardly the third wheel but adding in a few jabs and comments when he can.

Maybe it's because of today, everything I went through and stayed strong. Or seeing these three talking and laughing despite it all. But right here, with the warm metal digging into the backs of my thighs and my body covered in bandages, I know two things.

Trey is it for me.

And I want to run for another term.

It'll take its toll on us. He'll have to step down from the Secret Service and become a full-fledged First Husband—the first one ever. But today proved to me that we can handle it. That with the help of our friends, and the US military, FBI, and Homeland Security, we can make it through anything.

“I don't want to quit just yet.”

Trey turns, his hand gripping T's shoulder. “Was wondering when you'd figure that out.” A loud smack bounces through the trees as Trey slaps T's back. “Okay, I'm good. She's... taken care of for now. What's this present or surprise or whatever you said you had for me?” Trey rubs his hands together, brows raised and excitement radiating off him.

“Should they look you over first?” I toss out, knowing full well what the response will be.

“Nah, I'm fine. Just a few bruises. Nothing that won't heal on their own.”

I roll my eyes to the pink and blue sky.

“We have Whit,” T states as calmly as discussing the weather.

That gets my attention and overrules any annoyance at Trey's macho behavior.

“What?” he and I say at the same time.

That name. Just hearing it has my heart racing. My hands tighten on the ambulance bumper, the metal digging into my palms and fingers. I shoot Trey a panic-filled glance. Seeing my distress, he strides over to where I sit and drapes a protective arm

over my shoulder.

“You’re okay, baby,” he murmurs into my hair. “He won’t hurt you again.” Standing tall, he faces T and Smith, who are grinning ear to ear. Yes, even Smith is wearing a smile. There’s something off about both though, almost evil or vindictive in a way.

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I lean against Trey's hard thigh. "What do you mean, you have that son of a bitch?"

Smith clears his throat directing our focus to him. "He means we caught the pussy trying to escape out the back when we attacked that shithole behind you. And we... kept him just over there for you to handle."

"Handle?" Trey's bicep tightens, curling me to his side. "Any way I like?"

"Any way you like. As long as I get a few... words in too." T sneers. "That bastard ordered my execution, and I'd like him to know how much I didn't appreciate that."

My shoulder vibrates with Trey's chuckle. "I can do that. Where?"

"Why not in the house that's on the verge of burning? Less evidence to clean up." I gape at Smith. He offers a half shrug. "Just trying to be practical. Cleaning up evidence is a bitch, and I'm too tired to deal with that today."

I bark a laugh that turns into a groan. "I don't know if I've ever heard you this talkative. What happened while I was... detained?"

"A lot," Trey says above me. "A whole fucking lot. But we can talk about that and how in the hell Tank cheated certain death later. Right now, I want to go have that chat with Whit."

He starts to pull away only to hesitate.

"I'm fine. The doctors are right. I need to get to the hospital." I go to chew on a nail

only to taste dirt, ash, and blood. “Fuck. I need to set up a press conference, have my press secretary alert the media that I’m okay, talk to Sam, call Todd to reach out—”

“Benson didn’t tell you?” T questions, running a hand over his bald head and giving me a reluctant look.

“Tell me what?”

“Didn’t really have time while we were devising an escape plan and I was dying a bit inside at the thought of my best friend being shot in the fucking head.”

“Damn, you’re dramatic.” T sighs, but a small smile tugs at his lips. “Your secretary of state is dead.”

“What?” I shout. Things still around us, all eyes focused on me as I shove off the bumper. “What are you talking about? Why? I mean...” I sway from the jolt of pain that shoots through me at the sudden movement. “I need more painkillers to handle this.”

Like magic, two white pills appear in a small outstretched hand. Without even looking to see who that hand belongs to, I swipe them from the open, slightly sweaty palm, pop both into my mouth, and swallow. The pills irritate my raw throat, but at least the four bottles of water I drank in the ambulance while they fixed me up soothed some of the scratchiness.

“I’ll tell you everything after we’re done,” Trey says, rubbing a hand down my back.

“Agent Benson, we really need to get her to the hospital for a full-body scan in case of internal injuries,” Ernie says nervously no doubt worried about Trey’s reaction.

Patting Trey’s chest, I sigh. “Trouble, you and the other two go do what you need to

do. I'll be safe. We'll even take a helicopter instead of the ambulance if that makes you feel better."

And me too. Not really excited about the idea of being in an automobile again anytime soon.

Trey smiles before sealing a hard kiss to my forehead. "Love you, baby. I'll tell everyone to follow you out. With ten special forces teams surrounding you, I feel good about letting you go on ahead. I'll meet you at the hospital."

With a nod to the other two, he turns and follows their lead into the woods, T already shouting the orders for the units to follow the ambulance to the hospital.

The first dose of painkillers kicks in, making my thoughts fuzzy as I watch the three disappear.

At least that's what I'm blaming my wayward thoughts on.

Because there's no other reason for me to think about his hot ass and how badly I need him inside me all while he marches off to kill a man.

Yep, totally the painkillers.

Maybe.

Chapter Twenty

Trey

Last fall's dried and decaying leaves crunch beneath my feet as I trail behind Smith and my best friend. I'm not looking at where I'm going. No, my focus is on that

brilliant bald head. I thought... I really thought I lost him. Thought Tank was a casualty of this job and I'd have to beg Witness Protection to take me in order to avoid Sarah's wrath.

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But now I don't because he's here—alive. How the fuck that happened, I still don't know.

"You stashed him in the woods?" I duck under a low-hanging evergreen limb, the stiff needles scraping across my bare forearm.

"If no one knows he's missing, then no one will have anything to report."

I scoff at Smith's remark, making him pause. "Guessing that was your idea? No way in hell the big guy would ever break rules. Believe me, I've tried to get him to loosen up, but it never happens."

"Things change when a man looks you straight in the face and, without giving two shits, tells his skunk-ass boys to kill you." The growing shadows from the dipping sun and tree cover keep me from reading Tank's face. "But still." He turns with a smile. "You're right, it was his idea."

"Fucking knew it. You owe me a drink." Swiping a twig from the ground, I launch it at Tank's head. "In all seriousness, I'm glad you're not dead. Thanks for living."

"You have this bastard to thank for that." He hooks a thumb in Smith's direction. "I was good as dead being tied up and surrounded. Then he showed up, taking them all out before they even knew what was going on."

"How—"

"I saw you go through the escape tunnel and figured if the man orchestrated the

abduction of the president and held her hostage without a single slipup, then he had an escape scenario in place in case we found him before he was ready,” Smith says like it’s no big deal.

“You knew he would blow the warehouse.” As we step into a small clearing, I quicken my steps to walk beside Tank. “Hey, bestie.”

“Don’t make this awkward,” Tank says on a sigh.

“I figured he would blow the warehouse or the tunnel, leaving me shit out of luck or dead. And considering neither was a scenario I was good with, I followed the last guy through the tunnel.” Smith swings the assault rifle over his shoulder, allowing it to hang from the strap. “The dumbasses didn’t even think to turn and look to see if they were followed.”

“That must have put you near the explosion itself.”

He nods. “I’ve had worse. Can’t hear out of my right ear, but I’m guessing that will come back eventually.”

Lifting the hem of my T-shirt, I wipe my forehead and upper lip. “Where the fuck did you guys leave Whit? North Carolina?”

“Just past the clearing. Stop whining. We did something nice for you.” Tank shoves my bicep hard, sending me staggering a few feet to stay upright.

“You’re the best gift giver, Tank. My fiancée’s nemesis in chains—”

“Rope. We were fresh out of chains.” I smirk at Smith’s response. Maybe he’ll fit in with us after all. Now that I know what I know, he’s not half bad. I didn’t realize how my suspicions had dampened how I acted around him.

“Either way, you caught him and tied him up for me to dispose of.” I clap a hand on Tank’s wide shoulder. “It’s better than a blow job on Christmas morning.”

“You’re sick.” Tank shakes his head but can’t hide his growing grin.

“You love me.” Letting go of his shoulder, I begin to crack the knuckles on one hand before moving to the other. “So you followed us through the tunnel, popped out—”

“Snuck out,” Smith cuts in. “I’m not a damn bunny.”

“Right, snuck out, saw what was about to go down with Tank, and killed everyone before freeing him and following us.” I run through the events in my mind, but the details don’t match up with my memory. “I only heard one shot. Do you have a silencer?”

Smith holds up his agency-issued nine millimeter in one hand and the silencer in another. “Standard issue from Homeland.”

“Fuck, I knew those bastards get all the good toys.” I reach across Tank to grab it from Smith’s hand only for him to jerk it out of my reach just as my fingers graze the smooth metal. “Can you get me one?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe? Come on, help your fellow amigo out.”

At the edge of the clearing, we pause. Tank raises his hand, finger pointed into a thick cluster of trees. I follow his line of sight to a man slumped forward, upper body tied to a tree. Two special forces boys stand guard, their guns pointed at Whit’s head.

“Amigo?” Smith’s question sounds distant as the anger and fury from the last twenty-

four hours come roaring back, demanding an outlet.

“Three amigos, that’s us. Now if you’ll excuse me.” I shove past Tank only to be yanked to a stop. I glare at his hold on my wrist. “Let go.”

“We do this back at the house, remember?”

“Right. The house. I want him to pay, Tank. Pay for every second he had her, for every cut and bruise. Every foul word he said and every damn fear he implanted in her mind. Is there a punishment that will get back the last twenty-four hours?” I rake a shaky hand through my hair. “He took her. Hurt her. He hurt what’s mine.”

“I have a few ideas,” Smith tosses out. His words hang on the air.

My tight lips curl in a sinister smile. “I knew I always liked you.” Swiveling back around, I slow my long strides toward the man I’m desperate to kill.

No, not kill.

Torture.

Even that might not be enough for him to pay for what he did to Randi.

But I’ve never been a quitter.

One way or another, I’ll extract my pound of flesh from this bastard and savor the knowledge that his last hours of life were terrible. Just like he had planned for Randi and me.

Fair’s fair, after all.

* * *

The return trek takes longer than the initial hike through the woods due to the dead weight I'm dragging. Already exhausted thigh and calf muscles scream and burn with each grueling step, almost giving out completely as I take the last back porch stair. Pausing, I swipe at the rivers of sweat pouring down my forehead and neck, scanning the now empty and quiet clearing.

Fuck, even with the sun down it's hot as Hades. Guess I should get used to it considering I'll be spending eternity in hell after what I'm about to do. Well, I guess you could say this is my final nail in the coffin, so to speak, on which direction I'll go when I kick the bucket. I'm no angel by any means, but murdering a man in cold blood because he hurt the one you love... well, I'm pretty sure that's a big no-no for the holy one upstairs.

The gagged Whit twists at the end of the rope, trying to break free, the end clutched in my hand swinging back and forth with the movement. A hard flick turns the loose part of the rope into a makeshift whip. It slaps across his scratched and dirty face.

None of us wanted to carry shit-for-brains here. That left us with the only way to get him back to the small cabin being to drag him. Through the woods. Over every rock, stump, and a few piles of animal shit if the smells wafting off him tell me anything.

"Need help?" I shake my head at Smith's question but immediately turn it into a nod. "Thought so. Beating a man to death takes a lot of energy. You need to conserve."

"Thanks?" It's an odd way to show support, but this whole situation is fucked, so I'll go with it.

Tugging Whit's leash from my now raw and rope-burned palm, he hauls Whit through the remains of the splintered back door.

Both arms stretched high, I tip my head back and take in the star-filled sky.

“You don’t have to do this,” Tank says behind me.

I stare at the brightest star I can find and think over his words. Swallowing, I nod. “Yeah I do. I’m just fucking terrified by how much I’m looking forward to it.” Dipping my chin, I level a concerned look at my best friend, who wears the same expression. “Does that make me the same man as him? Or Ponder?”

“You already know the answer to that, Benson. You know you’re not, just like I’m not. This fucker deserves everything he’s about to get. It’s not just about tonight, or this past year, or the year before that. The torment and constant targeting of Randi makes him dangerous. If he leaves here today, she’s not safe, and neither are you. We do this tonight to protect her. To protect all of us.”

As the words sink in, I slowly nod. “You’re right.” His wide stance blocks my entry into the house. “But if I get carried away, I want you to stop me. Pull me back.”

Tank dips his chin in agreement, then turns and marches over the pieces of broken wood and shattered glass. I follow hot on his heels.

In the living room area, I pause, taking in the lack of bodies littering the floor. Large dark red blood lakes mark the floor but no dead assholes.

“What did they do with all the dead pricks?” I ask absentmindedly as Smith secures Whit to the decorative column dividing this space from the dining room

“The basement,” Smith responds. “We get to light this place up and ensure it burns to the ground when we’re done with him.”

Stepping back, he slams a fist into Whit’s face. Whit’s knees buckle with the force, leaving him hanging limp from the rope around his chest and shins. He hisses and glares at the man who dared hurt him.

Smith nods at the bindings and steps back. “Sorry, wanted to test the knots and make sure they held.”

“Maybe I should try too,” Tank offers, stepping forward without waiting for our approval. I cringe away from the sound of crunching bones under Tank’s fist colliding with Whit’s ribs.

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“How does it feel?” I ask. Each step is calm, calculated as I move closer to the now wheezing Whit. “Broken ribs, that is?” When he doesn't respond, I nod toward the gag that keeps his words muffled. Tank yanks it away the cloth tearing from Whit's teeth. “Randi lived with it for hours. Wonder how long you'd last with the pain.”

“You'll never be able to save her,” Whit says, his voice high-pitched, borderline hysterical. “I wasn't the only one who put a hit out on her. She'll be dead before the end of the year.”

