

CHAPTER 1

BURT HARRISON stood next to Sarah Carlton, first lady of the United States. His arm was wrapped around her grief-stricken shoulders and forced back his own tears. They both stood frozen in time, willing the medical monitor to return to the steady beep indicating President Carlton's heart was still beating — instead they were left with the squeal of the flat line signal.

Only moments ago he and Sarah had been pushed into a corner to watch the medical staff work with frantic, but skilled, precision to try and beat the inevitable. God's will had spoken. Post mortem tasks would now wait. It was time for the doctors and nurses to stop hovering over the president's bed and allow the first lady to adjust to the fact that her husband of fifty-two years was gone. They both needed time to adjust to the reality the United States was left without their Party's nominee with only weeks left before Election Day.

As soon as the medical team left the hospital room, Sarah walked to her husband's bedside, and placed her hand on his silent heart. "Why Michael? Why now? I can't lose you. I need you. This country needs you more than ever." Only the hiss from the oxygen machine answered back. Sarah sighed, leaned down, and kissed his lips. "I'll miss you, my love. How will I go on without you? This is all too much...too soon for me." Once again her body quaked with grief along with a flood of tears.

Burt reached to take her into his arms and comfort her, but Sarah pushed him away and blew her nose into an embroidered handkerchief.

"The country is in big trouble," she said as she brushed away a latent tear. "Michael was needed at the helm *now* more than ever.

With a lump still caught in his throat and unable to speak without giving in to his own grief, the campaign manager nodded his head in agreement. Michael had been his best friend, his mentor for over twenty years, and had begged him to return as his campaign manager for a second time. Despite his own cardiac issues, there was nothing he would refuse his friend, much less the president of the United States.

Sarah clasped her hands beneath her chin; she furrowed her brow. "Say something," she said to Burt. "*Anything* that will assure me the Party will find a suitable replacement for Michael." She looked up, her eyes wide with anxiety. "*Please* convince me Dylan Randle won't be the Party's choice to replace my husband on the ticket..."

Burt knew exactly how she felt and started to speak, but Sarah continued her rant. She needed to vent all the pent up anxiety and fears she had held inside so bravely for the last several hours — Dylan Randle the III became her target.

"I'll never understand why Michael chose that skirt-chasing son of a bitch to be his running mate the first time, much less for a second term," she continued. "How does that sweet Céline put up with him and his shenanigans?" She narrowed her eyes. "My gut instincts tell me that man is capable of more than just philandering."

Burt remained quiet. There was nothing he could say...nothing he could do. The replacement choice for the presidential candidate was beyond his and Sarah's control — particularly this late into the campaign. Politics was politics. Those in power had their ways and means to twist the dialogue into whatever direction worked to their advantage and

what *they* considered was the best direction for the country — regrettably, too many times, it was in contrast from the desires and needs of the voting public.

“Burt, are you listening? Sarah asked, her voice an octave higher. “This is important.”

“Yes ma’am, of course. Unfortunately,” he said with as much empathy as he could muster, “there is a political machine in place, always has been, that control these matters. In the old days they called them ‘*King Makers*’. Whether you and I like it, ‘*they*’ are still around and have the last word.”

“Ridiculous,” the first lady spat in disgust, and then released a deep, melancholy sigh.

Resigned to reality, Sarah plopped on the edge of the hospital bed and took her husband’s cold hand. Without looking back at Burt she said, “I believe you have phone calls to make, meetings to arrange so that the Party,” a sneer twitched her cheek, “can quickly nominate a new candidate. Time is obviously of the essence.”

“I’ve already contacted the Party Chair,” Burt said. “All the necessary protocols and preparations have been set into motion. We’ll have a new nominee by the end of the day.”

“Good,” she said without looking at Burt. “Michael would expect nothing less. The last thing this country needs right now is Allison Benson and her unconventional platform winning this election. Let’s just pray the Party makes the right choice; someone who’ll carry on Michael’s good work.” She turned her attention back to her dead husband. “Now if you don’t mind, please allow me some last moments alone with the love of my life.”

“Of course,” Burt said. “If you’re sure there isn’t anything else I can do for you, I’ll be on the next plane to Washington.” He walked over, leaned down, and kissed the top of Sarah’s head. “I take to heart *every* last word from the president’s dying wish,” he said. “I promise you I will personally do everything in my power to influence the Party’s final decision for the new nominee and his running mate. This country must not fall into the hands of the wrong people.”