“And you'll be dead before the end of the hour.” My words are confident, but worry churns in my gut. He could be lying, but something tells me he's not. “What do you know about the other hit?”

A dark chuckle rattles from his throat before turning to a cough and wheeze. “Like I'd tell you. Trey fucking Benson. You never could cut it in our world, which is why you did this.” A sneer pulls at his lips as he glares at me with the one eye not swollen shut. “You fucking losers deserve each other.”

“Tell me how you did it all. How you managed to coordinate the abduction of the president of the United States.” My voice is steady, calm. Too calm. It sounds eerie to my own ears.

Whit only sneers back instead of responding.

“Fine. Any question that goes unanswered will come with a penalty.” I nod at Tank, who's massaging his knuckles like he's warming them up for the next hit. The big guy has to be careful or he'll kill Whit with one blow.

Whit smiles. Blood coats his normally perfect white teeth. The various cuts from the forest floor have dried, leaving flaking crimson streaks all along his face. “Fuck you and that cunt you fuck. You both deserved everything you got today. Only thing better could’ve been you watching some of those dirty bastards fuck every single one of her holes before slitting your throat.”

“Wow,” I mouth as I angle my neck to the right and left in an effort to relieve the knotting tension. “Here’s the thing, Whit.” Shoving off the wall, I pause a foot away from where he’s wheezing and bleeding all over the floor from the split cheek Smith gifted him. “I know what you’re trying to do. You’re trying to get under my skin so I’ll snap that weak little neck of yours, to make your death faster than what I have planned for you. But here’s the thing.” Blood, sweat, and hell, maybe some tears slick my palm as I grip his face in a single hand. “If you mention raping my fiancée one more time tonight, I’ll cut your tongue out, then continue to kill you slowly. Nothing will rush me. Tonight is a night I’ll savor for years to come as the night I fucking killed Shawn Whit.”

Stepping back, I grimace at the blood on my hand and wipe it down the stiff material of my pants.

“Now, tell me everything you know about that fucker we know as Agent Ponder.”

Chapter Twenty-One

Trey

“Well, that didn’t last long.” Tank sighs.

“That’s what she said,” I toss over my shoulder as I press two fingers to the blood-and-sweat-slick neck. Nothing. “He’s dead.”

“That’s usually what happens when you snap someone’s neck,” Smith says to Tank.

Frustrated, Tank starts to run a hand over his head but pauses with a grimace when blood glazes over his scalp. “I didn’t hit him that hard,” he grumbles.

I hold up a hand to pause their bickering. “It’s fine. We got what we needed out of him.”

Knuckles split and bleeding, Tank rests his mitt of a hand on my shoulder. “I’m sorry I took that from you.” He squeezes, the strength in his grip lacking the usual power.

Still crouched by the dead body, I stare into the lifeless eyes, processing the fact that Whit is dead. “If it wasn’t me, then I’m good with it being you.” The crack and pop of my joints fills the quiet room as I stand with a groan. “Besides, I got to have my fun.”

Fun. Fuck yeah, it was fun. Each hit lifted a sliver of the heavy dark cloud that’s fogged my brain since Tank called saying Randi was missing. After several bone-rattling punches, exhaustion from the day made it nearly impossible to continue with my torture plan. That’s when Tank and Smith stepped in.

It was clear Smith has experience holding back killing blows. It was like some disturbing form of art as he moved his attacks around Whit’s restrained body to keep from hitting the same spot twice.

Then there’s Tank. Love him, but the big guy is all brawn and no tact when it comes to pulling punches.

Hence why Whit is dead, and not by my hand.

There was honesty in my words. I am good with not being the one who delivered the

final blow. Whit is dead, and that's what matters most. Even though the information he had on who we know as Ponder was little, we still know more about the hired assassin than when we started. This way, if he doesn't return to his townhome to collect the things he'd clearly set aside for a quick escape, we have a few bread crumbs for Smith's friends at Homeland to follow. Hopefully it'll be enough for us to catch the bastard who devised the plan to kidnap my girl.

"Now what?" The wall rattles under my weight as my back slams against it, supporting me from collapsing to the blood-splattered floor.

Without a word, Smith moves through the room and disappears down the hall but in the opposite direction of the back door. The creak of hinges has me leaning along the wall to see if it was him leaving or someone else coming inside the cabin via the surprisingly still fully intact front door.

Two red plastic fuel containers dangle from Smith's fingers as he shuffles back down the hall and into the living room. Liquid sloshes inside as they thump to the floor.

"Where the hell were you keeping those?" I sniff the air. "Diesel or gas?"

"Diesel. I'm not an idiot. One of the special forces guys left them on the porch for cleanup. Plus these." He holds up a thin matchbook between two fingers. "We're to make all the evidence of tonight disappear. Everybody, the entire house. This never happened. I'll pour one canister over the bodies in the basement. You"—he hitches his chin to Tank—"start spilling the other all along this floor. Make sure you leave a trail out the back."

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Tank nods and reaches for the accelerant-filled canister. Smith grabs the other container and leaves the room. Heavy feet against the wooden stairs followed by a few curses about the stench of death grow distant as he descends to the basement.

I meet Tank's worried dark eyes from where I'm still posted up against the wall. There's a strong possibility that if I move, I'll fall to the floor and never get back up.

"You look like shit."

"I look better than Whit."

Tank's lips twitch. "Not sure that's much of a positive, Playboy. You're comparing yourself to a dead man."

"It's been a hell of a day."

He nods. "One for the books, that's for sure. You worried?"

"Because that fucker who planned and executed the kidnapping of the president for money is still out there and wants me dead? Yeah, yeah I am."

"Me too. But we'll find him."

"And we'll kill him too."

"Bloodthirsty?"

A cruel smile pulls at my lips, the skin along my cheeks stretching under the dried blood. “Only for those who deserve it.”

Smith stomps into the room and eyes the still full can. “You two are worse than any woman I’ve ever known.”

“You should see our pillow fights.” The words are more of a moan as I push off the wall to stand on my own. The room sways, darkness encroaching in the corners of my vision.

“Come on.” Without invitation, Smith ducks under my arm and lodges himself beneath my shoulder, supporting my weight. Halfway down the hall, I part my lips, readying to thank him, when he shoots me a sharp look. “Don’t make this fucking weird or I’ll drop your ass.”

Stepping out of the death, blood, and fuel stench in the house, the fresh air smacks my face, revitalizing some of my depleted energy stores. Behind us, the smell of diesel grows stronger, even out in the open. Smith leans my weak ass against a support beam of the small porch before releasing his hold to go help Tank.

At the threshold, Tank upturns the fuel container, using every last drop before tossing the empty canister back into the house. Both men turn to face me, Smith with the matchbook between his outstretched fingers.

The edge of the two-by-four beam digs between my shoulder blades as I use it for leverage and shove off. The first step toward Smith brings a hiss of pain from between my clenched teeth. Fucking hell, I need a good fuck and an ice bath. My thigh muscles tremble under my weight. Okay, maybe ice bath first, a nap, and then a fuck. Wouldn’t want to smother Randi because I physically can’t push myself off her.

I snatch the thin flexible cardboard from Smith’s outstretched fingers and hold it

toward the light to read the writing and brand on the front. Even this exhausted, I somehow bark out a laugh. I arch a brow at Smith. “Seriously, Tails and Twats?”

His eyes roll to the night sky. “Not mine, remember? Sounds classy though.”

“Randi will never believe you’ve said two jokes in one day.”

A tiny smile tugs at his lips.

Turning back to the still open door, I toe the threshold and stare down the hall. An emotion I can’t pinpoint swirls within me, tightening my chest. Once I light this match, it’s over. Today, tonight, all of it done.

The cardboard flap bends back under my trembling fingers. I rip three matches from the booklet and pinch the flap to the back with the flimsy matches against the flint strip. With a quick tug, sparks flare and a minor bright flame bursts to life.

I stare into the flickering flame, watching it creep closer to where my fingers pinch the ends. Heat bites at my skin as the flame draws nearer. With a deep inhale, I flick the three nearly spent matches toward the shiny liquid puddled a foot from where I stand.

Two flicker out before hitting the accelerant, but the final match hits the mark.

The sudden flash of blistering heat has me stumbling backward square into a solid chest. A rolling roar grows, chasing away the quiet night as flames race down the line of diesel, igniting the rest of the house. Within seconds, the heat from the intense flames forces all of us off the porch.

“Benson.”

I don't turn, mesmerized by the red-and-orange glow lighting up the surrounding area.

"Benson." I reluctantly turn to my friend, who looks just as mesmerized as I am by the destruction we've left in our wake. "Randi is at the hospital and asking for you." I blink, tilting my head to understand what he's talking about. It's only now that I notice the heavily armed man standing beside Tank. "They're concerned about her mental stability."

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“Apparently she won’t stop rambling about unicorns to anyone who will listen in between demanding they not sedate her until you’re there,” the guy states absentmindedly as he too becomes enraptured by the fire now billowing out the windows and crawling up the exterior walls.

“The unicorn stuff is normal for her,” I say on a huff. Turning back to the flames now swallowing the entirety of the cabin, I suck in a breath and raise both middle fingers. “She won, motherfucker. See you in hell,” I whisper.

Turning on my heels, I push through the stiffness in my muscles and stride in the direction of the single black SUV that will take me to the only thing that matters in this world.

Her.

* * *

My lids feel like they’re glued shut as I attempt to open my eyes. Finally forcing them open, I blink past the haze covering my vision.

A rhythmic beeping close by reaches my ears first. A sharp antiseptic scent floods my nose, and the white walls and various machines come into view as my vision sharpens. Soft material cushions my cheek. A steady heartbeat beneath my ear soothes the unexpected rush of adrenaline that flashed through my system upon waking up in an unfamiliar room.

“Go back to sleep, Benson,” a familiar voice whispers from somewhere in the dark

room. “You’re both safe.”

The grogginess of too little sleep tugs at my lids, making them too heavy to keep open.

I tighten my hold, molding my body even tighter around the soft one in my arms, and give in to sleep once again.

* * *

Lips parted, chest rising and falling in a smooth and steady cadence, Randi sleeps peacefully. Unable to stop myself, I draw closer to her bed, needing a simple touch, skin to skin, to remind me she’s safe—alive.

With a featherlight touch, I trace along her healing lips and purple-and-blue bruised jaw. For two days, they’ve kept her under observation. Mostly sedated due to her constant arguing about being fine and needing to get back to work. But not today. No, today she gets to go home. She’ll return to the White House and finally see Taeler and that sweet grandbaby.

Which means I get to leave too, even though I could’ve gone home anytime I wanted. No doctor was holding me back from leaving. But she was. No way could I leave her here alone. I might never leave her alone again. If she thought I was overbearing before, she’s in for a rude awakening starting the moment we get back to the White House.

Now I know what it’s like to nearly lose your soul mate. The very person who encourages and challenges you. The very reason your heart continues to beat and who pushes the encroaching darkness away. I’ll never allow harm to come to her again.

A twitch of movement behind her closed lids snags my attention. Beside the bed, the

heart rate monitor beeps increase, the rapid pace ramping up my own pulse. A sharp, scared whimper whispers past her dry lips.

Another nightmare.

This isn't the first she's had, and I suspect it won't be the last with all she went through in those horrible hours we searched for her while she was alone with those fuckers. I made Shawn detail every bit of pain they inflicted. What he and Ponder did before Tank and I arrived. Then I delivered it all right back to him. It won't stop the fear from slipping into her dreams or keep her from future panic attacks, but it might help ease the anger and resentment I know will brew within her over the next few months.

Leaning forward, I press a kiss to her forehead and tighten the hold on her hand.

Helpless. This is what I feel as she struggles in her dreamscape. The only place I can't help her. I could wake her up, but for the first time since she was admitted, the sleep she's experiencing now is on her own, not drug induced, and I'm not sure if I should interrupt even if every instinct screams at me to shake her awake.

A breathy plea moves through my hair, brushing against my ear.

Dipping lower, I place my lips over hers. "I'm here, Mess. I'm here."

The twitching settles, and her rapid breaths ease. I watch as those long dark lashes flutter open. She doesn't flinch at finding me hovering so close, our noses almost touching. Instead she does the unexpected.

Her cold fingers slip up the exposed portion of my bicep, over my shoulder, and gently clasp the back of my neck, sealing our lips together with a desperation that scours my soul and rips through my heart.

Elbow braced on the bed, I lean into the kiss, giving her everything I've held back the past couple of days. Pouring my sorrow and anger into this one binding kiss. Her tongue slides against my own, lips parted, opening herself to me. Those chipped and broken nails scrape along my scalp.

It's a desperate kiss, displaying how badly we need each other. I can't touch enough of her, and the way her other hand plays along my taut back muscles tells me she feels the same. We need this. A reminder of our physical connection. A release of the pent-up emotions and frustrations that sit brimming at the surface, ready to erupt.

My breath shudders with the flood of need, making me edgy and harder than a damn rock. I tear my hungry lips from hers, shifting to kiss down the column of her neck, each fading fingerprint bruise. My tongue trails lower, savoring every inch of her I get to taste. From one side to the other, I run the tip along her collarbone, nibbling and sucking the delicate skin.

Her fingers tighten in my hair, tugging at my scalp. With a yank, she rips my face up to meet hers. Breaths labored, dick straining against the zipper of my jeans, I press against the mattress, hovering above her and meeting those lust-filled hazel eyes.

"Remind me," she breathes.

"Remind you of what, Mess?"

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“Of what I have waiting for me on the other side of all this. Of the normalcy. That you still want this broken person they turned me into.” A single tear drips, slipping along her temple before disappearing into her hairline. “Remind me I’m still me. Remind me of who I am, Trouble. Remind me of what it feels like to feel good.”

Even though her words fracture my heart into a thousand pieces, I smile.

I smile for her.

I smile for me.

I smile for us.

And I give her exactly what she needs in this moment.

Me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Randi

I’m broken. Not just parts of my body but my entire being. The fear Shawn beat into me during those hours in the warehouse seeped into my muscles with each hit, every taunt. My bones ache, but that’s nothing compared to the soul-rattling despair and terror that’s now dug its claws into me.

I’ve never been scared. Always dove into an issue head on, not worrying about the

consequences.

But now? Now I know what can happen and how much it will hurt. I know the fear of death staring you in the face and accepting you won't live to see another day. That did something to me. Between the beatings, talk of rape, and knowing I would die, a part of me is frozen in fear.

I'm scared. Terrified that one day Shawn or the other man will come back and make good on their promises of me dying a slow death. At least that's how it plays out in the recurring nightmare that seems to be imprinted in my brain, ready to replay anytime I dare to sleep.

The doctors thought I didn't want to rest because I had work to do, which is what I told them, but that was a front of truth-laced lies. I just didn't want to close my eyes without the sedation. With the sedation, everything was black, nothing. But when I sleep on my own, I'm back in that warehouse and Trey is gone.

I need him close by. Need his warmth, protection, and understanding.

He's my salvation.

My savior.

My everything.

Staring into those honey brown eyes hovering just inches above me, I move a lock of dark hair from in front of them. He might think I'm crazy for asking for this, asking for him, but I need us. Need that connection. Like I told him, I need the reminder that we're good. That something in my life is still stable.

My heart is cracked wide open, 100 percent vulnerable with the request, offering him

a side of me I never allow myself to show. I don't need anyone, never have. I've done everything to this point on my own. Undergrad. Law school. Campaign. Politics. But this I can't get through alone. And maybe I don't want to.

It's more terrifying than anything Shawn said, opening myself up to Trey like this. Letting him see just how much I need him. All it would take is one word, a hesitation even, or a flat-out refusal. I wouldn't recover from his rejection, even if it did come from a loving place of not wanting to hurt me while my body is still healing. Recover from the abduction and torture? Sure. With enough therapy, I'll be okay. But being turned away when I'm desperate for help, begging for someone to ground me and them refusing—there aren't enough prescription drugs in the world to make that kind of rejection go away.

I hold my breath, waiting for his response. My heart races, fingers trembling as I run them through his clean hair.

A smirk. That playful smirk tugs at his lips, and I know I have my answer.

Trey Benson, my soul mate, won't back away when I need him most. No, he leans in, knowing exactly what I need.

I don't need to be perfect for Trey.

I never have been. And that's why he loves me.

"What hurts, Mess?" he asks, that all-seeing gaze raking over my face and lower, hunger growing with each inch he covers.

I take a quick stock of my injuries. "My ribs when I take a deep breath. That's it. Trey—" I start, ready to beg again, when he seals those soft lips against my own.

“One second,” he whispers against my mouth.

With a grunt, he pulls away. Using the bedside rail as leverage, he stands, adjusting the sizable bulge in his jeans before awkwardly walking to the door and pulling it open. With most of his body remaining inside the room, he talks in a low tone to someone outside the door before closing it once again and flipping the lock. “There. Now we won’t be disturbed.”

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His mischievous smirk causes heat to bloom in my lower belly and dampness to slick the inside of my thighs.

A predatory glint shines in his eyes as they sweep me from head to toe. Each step is steady, calculated from the door to where I lie trembling with excitement. Long fingers fist the mound of blankets covering my bare legs and slowly drag the heavy material to the floor, leaving me exposed in the ugly-as-sin hospital gown I've been forced to wear.

I nibble at my upper lip to keep my grimace from showing as I take in the state of my legs. Bruises and lacerations litter my upper thighs, and layers of gauze wrap from shin to ankle. I don't let myself think about the damage that lies beneath. Not now. Not when the heat from Trey's sweeping gaze could light the sheets beneath me on fire.

The bottom sheet snags on jagged nails as I ball it into a tight fist. Something about this triggers anxiety and sends my pulse racing. The bed, the basic sheet, bare legs exposed.

“Randi.”

I hear him call my name, but I just can't look away from the sheet gripped between my fingers. The sight has me locked in a trance that transports me back to that basement.

“Randi, look at me.”

Shame and fear clash as I shift to stare at the hospital gown, grounding myself to the present. I really am broken. What if he doesn't want to deal with this mess I've become?

"I'm a mess," I whisper.

"You've always been my mess, Mess."

"But now... now I'm more like some hoarder's trailer than a mess. I'm unsalvageable. Not even a TLC special could clear out the baggage and trash that's been shoved in here." I tap the side of my head.

"Mess, baby, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you've always been a bit of a work in progress."

My eyes widen, challenge flaring in my chest. "I'm sorry."

"Don't give me that look. All I'm saying is... fuck, I'm saying this wrong."

"You think?" Indignation swirls within me.

"You've climbed an uphill battle your entire life and survived. Not only made it through but bettered your life. You clawed your way out of that trailer park, away from the life you were destined for. I know you can do the same now. It won't be easy, you know that from experience, but this time you have me, and you have Tank and Sarah. We won't let you go through this alone. Don't ever think you're too damaged or too much work to save. If that was the case, Tank would've walked away from me years ago. We don't give up on family. We don't give up on the ones we love."

My lower lip trembles. "Promise?"

“Promise.” His eyes twinkle, completely at odds with the solemn conversation. “How about we seal it with a kiss?”

That desire-filled heat from earlier sparks in my lower gut again. I lick my chapped, healing lower lip.

“Full disclosure. I don’t know when I last brushed my teeth,” I admit, sinking into the pillow at my back as he prowls closer. I’ve showered several times in the en-suite bathroom, giving me confidence that I don’t reek of body odor or still have crusted blood covering me, at least.

“Madam President, I don’t give a flying fuck as long as I get to kiss you.”

I have a smart reply ready only for it to be swallowed up by his lips sealing to mine and his tongue pushing past to tangle with my own. He consumes me, each swipe of his tongue and moan of pleasure from the simple kiss burning away the fear and doubt of his desire for this broken version of myself.

It’s not enough. The kiss is perfection, but I’m desperate for all of him. Grasping on to his shoulders I urge him onto the bed with me.

If it were any other hospital bed, we might not fit. But it’s not. This king-size hospital bed really is fit for a king... or president. Finally the perks of the job are paying off, so I can fuck my fiancé in the hospital and still be comfortable.

The small tug is all it takes for him to toe off his shoes and climb onto the bed. Careful of my IV and other wires, Trey hovers over me, bracing himself on both elbows digging into the mattress on either side of my head. I run a finger down his hard chest over the soft material of his dark gray T-shirt.

Hooking the collar, I give it a quick yank. “Off.”

Trey smirks, hooking his own finger into the collar of the hospital gown. “Ditto, baby. I need a good look at what’s mine.”

I watch in awe, a bit of drool collecting and slipping out of the corner of my gaping mouth, as he rips the shirt over his head, those defined muscles rippling and stretching with the movement. Kneeling between my parted legs, he grins, hooking both thumbs into the waistband of his dark jeans. That deep V and those washboard abs have me licking my lips, itching for a taste. I bend, readying to sit up and lick his stomach and lower, only for a pinch of pain to stop me cold.

“What level of hell is this?” I hiss, gently cupping my ribs. “All I wanted was to lick your stomach.”

A dark chuckle scatters the remaining ache in my side, reminding me of the slow, steady throb between my thighs. “As much as I’d love that, baby, any licking will have to wait. Right now, I focus on you. Reminding you that no matter what you’ve been through, no matter the aches”—three of his fingers caress from one side of my ribs to the other, dragging the gown’s thin material with it—“or the bruises.” He trails those same fingers up, and I hiss through clenched teeth at the barely there touch over one nipple. Trey cups my jaw, swiping his thumb over my cheekbone. “I’ll remind you that no matter what, you’re still mine and so fucking beautiful it physically hurts.”

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His free hand grips the bulge in his jeans and squeezes. Those dark lashes flutter shut on a groan. “Especially right now. I think I need this more than you. To feel you from the inside. I need to be reminded that you’re here, with me. Something in me snapped when Tank called about you being missing. And I don’t think....” He shakes his head. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to close my eyes or leave you alone without the fear that you’ll be taken again engulfing and paralyzing me.”

Love, concern, and a touch of fear splay across his pinched features. I grip the wrist near my face and give it a gentle reassuring squeeze.

“We’ll get through this together, Trouble. You and me.” Tightening my hold, I use his arms as leverage to carefully roll onto my side. I hitch my chin over my shoulder toward the ties securing my gown. “I’ll need a little help. Can’t take this off on my own.”

A bright smile tugs at his lips, chasing away the cloud that settled over him at the thought of losing me again. His hot palm sizzles against the bare skin of my ass cheek with a hard pat to each side. Teeth digging into my lower lip, I muffle the groan of pleasure that wants to escape, knowing there are guards just outside the door. One tie slackens, the ends dancing along my spine as he slips the strips of cotton free. He makes quick work of untying the one secured at the nape of my neck before helping me lie back against the conforming mattress.

His hungry gaze eats up each bare inch of skin he exposes as he slips the gown over my shoulders. The stiffer material of the neckline snags on both peaked nipples, causing them to bounce as he drags the gown lower. The movement stills only for the material to drag back up over my nipples before applying more pressure and dragging

the taunting cloth back down.

My eyes flutter closed at the teasing swipes of the fabric against the sensitive buds. “Trouble,” I groan, moving my hands up to cup both breasts.

“Do it, baby. Let me see you play with yourself. Pinch those rosy nipples like I would.”

“I want you to do it,” I beg, but my fingers are already obeying his order, pinching and flicking the hard peaks to the point of pain before easing off.

He hums in disagreement, the small sound causing increased desire to flow through my veins. The increasing beeps of the heart rate monitor offer Trey an inside look at how much his words and my own hands affect me.

Another hum, this one laced with need, rumbles in his chest. “This could be a fun little game. Let’s see what gets that heart of yours racing, baby.”

Done with playing, Trey rips the gown away and drops it to the floor. Goose bumps sprout along my stomach and down my legs at the sudden exposure to the chilled air.

“Don’t stop,” he commands. The force behind those words makes my lower stomach clench with want. “Harder, like this.” Cupping my hands, Trey’s fingers manipulate my own, placing each peak between my thumbs and index fingers. His light brown eyes flash as he applies pressure. My gasp turns to a groan at the spike of pain as he twists. My pulse skyrockets, the rapid beeping filling the room. A mischievous smile pulls up his scruff-dusted cheeks.

“Like that. Don’t stop until I tell you to.”

“Or what?” I breathe, my back arching off the bed as I tug my own nipples toward the

ceiling.

Asmackcracks through the room as his palm connects with the side of my ass.

“That might be incentive.” I groan as the sting left behind fades.

“Fuck, you’re perfect, you know that?”

“Because I like foreplay a little dark and dangerous?”

“Because I’m a little dark and dangerous.”

“We’re perfect for each other, then.” My fingers still, all my focus going to where he’s softly caressing the inside of both thighs. “We should get married.”

The bed trembles with his laugh. “No more talking unless it’s you moaning or screaming my name.” I seal my lips shut and nod. “Good girl.” A single finger easily glides between my slick center. “Even without that damn machine I’d know how much you like this, Mess. Look how wet you are for me.” His gaze darkens as he stares between my legs. “Let’s see what this does.”

Cupping my pussy, he grinds the heel of his hand against my swollen nub and shoves three fingers inside me. I gasp at the force of his fast entry. Eager for more, I widen my legs, both knees bent and lying along the bed, giving him all the access he needs to do his worst.

Fuck, I hope he does his worst.

In and out he pistons those fingers, curling and scissoring with each thrust as he pounds the heel of his palm against my clit. Higher and higher I climb, every muscle taut with the building release. The monitor beeps at an erratic pace, offering an

unexpectedly erotic background noise.

Just as I hit the top, my body primed to fall into ecstasy, Trey withdraws his fingers completely. I whimper as I pinch my nipples harder, desperate to do whatever it takes to find my release. My lids flick open at a faint sucking sound.

Smiling around those three fingers, Trey wraps his lips around the lowest knuckle and sighs. His own eyes flutter closed. The hand not at his mouth flicks the top button of his jeans, allowing the band to gape enough that the purple head of his engorged cock peeks out. A bead of precum glistens at the top. I lick my lips, eager for a taste.

“You want this?” His voice is low and raspy with the need that’s clearly written across his tight features. He swipes a thumb over the head, wiping the tempting drop away. Leaning forward, Trey shoves his thumb into my awaiting mouth. “Suck it clean, baby.”

“Fuck,” I mutter around his thumb as I lick it. He yanks it away before I’m ready, causing it to pop from my lips.

“Your turn.” Gripping my forearm, careful of the IV and gauze covering my wrists, he yanks my hand from my breasts. Like a puppet arm, he guides my hand lower, the dangling fingers barely ghosting over my sensitive skin. Interlacing his fingers over mine, he forces my own palm to cup my drenched pussy. “Feel what drives me absolutely insane. Feel yourself from the inside with me.”

The machine goes wild, the beeping turning to an ear-piercing alarm. With a growl of frustration Trey leans over the bed and yanks the plug from the wall. Chest heaving, he looms over me, a small smile spreading over his face.