CHAPTER 2

AS THE sun crawled above the rolling hills of Eastern Montana, a brisk steady wind whipped the grassy plains as a herd of bison grazed two hundred yards in the distance. Dylan Randle the III climbed out of the Jeep. The hunting guide handed him a Remington 700 and two 300 Winchester magnum shells.

"Are you sure you don't want more cartridges?" the guide asked. "It could take three or four shots to bring down a big bull."

"*God Bless America*" chimed on Dylan's cell phone. He reached into his pocket, ignored the message and switched to silent mode.

"Don't you think you should get that?" the guide asked. "It could be important. You *are* the vice president of the United States in the middle of an election campaign."

Dylan loaded two cartridges into the rifle's magazine. "President Carlton made it perfectly clear who was running the show when he was *forced* to accept me once again as his running mate," his voice tinged with scorn. "I'm right where he sent me...well close proximity anyway." He smiled and said, "With one minor detour."

The guide shrugged and ignored the text messages blowing up on his phone. "No skin off my knee," he said. "You're paying the big bucks for the kill. I'm just here to accommodate your wishes and put food on my table."

Dylan shrugged. "I don't know what everyone is so worried about," he said. "Vegas is only a puddle jump flight from here. That crackbrained cowboy *will* get his Rodeo Championship buckle on time and the people in Nevada will get their bullshit political speech, a look at my pretty face and plenty of kisses for all the babies." *Preferably with one of those gorgeous, Vegas' show girl babes*, he thought with a mischievous grin. *Too bad he'd been ordered to behave.*

A gust of icy wind shifted into Dylan's face. *Everyone wanted a piece of him*, he thought as he zipped and then lifted the collar on his down jacket. *Not this time. Not before he got his rocks off staring a trophy beast in the eye and show him who was boss — who was in control.*

The guide nodded to Dylan the wind direction and the bison's position was primed for his best chance for a clean kill.

Dylan lay on the ground and elbow-crawled to the top of the knoll. His thoughts continued to swirl like an out-of-control dirt-devil speeding across the plains. He still couldn't believe the party chose Michael Carlton to run for a second term and not him. That old man looked like walking death and needed to retire. With the old man's medical issues the grim reaper had to be lurking around the corner, Dylan thought with a roll of his eyes. At least President Carlton had the good sense to keep me as his running mate — just in case. Dylan peered through the rifle's scope and adjusted the focus. *After all, everyone knows I'm the best choice for VP and the future of American politics.*

A sharp rock dug into his belly. Dylan readjusted his position and tried to find a more comfortable spot to shake the growing ire that threatened to ruin his perfect day. More memories from the time leading up to the Convention continued their unwanted march into his thoughts. How dare the Party even suggest dropping him from the ticket... and replace *him* with Callie Summers! There was no way she had more to offer than he. The people loved him. He was without question the wisest choice to remain the vice

presidential nominee. Not even the president of the United States gathered more supporters at rallies than he. After all, if it hadn't been for him on the ticket, Michael Carlton wouldn't have won a first term, much less have any chance of winning a second term.

The guide lay next to Dylan; touched his shoulder and whispered, "There, one hundred yards to your left. That monster bull must weigh over two thousand pounds and stand over six feet high. What a trophy, man. Go for it."

Dylan forced his indignation back into the memory vault promising he would never forget who his political enemies were. Someday, some way they all would regret their treachery. He had the means, and most definitely the desire, to destroy them all without a blink of an eye.

He slid a live-round into the chamber, slowly swept his Remington to the left, and then adjusted his Leopold scope until he stared at the broadside of the animal. The massive beast turned and faced him. Their eyes locked. Dylan slid his finger onto the trigger, hesitated for a brief moment. If he didn't know any better, he would have sworn that bull dared him to pull the trigger. Dylan grinned. *You don't think I'm capable of killing you, you magnificent beast? Well, just watch me.* He took one last calming breath, slowly released the air —

"Stop! Mr. Vice President." Two pairs of hands grabbed Dylan under his arms and swept up his six foot two frame from his prone position as easily as if he were a child.

"What the fu—," the rest of the word stuck to the roof of his mouth. He was surrounded by a group of secret service agents in dark suits, all grim faced.

They snatched the Remington 700 from Dylan and handed him an iPad. A headline emblazoned with bold lettering announced: *President Michael Carlton dead at the age of seventy-eight leaving the country without a president and a nominee just weeks before Election Day.*

Dylan, still shaken from the interruption, glanced back and forth at the two Secret Service officers holding onto him. He was both pissed and confused. "Wha...what does this mean?" he barked.