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“It was fun while it lasted, but I think I know exactly how you feel about all this.” For emphasis, he forces two of my fingers into my channel. My eyes roll into the back of my head, my hips lurching off the mattress. Sitting back on his heels, Trey unzips his jeans.

Two of his thicker fingers slip between my own, the combination tight and fucking awesome. I clench around our combined fingers, loving the fullness.

“Your tit, Randi. Pinch that nipple hard like my teeth would feel.”

Don’t have to tell me twice. I’m quick to do as I’m told.

“Look at me. Look at what you do to me.” I force my eyes open. His free hand is wrapped around his thick cock, knuckles white as he pumps up and down. “Every time you’re in the room. Every time you cross my mind, I get hard enough to club someone with my damn dick. But this, watching you fingerfuck yourself, playing with your tits, it fucking hurts so damn good.” He increases our pace, shoving our combined fingers in and out. “Come around our fingers, baby. Come for me.”

Pressing the heel of my hand down, he grinds it against my clit.

I almost bolt off the bed as the intensity of the orgasm crashes over me, but Trey keeps me pinned with our hands pressed to my mound. My head lolls to the side, the release of built-up emotions draining all my thoughts and energy. Every muscle trembles with exhaustion. Relieved tears build behind my sealed lids before slipping out and dripping down my temples.

With a curse, Trey withdraws our hands. I whimper at the loss. It turns to a cry of shock as he falls forward, catching himself with an elbow to the mattress as he slams in deep in the same movement. On a hot puff of air, his mumbled curse brushes against my ear.

“Fuck yes,” Trey grunts as he flexes and rotates his hips to seat himself deeper.

I dig both heels into his flexing ass, urging him to take everything. Fingers wrapped around my hip bone, he tilts my pelvis. With shallow thrusts at the new angle, he hits a spot that has stars sparking behind my eyes.

“There,” I breathe. “Fuck, right there. More,” I beg.

“Yes, Madam President,” he whispers against my neck.

The bed creaks, the legs grinding against the floor as it shifts with each of Trey’s powerful thrusts.

I tighten around him, eager to find the release that’s building once again.

“You’re squeezing the life out of my cock,” he grunts. “Don’t fucking stop.” His thrusts slow as he works against me. “Fuck,” he curses. “Come with me, baby. Come around my dick like you did your dirty little fingers.” Teeth sink into my neck, hard but without breaking the skin.

That pinch of pain does it. I shatter. Everything floats away. Nothing matters but this out-of-body feeling only a soul-shattering orgasm can offer. I forget to breathe as I chase the last trembles and waves of pleasure.

“Breathe, baby,” Trey pants. His hot breath brushes my sweat-slick neck.

I gasp, sucking in a lungful of air.

“An orgasm so good you forgot to breathe. That’s a new one.” He chuckles. We both moan at the vibration it causes where our bodies are still connected.

“I don’t ever want to move,” I admit. Leaning up, I press a kiss to his damp shoulder.

“Pretty sure you can’t run the free world with my cock buried in your pussy.”

I smile, blinking away the tears still clinging to my lashes. “I could always try, but it might make press conferences a bit porn-ish.”

“We need to get you ready to go home. They’re releasing you today.”

With a few protests that are said more like curses, Trey pushes off the bed. He rests his hands beside my ears, his love-filled gaze chasing away the remaining fears of what’s to come.

“One more time?” I ask, biting my lower lip.

A wide smile breaks across his face, those straight white teeth on full display.

“You’re the boss,” he mutters as his lips dip to my straining nipple.

My lids flutter closed as I rake a hand through his soft strands.

Later, reality will need to be addressed. Work will be overwhelming once again.

Tomorrow, I’ll have to address the world and explain what happened along with other news they’ve been impatiently waiting for.

But right now?

Right now it's just him and me.

And that's all that really matters in the end.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Randi

Out of all I've done in my life, this has to be the most nervous I've ever been. Of all the debates, challenging powerful men, and living through unnerving situations, why am I afraid now?

I hate this. The worry, anxiety, the voices in the back of my head telling me I can't do it. Is that Shawn taunting me from the grave, still whispering in my ear about how I'm not good enough, nor will I ever be good enough, strong enough? I don't know, maybe. Or has it always been there but my drive and self-built confidence have been enough to always drive it away?

The firm cushion of the buttercream sitting chair shifts as I lean forward. Elbows on my knees, I wring my fingers and attempt a deep breath to settle my nerves.

A twinge of discomfort causes a grimace, but it's not as painful as it was. My body is healing quickly thanks to the days my doctors required me to rest. I hated every second.

I smile to myself despite the turmoil of thoughts running through my head. Well, I hated every second except that last hour with Trey in my bed before I was discharged.

I stare at my nude pumps. The shoes that cost more than three months' mortgage on my trailer back in Boone. I don't even want to think about the comparative cost to the tailor-fit pantsuit I'm wearing. Or the expensive toiletries and makeup stocked in my bathroom.

I shake my head, long silky dark locks slipping over my shoulder to frame my face.

"It's just a press conference," I mutter to myself. "It's fine. I'm fine." Releasing my fingers, I shake them out, allowing the cool air to wick away the clamminess. A quick glance at my watch tells me I have thirty minutes before I'm expected.

Fuck, I hate the waiting. I could've scheduled it earlier—I am the president, after all, and it's me they want to hear from—but under the guise of needing more time, I forced them to wait until today. Two days after my release. Four days from when Trey found me. Five days from when I was abducted and beaten.

I swallow hard. There's a slight tremble in my hand as I raise a red-tipped finger to my teeth. Really I needed the past few days to get my shit together. Not that I have it all together now, but each day is better. Plus it gave me time to reconnect with Tae and that sweet little baby. We didn't leave each other's side for twenty-four hours after she nearly tackled me the moment I stepped foot into the resident side of the White House.

There was also something else I needed to do. Something personal I've been meaning to take care of for Trey. Between taking calls from the bed, the physical training exercises, and Tae popping in every hour to make sure I was still here, I was able to accomplish what I'd set my mind to. He doesn't know yet. Well, at least I don't think he does, unless his attorney called him the minute the funds were released.

Some might call it an abuse of power, but screw them. It wasn't that at all. Yeah, it made reaching the attorney general way easier, since I have his number programmed into my favorites list, but that's not why he authorized the release of Trey's trust fund.

No, that was all me and my Harvard education mixed with my debate experience. Once he saw the evidence and traced the funds back to the original source—Trey's grandfather—the attorney general realized the oversight and corrected it.

Boom.

"That might be better than a boob punch to Celia," I mutter.

"Who are you boob punching?"

I jump an inch from the seat, the hand at my lips coming to press against my racing heart. Breathing hard, I shoot Sam an accusing glare. "Don't scare me like that."

"I knocked." Those dark brows furrow as concern flashes across his features. "Randi, no one expects you to be fine after what you went through."

"I know," I say on a sigh and lean back against the chair, angling my body to face where he stands by the door. "It's just... I'm constantly on edge now, you know? Like every sound, every move might be the one that happens right before I'm taken again."

"Are you seeing someone?" He steps deeper into the room and sits on the footboard of my bed.

"Yeah, and a friend." Said friend, Sarah, has been a lifeline. Taking my calls at all times of the night, letting me ramble on and on. Helping me feel strong again by

taking me through simple self-defense lessons until my body is fully healed and we can get back to our old workout routine—i.e. her kicking my ass. That first day back in the White House, she stopped by with T. I'll never forget her look of absolute fury when she saw my bruised face. If Shawn wasn't burned to a crisp and nothing more than ash and a bad memory, I think Sarah would've dug up his remains and killed him all over again.

I smile at the thought. I love my protective friend. Everyone needs a Sarah in their life. And a T. And a Trey.

“You'll get through it. I have no doubt Benson will make sure of it.”

My smile widens. “Yeah.” Shaking my head, I disperse the memories that are trying to force their way forward. “What's up? Why are you here?”

Sam's bright green eyes burn through me. “We're friends, Randi. I'm here to check on you.”

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

Him and Vlad, it seems. Vlad has called every day to check on my recovery progress and sent over enough Russian vodka to keep me drunk for decades. He says it's a cure-all, though I haven't had the time to test out his theory just yet.

"And stopping by to make sure I still plan to announce we're running for a second term." Amusement lightens my tone.

"You are known for making surprising statements to the media, so yeah, I want to make sure you're still on board."

I grin around the nail between my teeth. "No need to worry. I'm in this, and I'm ready to let the world know."

Shoulder against the bedpost, Sam surveys the room. "I can't believe Rosen was dirty."

"I can." Shock registers on Sam's face. "It was little things here and there." I shrug. Little did I know the extent of the dirt on Todd's hands, of course. That fool had his hooks in just about every dirty transaction in this city, wheeling and dealing to keep the money coming his way. Vlad was right about him, he did sell his loyalty to the highest bidder—and paid the price for it with his life.

"I'll have to find his replacement," I grumble. Massaging my temples, I focus on calming breaths.

"Let me work on that for you, Randi. Let me take something off your plate for a little while."

I shoot him a grateful tight-lipped smile that doesn't reach my eyes. "Thank you. Oh, and you're not too far off on typical Randi announcing shocking things to the media."

That puts his full attention on me. "I'm scared to ask what bomb you're planning to drop on them today."

I cringe at his choice of words. "Let's not say it like that when I actually hold the authority to drop real bombs on people, okay?"

"Touché. What will you—" He waves a hand like he's searching for the perfect word. "—expose to the media today, Madam President?"

A soft snort escapes me. I don't know why, but when he says it, I always laugh. Maybe because he knew me back in law school, or because we plotted Kyle's demise together. Or maybe it's because his own eyes hold a bit of humor when he says my title. We're a good team, Sam and me. And we will be again for another four years if the voters agree.

"I'm announcing today about—"

"You should be resting."

Sam and I turn to the owner of that deep, commanding voice. My heart does a little skip at the sight of Trey in a form-accentuating suit. Arms crossed over his chest, he shifts his displeased expression from me to Sam and back again. The two guns holstered near his chest peek out, drawing my gaze. "Give us a few, would you, Pierce?"

Sam dips his chin and shoves off the bedpost. "It's nothing crazy, right?" he asks, alluding to what I was about to reveal before Trey slipped into the room.

I shake my head, more of my dark hair falling over my shoulders and tickling my cheeks. “Nothing crazy. At least now you’ll be as surprised as the rest of the world,” I say with a wide grin. I’m sure it’s eating him up not knowing.

He huffs, tossing his hands in the air, making his dress shirt sleeves slip up his arms and expose the bright inked skin beneath. Grumbling about something, Sam exits the bedroom, leaving Trey and me alone.

“You okay?” he asks, coming to where I sit and crouching low to put us at eye level.

I force a reassuring smile. “Yeah, just nervous.”

He blinks, confusion clear in his eyes. “Why? You’ve done this a hundred times before.” Something dark flashes over his face, making his features harden. “You don’t have to tell them shit about what happened, Mess. Tell them there was an incident and it’s over, handled by your very capable Secret Service team.” He winks at the end, but it lacks the lightness he’s attempting to create.

I chew on the tip of my pinkie nail. “It’s that and....” Trey’s gentle fingers grip my tender wrist and lower the hand from my lips. “Everything is about to change, Trey. Are you ready for that? Are you really ready to stop being an agent, to be the first First Husband? What if you resent me for making you give it all up? What if—”

He cuts me off with a hard kiss, making me swallow the next words. Callused palms cup my cheeks. I give in to the kiss, relaxing into him until it’s only his hands holding me upright. All the stress, worry, and fear slip to the background. He hasn’t taken them, just moved them aside to remind me of the only thing that matters.

Him.

He pulls back an inch, leaving me panting for more. I lean forward to seal our lips

together again.

“Breathe, Randi.”

Closing my eyes, I do what I’m told, inhaling as deeply as my still healing ribs will allow before becoming unbearable and then releasing it slowly.

“I was going to do this after the press conference, but, well, I think we both need this now. Just know I had a whole thing planned.” His words go in one ear and out the other as I continue my deep breathing. “Open your eyes, Mess.”

After one more exhale, I lift my lids. The smile that was pulling at my lips freezes on my face. I blink once, twice, expecting the image to change. But it doesn’t. Nope Trey, my Trey, is still on his knees with a small red velvet box held out between us.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

I swallow, my breaths short and shallow.

You'd have to be an idiot to not know what's about to happen. I know. He knows I know. And I know he knows I know. Yet I still can't bring myself to shift my eyes away from the box to the man holding it.

Then he goes and makes it worse. He opens the damn box. I thought it held my undivided attention before, but now I want to disappear into the brilliant glittering diamond blinking beneath the few sun rays that have slipped past the blinds and curtains.

"I..." That's all I got. Yep. A Harvard graduate, president of the United States of America, and that one little word, which was more like a gurgle than a word, is all I can think to say.

"My world starts and stops with you, Randi Sawyer. I didn't understand what living was until I pulled you from that burning limo and met you. Every moment we share is one I savor. When we're apart, it's like a part of me is missing until you're back in my arms. I want you for the rest of my life. I need to be by your side every day and to hold you in my arms every night." The emotion is clear in his shaky voice and damp eyes. "I never want to wake up without you beside me again. Please say yes. Say yes to me worshipping you, loving you, and protecting you for the rest of our lives. Marry me, Mess. Please fucking marry me."

Streams of tears drip from my cheeks. Forgetting about the layers of makeup that were applied for the upcoming press conference, I swipe the dampness away with the back of a hand.

“Trouble.” I swallow back a sob. Apprehension flashes across his face. “There’s no coming back from you, from us. You’re all I want. You’re all I need. None of this matters if we’re not together, if I’m not facing this shit show called life with you by my side. Yes, I’ll fucking marry you.”

Pitching forward, I forget about the enormous diamond between us and lunge out of the seat. A quick flash of shock crosses his face and the red box falls as I crash against him, my arms going around his neck as we tumble to the floor. Holding me close, Trey takes the brunt of our fall, twisting so his back slams against the thin carpet with me pressed to his chest.

I swipe at the trail of wetness streaking his cheek before leaning forward and kissing away the remaining tears. His fingers delve into my hair, fisting at the base and dragging my lips down to smash against his.

I nearly sob with happiness into his mouth. The hand along my back tightens, sealing us even closer together. A bold, joyful laugh bursts from his lips. Hand to the floor, I push up and gaze down at the man I love. A breath catches in my throat at the pure happiness radiating from his wide smile.

“You made me drop the ring,” he whispers as he rakes both hands through my hair.

“I don’t care about the ring. All I want is you.”

“Good thing you get both.” He drops one of his hands and pats along the ground. “Ah.” Lifting the box overhead, he withdraws the ring before tossing the box across the room. Slowly he lowers the glittering engagement ring to eye level. “They released my funds from my trust.”

“Did they now?” I say, mesmerized by the way the diamond sparkles even in the shadows.

“You don’t sound surprised.” I raise a noncommittal shoulder. “Hmm, I thought so. Either way, this was the ring I wanted for you. What I’ve wanted for you for the past several months. Ask Tank.” A soft chuckle from his chest tickles my own. “I dragged him to that jewelry store at least once a week to look at it. I made them keep it in the back until I was able to buy it.” A spark of mischief dances in his honey brown eyes. “I’ve been a good customer for years.”

I smack his shoulder only for him to snatch my hand and flip us so I’m pinned beneath him. He takes the hand he’s captured and brings it to his lips, kissing the ring finger before slipping the ring down. For half a second, I worry it won’t fit as it catches on my knuckle, making Trey use a little more effort for it to slide over.

I let out a held breath when he releases my hand, leaving the sparkling jewel secured around my finger.

“Wow,” I whisper. “I never thought this would happen to me.”

“The big rock?” Trey waggles his eyebrows.

“No,” I say, sticking my tongue out at him. “This feeling of sheer happiness. For so long I’ve done this all on my own, always an uphill battle, and now... now I know I won’t have to do it by myself. That no matter how hard it gets, I know you’ll be there by my side.”

“Always, Mess.” Leaning forward, he brushes his nose against mine. “I will always be by your side.”

“Ditto, Trouble. We’re in this together.”

“Forever.”

“Forever.”

Forever might not be long enough.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Randi

The murmurings of the press corps quiet the moment I appear through the side door. Careful to not snag a heel, I step up to the podium and grip both sides for support. Flashes momentarily blind me as a few dozen pictures are snapped. I hear more than one gasp when I face them full on, allowing them to see the healing damage still apparent on my face.

Most of the swelling has gone down, but there’s no hiding the black-and-green bruises across my jaw, cheekbones, and circling one eye.

It’s fine. I’m fine. It was a shock the first time I saw my reflection, of course. And I might have overreacted slightly by shattering the mirror that exposed the horror that was my face. But I’m better now. I’m fine.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

I scan the somewhat familiar faces and smile.

“First off, I’d like to thank every single person who prayed for my safe return during those long hours I was missing. I have no doubt that me standing here today is a direct result of those prayers. There are a few things I’d like to discuss with you today, but I know the main point of interest is where the hell I was those missing hours.” The reporters chuckle, and a few smile and nod, shrugging like I caught them red-handed on something. “On June 15 at 3:30 a.m., my convoy was attacked as I left a residence deep in the city. The entire team that was escorting me back to the White House was killed in the direct attack.”

“Why were you in the city at that time of night?” one reporter shouts out.

“What do you think I was doing in the city at that time of night?” I leave off the string of names I want to call the fool. “I’m the president, but I’m still a single woman.”

Well, not really single anymore, but I’ll get to that in a minute.

“After the motorcade was eliminated, I was abducted from the wreckage, drugged, and then held hostage at a warehouse across town. As you can see from my face, it was not a pleasant experience—”

“Was it terrorism?” someone shouts.

“In a way, yes it was. The technical definition of terrorism is ‘unlawful use of violence in the pursuit of political aims,’ which was exactly what he was after. He

wasn't a new threat but someone who's been after me since the day I stepped into Washington. This man was threatened by me. Threatened by my background and how it is directly influencing the policies I'm determined to put in place while in office. He was a weak, selfish man who, thankfully, is no longer a threat to me or the people of this country.

"That's all the detail I'm willing to give at his moment in time. The funerals for the brave men and women who died trying to protect me will be held over the next week. I would appreciate you respecting the families' wishes and staying away from the family-only services and burials. With that behind us, we can now look toward the future. The next four years."

Chairs creak and a hum of low voices reaches my ears as I take a second to let those words sink in.

"I've been asked many times if Sam Pierce and I intend to run for office again. Until now, I wasn't ready to make that decision. As I said earlier, I'm a single woman with a daughter who now has a beautiful baby of her own. Taking on another four years would be challenging and put additional strain on my family. That was not a decision I wanted to take lightly. However, after the incident and many, many hours of internal debate and talking with family, I've decided to run for office in this next election cycle with Sam Pierce once again as my running mate."

The room erupts to life. A few even leap from their chairs, shouting their questions.

Holding up both hands, I shake my head, not saying another word until they've calmed down.

"There are a few things I'd like for everyone to know about me now that I've decided to run for president. I normally keep my personal life private, but I know with campaigns, anything is fair game to the other party. First—" Shrugging off my jacket,

I carefully lay it over the edge of the podium and place my hands on my hips. “—I have tattoos.” Raising my arms, I roll my shoulder and bicep so everyone can get a good look at my half sleeve. “Hope this doesn’t offend anyone, but I needed to put this out there because I’m tired of hiding the art on my skin.”

Crickets.

“Okay,” I whisper to myself. I glance to Trey, who gives me two thumbs up. “On to the next topic. Earlier you asked why I was in the city at that hour. Well, to be completely honest, I was there seeing my boyfriend.”

There’s a sharp gasp and... Oh hell, did that lady faint?

“Well, not really boyfriend anymore. Now my fiancé.” I hold up my hand, allowing the light to catch the diamond, shooting rays of sparkling light around the room.

“Who is he?” one of the reporters in the front row asks. In her excitement, she’s shifted to the very edge of the cheap chair in an effort to catch every word of my response.

Smiling, I point to where Trey leans along the side wall wearing a shit-eating grin.

“Trey Benson, ladies and gentlemen.”

The man doesn't miss a beat. As every eye in the room turns toward him, he simply waves and gives the crowd a dynamic smile.

Shaking my head at his showmanship, I clear my throat, directing their attention back to me. “He’s currently a member of my alpha Secret Service detail, but that might change with the engagement. And before any of you ask, no, I will not go into detail about how all this happened... yet. One day, sure, but I’ll be honest, I’m exhausted.”

The crowd chuckles. “This job eats up every second of every day, and it’s still not enough to get it all done. It’s beautiful, terrifying, exhausting, and thrilling all in the same moment. And I wouldn’t want it any other way. I’m thrilled to run for the incumbent president seat in the next election cycle, and I hope you’ll vote for me once again so I can continue making the changes this pompous-ass government needs.”

The speech is perfect... until I pull a fucking Randi.

One hand tosses up a peace sign while the other gives the room a thumbs-up as I step to the side. I examine the riveting floral carpet, grumbling about my traitorous hands and how they always fuck things up for me when someone grips my biceps. Trey smirks. The air grows heavy with anticipation as everyone focuses on our simple interaction.

“That was perfect, Madam President. Especially that last bit about the ‘pompous-ass government.’ You surely sealed a few votes with that closing line.” His smile grows at an obnoxious catcall that cracks through the room, coming from...

I glance over his shoulder to find a grinning Sam.

Cameras flash as Trey cups my cheek, turning my attention back to him.

“So it’s official.”

“Official,” I whisper, my eyes darting to the crowd of reporters that seems closer than just moments ago.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

Their shouted questions finally reach my ears.

“When’s the wedding?”

“Where will it be?”

“Will you invite the Russians?”

What is their deal with the Russians? I roll my eyes at the last question and wave a hand, dismissing them all without a single reply.

“They’re all yours,” I say to Sam, patting his shoulder with the hand that’s not interlaced with Trey’s. “Go win us some votes.”

“Should I show my tats too?”

I look him up and down, considering the idea. “Couldn’t hurt, but I’d be worried about most of the women in America showing up on your doorstep.” He laughs, humor alight in his green eyes. “Let’s talk strategy for the campaign tomorrow. See ya.”

Stepping through the side door, I wait until it’s closed and the noise diminished before leaning against the wall to catch my breath.

Varying emotions battle within me as the gravity of what I just revealed to the world settles.

“Oh shit,” I curse under my breath. Slipping out of my shoes, I step forward to race down the hall.

“What?” Trey’s hand tightens around mine, holding me back. “What’s wrong?”

The four agents around me draw their guns. Keeping the barrels pointed to the ground, they form a brick wall around me.

Leveraging one of my thin shoulders between two agents, I force them apart and take off down the hall, this time without Trey’s restraint.

“I just told the whole world about our engagement and totally forgot to tell Tae!” I shout over my shoulder.

Trey’s boisterous laugh chases me down the hall. “Good luck with that.”

As I jog through the maze of hallways, I say a prayer to the unicorn gods that she wasn’t watching the press conference. At her door, I slump forward, slamming the heel of my hand against it, making it rattle under my weight to keep me upright. Breathing ragged, I curl an arm around my sore ribs, hoping cradling my waist will relieve the ache.

But then the door swings open.

“Shit.” Unable to catch myself, I stumble forward, crashing into Taeler. Her own curse slips out as we tumble to the ground. The lamp beside the bed shakes and the picture frames along the wall shift with the impact of both our bodies slamming to the ground.

Groaning, I roll to my back and stare at the ceiling.

“Fuck, Mom,” she cries.

“Language,” I hiss back.

“You just tackled me for no good reason and you’re—”

“I said yes.” Now my racing heart is from trepidation, not exertion or free-falling to the floor. The carpet flattens under my head as I roll it to the side. “He asked, and I said yes.”

“You told me that. You said the night you were kidnapped he asked you and you said yes, so why the hell did you assault me?”

“I didn’t assault you. You opened the door—”

“My bedroom door when someone knocked.”

“The door I was using as support because I raced over here from the press room because I forgot to tell you before the press conference.”

“Tell me what?”

I raise my left hand into the air and hold it between us. Tae’s eyes go wide when they latch on to the sparkling diamond decorating my finger.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

“He asked, and I said yes.”

I wince at her high-pitched scream. Before I know what’s happened, she’s on top of me, arms wrapped around my neck, crying, laughing, and still screaming.

That’s how he finds us.

Leaning against the doorframe, Trey smirks down at us. “I don’t even want to know how you two ended up on the floor. By the amount of tears and happy screaming that can be heard through the entire White House, I’m guessing you told her.”

My cheeks hurt with my wide smile. Her soft blonde hair tickles my nose as I lean forward and take a deep inhale.

“Mom, you’re so weird.” Her tone lacks the bite it used to. Gone is the snarky teen who thinks she has to help her mom through life because she can’t catch a break. Gone is my little girl; she now has a little babe of her own.

Gone is my loneliness.

Gone is the need to fight this thing called life alone.

Whole is how I feel.

Whole and happy.

* * *

“Where are we going?” My breath fogs the tinted window of the Beast. The busy sidewalks and crowded businesses of downtown DC flicker past. The leather cools my overheated skin as I lean back and rest my head against the headrest.

“You okay?” Trey’s fingers tighten around my own.

I nod only for it to turn into a shake, then a half shrug. “My stomach is in knots, and my palms are as sweaty as a teen boy’s on his first date. But is that because this is my first time really out and about since... since the abduction or because I don’t know where we’re going and what you have waiting for the surprise you’re clearly giddy over?”

“I’m a badass. I don’t get fucking giddy.”

“You’re giddy.”

I shoot a grin at T, who sits as far away as possible. Holding out a hand toward Trey’s best friend and future best man, I say, “See? He sees it too.”

“It’s a surprise. A good one. You already got the best part I had planned.” Lifting my left hand, he holds the engagement ring close to my nose. My eyes cross staring at it so close. “Now I get to enjoy the night too, since I’m not nervous about messing it all up.”

The limo slows. Turning toward the door, I press my cheek to the window to see to the top of the building we’ve parked in front of. My skin slowly peels away from the glass as I sit back after a moment, allowing the agent outside the door to swing it open without me falling face-first to the sidewalk.

I only get a hairbreadth across the leather seat before I’m tugged back to make way for T’s massive frame to squeeze past as he exits the limo first. His all-seeing dark

eyes scan the area, a finger pressed to his ear while he listens to the rest of the team. Seeing his earpiece triggers me to lean back against Trey's chest.

"Where's your radio?" I ask, leaning back farther to check both ears. I was right, no earpiece.

"I took the day off. This is about us, not work."

"But you're carrying."

"Baby, I'll never not carry around you. These guns go wherever you go. Call it paranoia, but I'd rather be prepared even if I'm not on duty."

"What about when you're the First Husband?" I wait, holding a breath.

"Let's figure that out later, Mess. Tonight, let's just be a regular couple celebrating the fact that they found the person they want to spend the rest of their lives with."

"Okay." How could I not agree with that love-filled gaze, pouting full lower lip, and tender tone?