"It means you need to be sworn in as quickly as possible as president of the United States of America."

CHAPTER 3

ENGINES rumbled; the ferry vibrated as the passenger boat eased away from the Algiers Point Ferry Terminal. The large barge fought against the fast moving current of the Mississippi River; dodged errant logs that bobbed and dipped below the surface, only to pop up again and continue their serpentine path toward the Gulf of Mexico.

As the ferry headed into the open water, Penelope “Pepper” Mills guided her bicycle to her favorite spot at the bow of the boat. She rested the rusty contraption, which had seen better days, against the protective railing that surrounded the lower deck. She leaned forward, held both arms out straight, shut her eyes, and listened to the melodic swish from the ferry’s wake. The river’s mist and the cool, late October breeze brushed against her skin as the early morning sun kissed her cheeks.

Leonardo DiCaprio was holding onto her waist, she fantasized. His soothing voice whispered promises into her ear. Once again the engines rumbled; the barge bounced off pilings and jolted Pepper from her daydream as they pulled into the New Orleans Ferry Terminal.

So much for my daily date with Leonardo, Pepper sighed with a shrug. Pretty sad her happiness had been reduced to a short ten-minute ferry ride across the Mississippi River twice a day. Not ideal, but definitely an improvement after hop scotching from job to job for over a year, left broke, depressed, and without purpose.

Pepper hooked the strap of her oversized faux Gucci Bag across her chest and wheeled her bike over with the other commuters who waited to exit the ferry. *New Orleans really wasn’t so bad*, she thought as she watched the ferry crew secure the mooring lines. Admittedly, she would be enjoying this city a hellava lot more if it were under different circumstances. Having been reduced from high-profile Washington correspondent to writing obituary blurbs was a long way to fall.

The crew dropped the chain and all the passengers crossed the gangway, scattering to points unknown. Pepper maneuvered her way with the crowd down the steel-plated walkway, and then headed for the Mississippi Riverwalk and Café Du Monde for fresh Beignets and Chicory coffee. *Definitely an acquired taste*, she thought with a smile *and a must if you hoped to persuade the Crescent City to accept you as one of her own*.

She suppressed a laugh. *So far so good for me*. If folklore were to be believed many had come to live in New Orleans from all over the world, but eventually moved away because bad things repeatedly happened to them. Unlucky? Or, was New Orleans nudging the unwelcome to go and live elsewhere? She wasn’t superstitious; however, the city did have a colorful history with plenty of ghosts from the past that had a mind of their own.

Pepper biked along the Mississippi Riverwalk, turned off the trail, and headed straight for Café Du Monde. After she ordered her breakfast to go, she walked her bike to Jackson Square and found an empty park bench — an easy feat since it was early morning and the tourists weren’t out.

This was her favorite time of day when the Square woke up with its kaleidoscope of characters. T-shirt peddlers and other arts and craft vendors were vying for premium spots, while mule-drawn carriages lined up on the Decatur side of Jackson Square offering leisurely city tours. Just watching the local artists display their latest creations of Folk Art depicting the French Quarter, the Superdome and other popular scenes of New Orleans,

lifted her melancholy and gave her hope she would once again have a career she could be proud of.

Pepper broke off pieces of her last Beignet and tossed them to the pigeons. The squatty birds scrambled for their meager share. A wave of sadness returned and washed through her like an unsuspecting undertow. She knew exactly how those little foragers felt. She, too, had become a scavenger, with New Orleans being her last chance to succeed as a serious journalist. *More like survive*, she huffed under her breath.

It had been less than six years, but it felt like a lifetime since she had personally interviewed heads of state from all over the world. How quickly those sweet memories had faded since she was the rising star and the envy of her colleagues.

A taste of venom mixed with resentment and regrets soured her mouth and blackened her thoughts. Her life would be forever tormented, scarred because of that ill-fated encounter with the golden boy of Washington D.C. ... a sexual predator... heir apparent to become a future leader of the free world.

She had her chance to exposed him at the time, but she was too naïve and blamed herself. For ten years, she had swallowed, no, buried the shame... her pride... her bitterness toward Mr. Dylan Randle the III and focused only on her career. Even when the “Me too Movement” spread across the nation, she remained reticent to speak out against him. No one in their right mind went against the currents of political power and lived to tell the tale — particularly a Washington D.C. correspondent who wanted to hold onto their rising career.