Careful to not crush me, Trey climbs over my lap and steps out the open door. After adjusting his suit jacket, he turns and extends a hand into the limo. Without hesitation, I place my hand in his, allowing him to guide me out into the evening air.

Several agents block off a clear path, keeping the spectators at bay as we walk hand in hand toward the nondescript revolving door. The glass door slowly whooshes past. Trey urges me into the next compartment and follows me in, keeping a tight hold on my hand.

The moment we step from the revolving door, a blast of cold air-conditioned air

brushes my face, cooling the sheer layer of sweat building along my hairline. Even though we were only outside for a short time, I feel overheated, like fire flickers in my veins. It's strange considering I've always been cold even in the heat of summer, but something triggered in my body those hours Shawn held me hostage. Now I can't get cool enough; I'm always just a tinge too warm wherever I go.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

Following where Trey leads, I take in the small nondescript lobby area before we're led up a circular staircase. My heels fall silent as I step from the marble floors to the spotless red carpet runner along the steps. We pause at the second-floor landing. Soft movement above us has me looking up to a four-foot-wide chandelier. The crystals sway slightly with the heavy blast of air pouring from the air vents above.

Trey speaks with a man briefly before urging me to follow him once again. Up another level. Then another. On the fourth floor, my breaths become labored from the climb in heels. Sensing my need for help, Trey snakes an arm around my waist with a gentle tug until I'm leaning against him, allowing him to support some of my weight as we're led down a dark hall.

The gun digging into my side offers some reassurance that we're safe. That and the two agents ahead of us and at least four taking up the rear of our little train.

"Toot toot. We're all on the Randi train."

Trey snorts, the vibration going from his chest to mine. "Please don't say that. People will start to think you're collecting agents for your harem."

Scrunching my face like I'm contemplating the idea, I can only hold it for a few seconds before bursting out laughing at his scowl.

Turning a corner, we step into a private room. My laugh dries up immediately, catching in my chest at the sight of the single table covered in a brilliant white tablecloth with two chairs halfway tucked beneath.

But that's not what has me speechless.

Releasing his hand, I move across the room, unable to take my eyes off the glittering lights of the city. In the distance the Washington Monument stands tall and proud with the dome of the Capitol Building barely visible just beyond.

It's beautiful. I press a hand to the cool glass. A body pauses behind mine.

"You like it?" There's an uncertainty in his voice that grips my heart.

"It's perfect. I love seeing the city like this. Like I'm just a bystander. Able to watch everyone go on with their lives without my presence interrupting their day."

He sweeps my hair from my neck, warm lips pressing where it meets my shoulder. I'm too caught up in watching the streets below to notice when he steps away. When I can finally rip my gaze from the life happening just below us, I find him at the door, whispering with T. The conversation stops when they notice my attention.

Trey shoots T a look I don't understand before pushing him out the door and flipping a lock. With all the confidence in the world, he leans back against the closed door and shoves his hands into the pocket of his slacks.

"It's just you and me now, baby. Ready to celebrate our engagement properly?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

Trey

Even from across the room, the flush that smears over her cheekbones at my words is clear. Shoving off the door, I pound my fist against it to ensure the lock holds even though I know it will. The guys checked the entire building out earlier today, even

left a few agents behind to make sure no one messed with the locks or surveillance equipment or placed anything in the room I had reserved for the night.

Because I wanted this room specifically for one reason.

Absolute privacy. I'd expected to be pouring my heart out and asking the beautiful woman in front of me to marry me, none of which I wanted to be seen by anyone else, even my fellow alpha team brothers. This moment is for us.

We've cut the video and audio feeds in this room and ensured the windows are completely blacked out, meaning a reporter—or sniper—can't see anything when looking in.

Reaching out, I tuck a lock of dark silky hair behind her ear. The skin beneath my fingers pebbles with tiny goose bumps as I trace along her jaw and down her neck.

“Are you hungry?” I know she is, and I'm an ass for even hoping she'll say no so I can eat my fill of the only meal I've wanted for days. My roaming fingers follow the deep V of her sleeveless silk top, shifting to move along the swells of her breast.

“Are you?” Her reply is filled with want. Even with a bra, the stiff peaks of her tight nipples are visible, calling for me to take a quick nibble.

“I think you know what I'm hungry for, Mess. What I'm always hungry for with you.” I overtake the small gap between us, sliding a hand down her spine and pushing her hips flush with my own. A sharp breath of air pushes past my tight lips at the heat pouring from between her thighs and straight into my stiffening cock. I grind against her, enjoying how her body immediately responds, flexing against my own.

“Trey,” she breathes. Her hands rest on my shoulders, short blunt nails dig into my jacket.

Too many clothes.

Way too many damn clothes between us for what I have in mind.

Releasing her, I retreat a step and shrug out of the suit jacket and shoulder harness, keeping the latter close in case of an emergency. Her perky tits rise and fall in rapid succession. Those hazel eyes are glazed over with her rising lust as she tracks every move I make. After removing both cufflinks, I shove the platinum studs into the silk lining of my slacks pocket.

That dirty, sweet tongue I want lapping my dick flicks out, wetting her lips.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

A dark chuckle rumbles in my chest. Using one hand, I tug at the black tie still secured around my neck until it hangs loosely enough to slip over my head. I lay it atop the jacket I slung over the back of a dining chair. One by one, I thumb open the top three buttons of my dress shirt. Her rapt attention on my fingers as I roll both sleeves up my forearms does something dangerous inside me.

It's in her drooped lids, those delicious thighs she keeps pressing together, that damn fingernail in her mouth. All of it combined with the way she can't rip her gaze away makes me feel invincible, dominant, and fucking horny as hell.

I flick a hand toward the table. "I think I'll have my dessert first tonight." On the way to my seat, I snag her hand and bring her with me. The chair flexes under my weight as I sit back, maneuvering her with a hand on each hip to stand between me and the table.

Thank fuck she changed into a skirt for tonight. I have no patience for pants or any other hindrances.

Her legs tremble under my touch as I cup just above each knee and glide my hands up, bunching the black pleated skirt around my wrists as I go.

I slide my fingers inward to snag the front of her panties, where only neatly trimmed curls scrape against the pads instead of lace. I snap my gaze to hers. A shy, almost mischievous smile plays at her red-painted lips.

"Thought I'd take a play out of your handbook and go commando."

“Get on the table,” I grunt.

Standing quickly, she teeters backward, a hand smacking onto the table to keep her upright. Not waiting for her to catch her balance, I grip her thin waist and haul her onto the tabletop, ass barely hanging on the edge. “Lean back, elbows on the table so you don’t fall.”

To my utter surprise, she does exactly as she’s told. She doesn’t look away as she gets comfortable, her head still raised, watching to see what I have planned. With little flair, I flip her skirt up, bunching it around her hips, and unceremoniously shove her knees apart.

I swipe the tip of my tongue along my lower lip as I stare at her slick pussy. Along the inside of one thigh, I plant soft grazing kisses. At the apex, I blow a gentle steady stream of air over her slit before kissing down the opposite leg to her knee. Leaning back, I admire the spread in front of me.

The chair’s legs thump on the floor as I scoot forward, close enough for her to plant a foot on each armrest. Glancing up from between her thighs, I make sure she’s watching, then slowly lean in and kiss the sweetest pussy I’ve ever tasted.

My own groan of pleasure slips out as I suck her swollen nub between my lips. Her sharp exhale and moan drive me crazy. Slipping a hand beneath each cheek, I lift her off the table and devour her whole.

Tiny gasps, my name whispered and then shouted fill the room as I lick every drip off her until she’s coming around my tongue buried deep inside her.

I could eat her all day every day and never have enough. Even now I can’t stop kissing, sucking, and nibbling. Only when her nails scrape across my scalp and dig in, yanking my face away, do I stop. Smile wide and satisfied, I lick my upper lip as our

gazes clash over her heaving chest.

Finger at my belt, I deftly unfasten it with one hand as I stand and extend the other to help Randi off the table. Her legs wobble, making her cling to me for stability. I wrap an arm around her waist, and we walk side by side to the floor-to-ceiling windows. With a little push, I propel her forward, her palms smacking the glass to keep her from falling.

“Turn around and get on your knees.”

She turns, lips parted and chest flushed. Reaching out, she grips my forearm and slowly drops to her knees at my feet. Tilting her face up, she licks those red lips eager for everything I’m about to feed her.

“You’re so beautiful kneeling in front of me, baby,” I say as I make quick work of unfastening my slacks and tugging the zipper down. Her hazel eyes flare with desire as I tug my pants low, my stiff cock pointing directly to her mouth like it knows where it belongs.

Soft dark strands flatten beneath my palm as I run my hand from the crown of her head down to cup her jaw. My dress shoes slide on the floor, widening my stance as I guide her lips to the already slick head. Being the vixen she is, she darts that pink tongue out, lapping up the beads of precum. Her lashes flutter closed with a soft hum of approval.

Fuck, this was a bad idea. I should’ve just pinned her to the window like I planned. If she keeps this up, I won’t last long enough to fuck her the way she likes.

“Take it all, Madam President. Swallow me whole in front of all of DC.” Holding a tight grip on her jaw, I draw her forward, smacking the other hand against the window for support as her lips wrap around my cock. My eyes roll in the back of my

head as she takes me to the base and swallows, her throat constricting around the tender head.

Up and down I guide her, making her take every inch, the groans and moans of approval and nails digging into my bare ass a sign she's loving this as much as I am.

Head drooped forward, I watch as my dick slides between her lips. Loosening my hold on her chin, I slide my fingers back through her hair and grip a handful at the base of her neck. At my gentle tug, those hazel eyes meet mine.

Locked in place, I take control, thrusting into her mouth. Saliva spills down her chin, dripping to the floor and making the scene even more erotic. I curse, fingers scratching at the window when she cups my balls and gently rolls them between her fingers.

Enough playing.

Grip firm, I hold her steady and take a step back, withdrawing my entire length. Her whimper of displeasure turns into a gasp as I haul her upright and twist her around to face the window.

"Keep your hands on the glass, baby. I can't wait to be inside of that sweet-tasting pussy of yours."

Her rapid warm breaths fog the window, those long nails scratching at the glass as she curls her hands into fists. Dipping beneath the skirt, I haul the bottom hem up to her waist. Foot to each ankle, I kick her feet wider and bend her forward so that sweet ass of hers is jutted out, vulnerable and at my mercy.

Her dark hole holds my attention. "Tell me when it's too much," I mutter into Randi's ear as I slide a hand down her ass cheek to her slit and dip two fingers into

her drenched channel. Her head lolls backward onto my shoulder as I slam my fingers in and out, taking her hard like she likes. Which is why I know she'll fucking love what's coming next.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

Leaving a trail of her wetness in my wake, I position those two slick fingers against that tight rim. Beneath my chest, her back rises and falls with exaggerated breaths, but she hasn't asked me to stop. Pressing forward, I breach through her virgin hole to the first knuckle.

Her back arches, a soft cry leaving her lips. Kissing along her neck, I suck at a tender spot and push deeper in to the base knuckle.

"How does that feel?" I whisper against her ear before nipping at the lobe. Between us, my rock-hard cock bobs with excitement, tapping the crease of her ass.

"Strange," she breathes. Chin to her shoulder, she sighs. "Strange good. Dirty."

"There's my dirty girl," I coo. "Now for the fun part."

Hard grip around myself, I line up with her pussy and slam forward, burying myself to the hilt in one hard thrust. Seated fully inside her, I pump those two fingers, pressing hard at the base for her to feel the fullness and pressure that makes ass play fucking awesome. Even I can feel how much tighter she is with just two fingers in the opposite hole. I don't let myself imagine what it will be like with a fuller toy or how tight it will be around my dick once she's comfortable.

"More," she cries, slamming her hips back into mine.

I groan, smacking the glass to stay upright and not put my full weight on top of her. Pulling out all the way, I tease her with the head against her clit before thrusting inside. Over and over I push and tease until we're both slick with sweat.

“Hold on,” I grunt and bite her neck, not releasing as I fuck her hard. Balls tight, I increase my pace even more, chasing my own release. Beneath me, Randi screams, her forehead falling forward and hitting the glass, her hands squeaking down as her hold slips. Arm around her upper waist, I help hold her weight.

With a roar I come undone, burying myself deep inside her. Knees wobbling and legs weak, I guide us both to the floor, hissing a breath from between my teeth as I pull out so she can nestle on my lap. Wayward strands of hair tickle my nose, but exhaustion makes it impossible to swipe them away.

“Okay, now I see what you mean,” she says, still breathing hard.

“Told you. Wait until we get more in there.” She whips her face to mine, eyes wide.

“Don’t worry, baby, we won’t until you’re ready. But I have a feeling my dirty little president will want more sooner than later.”

A wide shy smile splits her face. Nodding, she dips to lean a cheek against my chest.

“I love you, Trey,” she whispers. “I had no idea utter happiness felt this good.”

I wrap both arms around her and hold her tighter. “I love you too, Randi. This is just the beginning of our happily ever after. There are many, many more years and experiences to come. Now let’s get cleaned up. I’m hungry for your sweet dessert again.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Trey

The Filson duffel, stuffed to max capacity with dress shoes, slaps to the cement floor beside the other equally as stuffed duffel of non-work shoes. I would say I have a

shoe problem based on the fact that there are two more bags already shoved into the SUV, but the number of shoes I've collected over the years doesn't compare to the sheer number of suits I already had sent to the White House earlier.

It's been a week since I officially proposed, but today is the first day neither of us is drowning in work, offering a small window to officially move my residence from the condo I shared with Gerard and Beth to the White House. Sure, there were a few tears just now as I walked out that condo door with Beth still tightly clinking around my neck. It's not that they're sad to see me go, especially since I gifted them the condo the moment the funds from my trust were released. No, they're so fucking happy for me they can't even stand it.

Maybe it's because they know my childhood, saw me desperate for even a sliver of my parents' love or attention but never receiving it until I did their bidding. Now I have that love I craved in spades from Randi, and they see it. Everyone sees it.

The hard leather handle of the navy Filson duffel digs into my palm as I heft it up into the open trunk. I haul the other in next and stare in dismay at the already full trunk of my Bentley SUV.

Damn, I might have to make two trips. Knew I should've made Tank help me. Not that he could right now, because the bastard's too busy working. The only time I've seen my best friend the past week has been on shift. All his spare time is spent with Smith. That should irk me, and it would've in the past, but it doesn't now because I know what they're working on.

Ponder, or whatever the hell his real name is, is still out there. That's what they've researched, tracked, and obsessed over since Whit and his hooligans were barbecued. We all know Ponder is biding his time, waiting in the shadows like the damn coward he is until he has a chance to take out Randi or me. Too bad for him, we've laid our own trap to ensure he's the one six feet under and not me or my girl.

Not sure what I ever did to the fucker to warrant a bullet in the head, but he sure does hate me. That was one thing Whit was very clear about during our... conversation his last night of living. Maybe it was because I confronted him on his personal questions to Randi, or that I had him moved to the shitty shifts or stations because of said questions to Randi.

I smirk at the memory. Even though it put me in that asshole's crosshairs, seeing him stationed outside in the damn heat sweating his balls off or in the winter freezing to death was 100 percent worth it. I knew there was something off about him, the arrogance too... violent with him. I couldn't pinpoint then what it was that urged me to push him away from Randi, but now I can. Good to know my gut instincts still work.

A bang rattles through the packed garage as I slam the trunk closed.

This is the last of my clothes, the rest already at the White House. By the end of the day, I'll be an official resident of the most iconic house in the world.

Who would have ever fucking thought?

My parents dreamed this day would happen, me in the White House. Too bad for them it's not the way they hoped. And I'm good with that. More than good with that. I never wanted the politician route—they did.

I swing the key fob around my middle finger, my unseeing stare focused on the shiny black finish of the SUV's bumper, then pull out the phone vibrating in my pocket.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

“You ready?” Tank’s gruff voice is barely audible with the whistling wind in the background.

“Hi, baby. I miss you too.” Warm metal presses into my spine as I relax against the SUV like I don’t have a care in the world. For this plan to work no one can know I have eyes tracking my every breath from blocks away.

“Laying it on thick, aren’t you?” he grumbles. Using my shoulder, I hold the phone to my ear as I dig into the front pocket of my jeans and slide the half-gone cigarette pack and lighter out. “Thought you were quitting?”

My lips spread around the butt between them as I light the end. Only after a couple deep inhales do I respond. “Soon.” Closing my eyes, I rest my head back against the rear window.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand tall as a sensation of foreboding washes over me.

“Don’t do anything stupid.” The line goes dead in my ear, but I don’t drop the phone. Instead I continue to talk into it like there’s still someone on the line.

“Yes, of course, we can do that position again tonight, baby. Yeah, you screaming my name was music to my ears too.” Okay, maybe this is a little thick, but Tank and Smith didn’t tell me I couldn’t exaggerate a little while playing prey. “In fact, later I want you to recite the oath while I—”

The distinct click of a slide engaging catches my ear, cutting off my next words. I

peek one eye open, the late morning sun bright as it pours through the open gaps of the parking garage. A shadow moves to my right. Peeling the other eye open, I flick the spent cigarette to the cement and extinguish the glowing ember with the heel of my shoe.

I shove the phone into my back pocket and frantically scan the row of luxury cars. Somewhere in the distance, the clink of a bottle rolling down the slope of the ramp cuts through the stiff silence.

“Hello?” I say to no one as I scan the parking garage again. My face drops as my hands connect with the soft cotton of the T-shirt instead of the hard grip of my gun. The gun that’s in the center console four feet away. “Fuck,” I mutter.

A familiar figure steps from the recessed shadows cast by a thick support column.

My eyes narrow at the gun casually hanging at his side.

“What are you doing here?” I snag another cigarette, hands slightly shaking, taking three attempts to light the end before I’m successful. Little does this fucker know it’s adrenaline and not fear that’s causing the tremor. Adrenaline, blood lust, the need to murder... yeah, we’re going with adrenaline.

“Cut the damn act,” Ponder chides. “You know I was behind it all. You and those dumbasses have been tracking me—unsuccessfully, I might add.”

“What’s your plan now? Kill me, then go after her again?”

He leans his head one way and then the other like he’s considering the options. “She was a job. Which I completed by delivering her unharmed and helping keep her... compliant.”

“Until Whit changed tactics on you.” I release a billow of smoke and cock my head to the side. At least that’s what Randi thinks. She clearly remembers him being against forcing himself on her, and that’s why he left without finishing the job. “Who would’ve thought someone like you has standards.”

He purses his lips. “I’m a killer, not a rapist. Then the fucker went and crossed me by taking you. You did me a favor killing him that night, saved me the trouble.”

“You kill all your clients?”

“Just ones who have the potential to double-cross me or who actually do. The latter don’t live long.”

“And Rosen?”

The man huffs, using the barrel of the gun to scratch an itch along his scalp. “He was as weak as they come. That wasn’t the first time he ordered a hit for someone else. I fucking hate middlemen.” The loathing in his hard tone lays truth to the statement.

“So what now? You plan to kill me, then her, and then escape to....” I wave a hand in front of me, indicating for him to finish the statement.

“Just you.”

Both my brows rise up my forehead. “The other client with a hit on the president won’t be happy about that, will they? I didn’t figure you as the type of sociopath who’d go back on his commitments.”

The roar of a car engine fills the garage. We both tense as a white compact car from the level above rounds the corner, its tires squealing as it takes the tight turn. Ponder slips the hand with the gun behind his back and nods to the driver as he passes. If

anyone were to see us, they'd think we were simply neighbors having a nice chat in the garage.

“You're personal. All the contracts on that bitch are voided considering most are incarcerated or dead. So now it's just you and me.” He frowns at my empty hands. “I was hoping for more of a fight, but I have a plane to catch.”

My pulse races as he slides the hand with the gun forward and raises it, pointing the end of the barrel right between my eyes. Sweat beads and drips along my forehead, catching in the dark scruff I was too lazy to shave off this morning.

A sharp whizzing noise zaps through the air milliseconds before Ponder's head explodes. Blood, brain matter, and bits of skull spray along the cement and splatter the windows and trunks of nearby cars. I watch as his body crumples in slow motion.

A warm breeze wafts through the wide open-air gap between the cement barrier and the next level. I let out a sharp whistle and stroll toward the dead assassin. Stopping just outside the growing puddle of blood, I toss the spent cigarette into it, watching as the sticky liquid quickly douses the ember and the filter absorbs all it can until it's as red as the ground.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

My ass vibrates. I smirk around the new cigarette between my teeth, waiting until I've taken a few hits before slipping the phone free. Swiping the screen, I immediately hit the speaker button and hold it close to my lips.

"Cleanup on level 3."

"Funny."

I huff and take another deep inhale, allowing the repetitive motions to calm my nerves.

"That was closer than I expected. What took you so long?"

"Took me so long?" Smith's voice drips with indignation. "We're four buildings over, the wind is gusting outside, and I had a four-foot break between levels to shoot through. All in all, I consider what I did fucking quick."

I snort and take another drag. "Fine, color me impressed. Where's Tank?"

"On his way to you."

"Thanks for making the shot."

"Told you I could."

Shaking my head, I end the call. Even with the man who was out for my blood dead at my feet, anxiety rushes through my veins. One down, how many more to go?

Lost in thought, I roll the filter along my lower lip.

One question keeps going through my mind.

Now what?

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Randi

August

The grainy sand seeps between my toes as I race down the beach like I'm being chased.

Because I am.

Adrenaline races through my veins and blood thunders in my ears as I push harder, urging my legs to move faster. Sand flies behind me in my wake, hopefully giving my pursuer a mouthful of it and hindering their ability to get close enough to snatch me.

My skin tingles with the awareness that someone is close. Too close. The muscles of my thighs protest, my legs feeling like noodles, but the flickering light of my destination urges me past the pain. Huffing, I pump my arms harder and fight the need to sneak a glance over my shoulder.

Dark shadows move along the beach. Massive shadows. I smile despite the air wheezing from my chest.

Twenty feet.

Almost there. I can make it.

Fifteen feet.

The pounding of another set of feet slapping the sand seems much closer than before.

Ten feet.

An arm snakes around my waist, hauling me backward. I scream in frustration as my back collides with the still warm sand and a massive body straddles my hips.

Wet dark hair glistens in the moonlight. The house security lights cast a shadow over the body, making it impossible to see the expression on the man's face.

“You’re going to pay for that, Mess.”

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

Somehow even with my labored breaths and zero energy to even blink, I laugh. Trey's thighs tighten around my hips when I try to buck him off. Halfheartedly, I slap at his chest and shove at his shoulder in an attempt to get him off me.

His large hand snags one of mine before it can smack his bare chest a third time, then the other just as easily. Leaning at the waist, he holds both my wrists in one hand and digs them into the sand above my head.

Desire warms my lower belly, making me squirm beneath him, this time with zero hopes of dislodging the delicious weight settled over me.

"Is that any way to treat your husband?" he chides, but there's a hint of laughter in his voice. He twists to talk to the four agents behind us, dousing his face in the light. Just as I expected, a smile graces his face, those fine laugh lines crinkled at the edges of his eyes.

"You'd already jumped off the cliff once and said it was fun."

"You pushed me." He laughs, turning his full attention back to me. "Then ran."

"You said you wanted to race home."

"Together. Race home together."

"How's that fair?" I grumble.

"We have twenty-four hours to celebrate our honeymoon, baby. Is this really how

you want to spend it?”

Yes, I want to scream. Don’t get me wrong, I love us making love, the sweet and gentle stuff. But I love our frustrated, angry, punishing fucks just as much. Hell, maybe even more. And with us being on the campaign trail and me still running a country, that hasn’t been on the menu as of late.

And I really, really, really want it to be.

I bite my lower lip and nod.

Understanding washes over his face as he sits up, bringing my wrists up with him. Looping them around his neck, Trey dips his head, pressing those wet lips against my ear. I shiver as his breath sends goose bumps flaring down my neck.

“If you wanted a good hard fuck, all you had to do was ask, baby.”

“Trey,” I gasp as his teeth sink into my earlobe.

Before I can beg, we’re off the sand and I’m cradled against his chest. Bits of sand dig into my exposed thigh and stomach where our bare skin rubs together as he strides toward the infinity pool. As he leaps up the steps like he’s not carrying a grown woman in his arms, I take in our surroundings.

For twenty-four hours, this place is ours. Only ours. A private beach, far away from the media or any watching eyes. It’s not much of a honeymoon, but let’s be honest, it wasn’t much of a wedding, much to every woman in America’s disappointment. A simple white dress—yeah, yeah, I know it was silly to wear white. I obviously wasn’t a virgin considering I had living proof running around with her own tiny human to care for. Trey was in one of his sexiest suits, and the justice of the peace. Of course he came to us at the house instead of us having to go through the downtown area of

Honolulu, which was nice. Plus with T and the rest of the secret service team by our side we had plenty of witnesses as we signed the marriage certificate.

The moon's reflection shimmers on top of the pool water. Trey stops just at the edge, his toes hanging over the tile. This close to the house, the lights offer a clear view of his face. The face that now wears a mischievous grin and highlights the sparkle in his honey brown eyes.

“Oh no you—”

The bastard does exactly what I suspect. My sharp squeal is immediately cut off as we plunge into the cool pool. Trey's grasp tightens around me as he shoves off the bottom, rocketing us back to the surface. I gasp in a deep breath and turn, swiping the soaking hair from my eyes to glare at my gorgeous husband.

Gorgeous doesn't do him justice. There's a playfulness about him always, but then there's this glimmer of intense badassery.

Badassery. That's a word, right?

“The art of being badass?”

Trey's laugh brushes over my shoulder as he swims us to the edge. “I like where your head's at, Mess.”

At the edge, he walks us down to the shallow end of the pool. I sink a bit when he releases his hold before finding my footing and standing so my upper half is exposed to the night air. The sound of rushing water snaps my attention back to Trey, who's pushed himself out of the pool and is now sitting on the deck, legs spread.

Nail between my teeth, I move to stand between his spread thighs and rest my hands

on either side of his hips.

Without breaking eye contact, Trey calls out to Tank, “I’ve got her covered. You guys make yourself scarce. And turn off all the motherfucking lights, would you?”

Tank grumbles something in return, but I don’t pay him any attention.

One by one, the overbearing spotlights the guys had set up for security around the property wink out. The last one to flicker off is the one by the pool. The last thing I see before we’re doused in complete darkness is Trey’s smirking face.

Source Creation Date: June 11, 2025, 9:56 am

The sudden darkness takes my breath away. Within seconds my eyes adjust to the low light coming from the house and the soft blue illumination of the pool from the underwater light.

Callused hands grip my biceps. When Trey's lips brush over the shell of my ear, a soft chuckle tightens my lower belly.

"Come on, wife. Let's play your dirty games out here." Teeth sink into my earlobe, and I jerk in surprise, then lean harder into him. "Then we'll go upstairs and play mine. I think you'll enjoy the... additions I purchased for our twenty-four-hour honeymoon."

I swallow, my throat suddenly dry.

Additions.

Fuck, I hope they hurt so good.