And then, five years ago, Dylan was being vetted as a potential vice presidential candidate. Pepper could no longer keep silent — the public needed to know what kind of man was vying for the second highest office in the country. She, in her new status as star reporter, felt invincible and full of herself. She believed in her hard-earned credibility and the power to influence political opinions. Obsessed and unwilling to turn back, she seized the moment and attempted to expose the underbelly of Dylan Randle the III.

Pepper sighed. The moment she made public her accusations against him, it was jaw-dropping how quickly her friends, her colleagues, the Washington elite abandoned her — how quickly her opportunities dried up. To this very day, it still baffled her how the public could believe that... that lecherous womanizer — even when other women came forth with their accusations. How easily all the claims against him had been nipped in the bud and did so without a moment of consequence.

Unlike the other women, and much to Dylan Randle’s ire, she refused to let go of her accusations. Unfortunately, the end result was that *she* became toxic, unreliable, and labeled a crackpot who was obsessed and resorted to unsubstantiated and sensationalized stories. She was accused of slandering the fine reputation of the darling of Washington politics.

Once the political inner circles of D.C. hung the unwelcome sign around her neck, her prospective job opportunities fell faster than a zigzagging line of dominoes. For almost a year after her downfall, she was left unemployable with only seven-hundred dollars in her once fat bank account.

Pepper bit the bottom of her lip and tried to contain the rising bitterness she had hoped she’d permanently put to bed; she tried to silence the paralyzing obsession she thought she had come to terms with after two years of intense therapy. But the flood gates had opened and now all the unwanted memories began to spill over the dam.

The one person she thought she could count on was Washington's top anchorman, Mark Saderfield. Even though she didn't know him very well, they enjoyed a casual flirtation while attending the same parties. Unlike her other so-called friends and colleagues — the very ones who scattered like roaches when the lights turned on, Mark continued to believe her about Dylan's unwanted advances. Mark convinced her he was on her side. Pepper furrowed her brows. He promised he would do everything in his power to help repair her reputation and reset her career. *But he, like the others, abandoned her when she most needed a friend.*

Nine months into her exile from Washington and completely out of the blue, Mark sent a one line text message with a prospective job opportunity at the New Orleans Advocate. It was obviously a pity apology for bailing on her. No, make that more a cruel joke. *Did he actually believe he was doing her some big favor?* She scoffed under breath. What better way to keep the trouble-making reporter under wraps than to get her a job writing obituaries far away from Washington? *After all, dead people don't talk back, do they?*

Stop fixating on the past, Pepper screamed in her head. *You're spiraling out of control.* She pressed her hand against her chest and tried to calm her racing heartbeat; she took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. She had vowed never again to let Dylan Randle consume her thoughts and destroy her hard fought well-being.

Today should be a time to focus on the positive and concentrate on how she'd been given a second chance. A second chance that took a lot of cajoling, begging and pleading to convince her editor she was a reformed woman. *Remember,* she reminded herself, *you promised Delacroix you had learned your lesson. You promised you would not allow personal feelings to ever again contaminate your objectivity.*

Pepper closed her eyes, inhaled, exhaled and then repeated the controlled breathing exercises the doctor had given her. *Today is about new beginnings,* she nudged her thoughts. This is *your long-awaited return to the real world of journalism.* As Pepper's old demons reluctantly slithered back into the dark side of her memories, her heart rate slowed to a normal pace.

She leaned back against the bench and straightened her posture. She inhaled one last deep cleansing breath and once again scanned the morning activities buzzing about Jackson Square. With renewed determination, she soaked in the positive vibes released by all the creative people humming around the Square. Each of them was there today with renewed hopes and dreams for their future. So must she.

With all signs of negativity flushed from her system, Pepper welcomed her rejuvenated spirit now bursting with confidence and a willingness to succeed against all odds. Today promised to be the best day she had had in four years. Today she had landed an interview with Harley Durham — one of New Orleans most colorful and controversial characters.

This interview was to be *the* opportunity that finally dragged her out of the past towards a new and promising future. This long-awaited assignment was the avenue to write more meaningful articles, and once again, become the true professional she needed to be — the one she wanted to be — the one she knew she could be. And yet, she still had one major hurdle standing in her way. The very man she would face today just happened to be a close personal friend of the campaigning presidential candidate, Dylan Randle the III.