Damnit. There really is something wrong with me.

* * *

A content sigh pushes past my lips. Shifting around, I plant a soft kiss on his shoulder and relax against him. For the first time in months, I'm... content. The worries of the world—not exaggerating—aren't swarming my thoughts and spiking my ever-present anxiety. No thoughts of the campaign, of upcoming debates, the election this fall. Nothing as I stare up at the beautiful star-filled sky while curled against the man I

love. Well, nothing except for the “additions” Trey mentioned earlier. Those sound fun. But that will come later. Right now, this is exactly where I want to be.

“I wish we could do this every day,” I whisper.

“We can. Just say the word. Neither of us has to work another day, but I know you’d hate it.” His breath pushes over my damp shoulder. A quick nip of his teeth to my neck causes a giggle to tickle my chest.

I pause, debating if his words hold any truth.

He’s right. I’d hate it. After working my entire life, fighting for more, I’d hate a leisurely lifestyle of doing nothing. But for twenty-four hours? Hell yes.

For several minutes we stay like this, his fingers finding my wet hair and playing with the ends as we let the moment envelop us in peace.

“Will it ever be easy?” I ask the night, not expecting Trey to respond to my deep thought.

“No. It won’t.” Unease curls in my gut. “But we knew that going into this, Mess.” He grips my chin to turn my face toward his. “I didn’t ask you to marry me because I thought it would be easy. I didn’t say ‘I do’ because I had false ideas of how the next four years will go when you win.” I smile at the “when” instead of “if.” “It will be tough. We’ll have to fight for us every fucking day. I’ll remind you when you’re taking too much on and need to lean on those around you. In return, you’ll let me know when I’m being an arrogant ass.”

“So daily. You’re saying I’ll remind you daily.”

A burst of giggles and snorts escapes when he digs his fingers into my side, wiggling

them between my ribs and tickling the hell out of me.

“We’ll have to fight for time together. But I promise you this, Randi, I won’t ever stop fighting for you. Fighting for us. Every day I’ll wake up ready to battle for what we have, and I know, I know you will too. We’ve been through shit together and made it through. What’s forever compared to all that?”

His tentative smile and those honest words chase away all fears that have been my ever-present company since he slid that rock on my finger. Leaning close, I seal my lips to his and pour every ounce of love that’s gushing in my heart and soul into him.

Sealing our battle plan for us with a kiss.

We will make it through this shit show called life.

He’s right. We will fight for each other—for us—every day.

Because I’ve never failed in my life, and I sure as hell don’t plan to start with him.

My name’s Randi Benson, and I will fight for him with all I have, no matter the cost.

Forever.

Epilogue

Trey

March the following year

My whistling tune is off pitch and rhythm, sounding nothing like the “Jeremiah was a Bullfrog” song I was aiming for. Not that it matters. There’s no one around to hear

my awful rendition. It's been seven months since I married the unlikely president and the love of my life, four months since we won the election, and almost two and a half since she was officially sworn in for her second term as president.

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I round a corner. A younger agent I recognize catches sight of me and stands a little straighter.

With a smile, I stride past the kid and continue toward the Oval Office.

The sounds of a bustling office grow louder the farther I stray from the resident side. Men and women discuss world events loudly on one side of the hall while the other side is too focused on their zillion-line spreadsheets to even notice anyone else is around.

Blake, Randi's chief of staff, offers a sharp nod as I pass and then continues railing on whoever he's on the phone with. I take a sharp corner, colliding with someone, their iPad jabbing into my sternum.

"Oomph," I grunt. On reflex I reach out and grab hold of the person I nearly flattened to keep them from tumbling to the ground like their iPad.

A string of creative murmured curses reaches my ear. I chuckle as the woman rips her thin arms from my hold and narrows her eyes up at me. Holding up both hands in surrender, I take a step back, giving her some space. The mix of fear and loathing at my proximity has me curious. Obviously she doesn't recognize me or she'd know I'm no threat to her.

Or any woman, for that matter. Not that I ever was. Well, if they were single, hot, and willing, then okay, maybe I was a threat to be wary of. But since Randi, I haven't looked at another woman with interest. Mostly because Randi is all I need, but also because Sarah threatened to, and I quote, "Slice off my balls and dick, place them on

a skewer with light seasoning, grill them over an open flame, and then force-feed them to me” if I ever looked at another woman or hurt Randi.

I rather like my balls and dick attached, as does Randi most nights—and sometimes during a long lunch—so yeah, I don’t look at women.

“Sorry, didn’t see you there.” I readjust my jacket to make sure both nine millimeters are concealed. Keeping my features neutral but friendly, I move to step around the unfamiliar woman.

She grumbles something in return about being lost and late as she bends to retrieve the iPad from the ground. She dashes off in the direction she was originally heading before I have a chance to offer any help with the lost part. I know this place like the back of my hand from years of working as an agent and living here personally; I could’ve helped her get wherever she needed if she would’ve waited.

As I approach the office, my smile widens. Both hands tucked into my slacks, the picture of nonchalance and ease, I stroll toward the duo.

“Howdy, amigos,” I say in greeting, leaning against the opposite wall and crossing a foot over the other ankle.

“You know I hate that,” Smith states, his annoyed glare flicking to me before scanning the halls once again. “But I assume that’s why you keep saying it.”

“Bingo, amigo.” I chuckle at his attempt to flip me off discreetly. “You guys see a little blonde woman, about yea high”—I hold my hand to midbicep—“holding an iPad, looked flustered and a little pissy?”

Tank growls. “That’s Sam’s new secretary. Why?”

“She ran into me, literally, in the hall. Never seen her before, so I wanted to vet her out, make sure she had clearance to be here.”

“She does for now.” I arch a brow. “She’s not doing so great. I overheard a conversation between the two, and the poor girl just couldn’t keep up with everything he was throwing at her.”

“He’s a hard-ass, for sure,” I admit. “It’ll take someone with a backbone and brains to handle Sam. And someone who won’t throw themselves at him.” A chunk of dark hair slides across my forehead as I shake my head. “Last I heard, he’s debating hiring an all-male staff.”

“Did you hear the one last month, the Yale grad?” I nod even though I can’t picture who Tank’s talking about. “Sam walked into his own office, and she was sitting on his desk butt-ass naked. He lost his shit and fired her on the spot.”

“I’m sure that’s not the reaction she was hoping for.” I shake my head.

“I’ve got a ten on the new one not lasting a week.”

“I’ll toss in twenty for her lasting two weeks but getting fired for accidentally emailing a confidential document to Sam’s entire contact list.”

“You don’t even know how long she’s been in the role.” Smith cross his arms across his chest. “Besides, the pool is an alpha team bet.”

Faking shock, I stand and press a hand to my heart. “Tank, bestie, are you going to let him talk to me that way?”

“For fuck’s sake, you two,” he grumbles in return, running a hand over his fluffy dark and gray hair. He says Sarah wants him to grow it out. I think he’s feeling old and

trying to look young again. Either way, it's not a good look for him. "Where are your agents, by the way?"

A grin pulls up my lips as I shrug.

"Oh hell, what did you do to them?" Tank's exasperation is palpable and hilarious. The latter more for me than him.

"Nothing. I'm doing what you asked me to do—training them."

When I officially resigned from the alpha team to become the First Husband, it was... difficult at first, to say the least. The days were boring while Randi was working, changing the world one community at a time, and even most of the nights, considering she worked almost eighteen hours a day. Me doing nothing but sitting around and pestering the agents assigned to shadow me lasted only a few days before everyone was over my complaining and sour attitude—their words, not mine.

That's when Randi, the director, and Tank came up with their brilliant plan. And I'll admit it is a great plan. It gives me purpose again and the opportunity to have a little mischievous fun at another's expense. Like today.

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Since I can clearly handle myself and have demanded I stay armed at all times even without being an agent, they've assigned the greener agents to my detail.

The First Husband detail.

It's not a title I'm a huge fan of, but I am a fucking fan of being her husband, so I'm going with it.

I've agreed to train the agents as we go, help them know what to look for while we're traveling, how to spot weaknesses in a plan or protection detail. We work out together as well, sparring at times too to help with reflexes and hand-to-hand fighting skills.

To be honest, it's been fun as well as rewarding. After losing Grem, I realized there was a lot I didn't teach him. If I had maybe, he'd still be here today and holding his sweet little baby instead of six feet under.

I shake off those dark thoughts and turn to look down the hall as the sound of running feet rumbles closer.

"I wanted to see how long it would take them to realize I'd snuck past them." I steal a look at my watch. "Seven minutes." The four twentysomething-year-old kids skid to a stop, looking between me, Smith, Tank, and back to me, barely winded after the short sprint across the White House.

"How'd you get by us?" the lead of the four asks, ire gleaming in his gaze as his nostrils flare with annoyance. "We were at all the doors."

“Were you?” I arch a brow to add a drop of doubt to their self-assured conclusion. I hitch my chin to the youngest one in the back. “Never get distracted. You took a call, leaving me the chance to slip past.”

“You were the caller,” he snaps. “You’re the one who distracted me.”

“Still, you were distracted.” There’s no hiding the amusement in my tone. Yeah, I tricked him, but one, he should’ve known better, and two, it was fun. “We’ll head to the gym after I see what Randi wants to talk to me about.”

Without knocking, I twist the brass doorknob and push the door leading to the Oval Office open. “See ya, amigos.”

Smith whispers something about killing me slowly, but I shut the door, cutting off whatever creative torture he was concocting.

The moment the door closes, I freeze. Something’s off. The air is too cold; normally the heat is blasting in the office, making it feel like summer instead of the tail end of winter. There’s something else too, like there’s a live wire ready to spark and burn the place to flames.

Muscles tense, ready for anything, I take in the room but only find Randi behind the desk, no one else. Each step is tentative as I approach her.

Face in her hands, elbows on the shiny oak surface, she looks unhappy. I pause beside her, only now able to hear her faint whispering, talking to herself about who knows what.

My chest tightens with worry as I gaze down at her. Something is wrong.

Reaching out, I stroke down her long silky dark hair over and over, giving her a

moment before I force her to tell me what the fuck is going on.

“Who do I need to kill, Mess?” I say it like a joke, but we both know it’s not. I’d kill anyone who hurt her. Been there, done that twice already.

Her shoulders shake.

Fuck, is she crying?

Not giving two shits about personal space or giving her time to tell me what’s wrong, I grip both her shoulders and swivel the chair around until she’s facing me. Hand beneath her jaw, I tilt her face up to mine.

Eyes rimmed in red. Damp cheeks. Rosy nose and cheeks.

Fuck.

“I’ll kill them. I just need a name, baby. Tell me.” It takes work to soften my tone and not unleash the worry and frustration that’s swirling in me. The last thing I want to do is upset her more.

“Trey.” She half laughs, half cries. “Stop with the murder talk.” I swipe a tissue from the box on her desk and pass it to her. “You do know that if you ever do, you can’t tell me or I won’t be able to defend you.”

“I’d only be in court if they find a body.”

Her snort and small smile ease some of the growing tension between us.

“Seriously, Randi. Tell me what’s wrong. We can fix it. We always do.”

Watery eyes search my face. “We do, don’t we?”

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“And we always will. But whatever this is, you can’t do it on your own. I’m here. Lean into me. Then I’ll lean into whoever made you cry and possibly crush them to death.” I flash her my trademark smirk, hoping that will ease some of her sadness.

Boom. Nailed it.

“It’s you.”

My smirk falls and my heart sinks into my stomach as nausea spikes.

“What?”

“It’s you—” Her face pales as she shoves both palms against my shoulders, sending her chair wheeling backward two feet. Twisting faster than I knew she was capable of moving, Randi falls to floor, her knees slamming to the carpet in front of a white plastic trash can.

I tilt my head at the new random and cheap addition to her office.

Shaking off the curiosity, I move the chair out of the way, the wheels squeaking in protest as I shoot it across the room, and gather her hair into a low ponytail as she vomits into the can.

Her moans of pain and annoyance eat at my soul. I feel helpless standing here, unable to do anything but hold her hair and pray to her unicorn gods that all this will be over soon so she can tell me what the fuck she meant by me being the problem.

Me.

I know I'm not perfect, but things have been great. Stressful, sure, but she is running America, and her best friend is Russian, so yeah, things can get tense at times.

Her left hand smacks at my leg to get my attention. "Tissue, please."

I pass her the box, not really knowing exactly how many she'll need to clean up... that.

When she leans back onto her heels, she smiles up at me. Even after puking and crying, she's still beautiful. How the hell I got so lucky, I'll never know.

"Randi, I don't know what I did, but—"

"Oh, you know." She laughs.

I take her extended hand and help her off the floor. Placing a steady hand on the desk, she leans a hip against it and bites her lip.

"I really don't."

"Last night." She raises her brows like that should give me some kind of clue.

Last night. Last night. Fuck, what did we do last night?

Oh, right, we fucked.

Oh shit.

I compile everything and only come to one conclusion, but then my head goes blank. I blink down at Randi, not sure if I want to ask the question or just keep staring,

hoping I'm reading the signs right.

Because fuck, I want to be right. We've never talked about a family because we're both older and she already has Taeler, and I didn't want to press the issue. But now....

Please, unicorn gods, let my beautiful wife be pregnant.

"Trey?" she asks, furrowing her brow. "You okay?"

"Randi, tell me what's going on."

Nibbling on a nail, she glances all around the room, her chest ballooning out with a deep inhale. Like she's finally made the decision to tell me the big news, she locks her hazel eyes on mine and smiles.

"I'm pregnant."

And just like that, when I thought my life couldn't get any better, it absolutely fucking does.

THE END... FOR NOW.