

Trujillo's Choice

Trujillo Perez did not immediately return to his office after dropping his second in command at the east entrance to the Justice Department building. He needed to think over many decisions he had made throughout his adult life.

Annoyingly, his parking space was taken and he would need to call and have the offender towed, but for now he decided to park in an empty space farther down the row and behind a pillar where no one could see him from any camera in the parking garage. Whoever planned such a spot may have had a moment like this in mind.

He checked his watch and saw he had all of twenty minutes to devote to the philosophy of his entire life before they dragged the building for his body. He had no clue if his leadership meant anything to anybody here, but the name plate on his desk said it did, so it must. And sometimes that placed a very heavy burden on his shoulders.

He pondered Shakespeare's words, "We live as we dream...alone."

In Perez's case, it was true. He had made a decision twenty years before to devote his life in service to his government, but that choice brought sacrifices, and he was bound with very strong cords to assure everybody else's American dream.

It had never been easy, especially with his employees' and their true love stories in his face every day. Music and poetry filled only part of the gap, but it had always been do-able, possible, workable. Even after Elisabeth joined the team and his ache began.

He remembered how shy she was at first, uncertain of her acceptance into the male-dominated world of government agents. She was gutsy, however, and it had not lasted long; she rose to the top, one of the best. He was never jealous of her relationships, only watchful that no one took advantage of her.

Now he had a problem, for it was one thing to say he willingly gave up these things to devote himself to a greater good and a far different matter for them to be forcefully taken away. As long as she worked in the

building, he could protect her, regardless of the barriers, and count on her being part of his world.

The kidnapping of an agent brought out the entire force, to find her, especially as her kidnapper was such a powerful man. It had to mean they were getting close.

But Elisabeth! Why her? She was certainly not the most vulnerable of their elite Witness Security Unit, nor the least experienced. Perez recalled the conjectures of the team the day before in the war room.

"We've got teams covering the countryside along Route 108 from Olney in Montgomery County halfway through Howard County. She has to be here somewhere. The operation she was watching to find our witness I don't have much hope is still there. The teams have a better chance of finding Elisabeth than the witness or the drugs. They're all going with your gut feeling."

Perez had leveled a glare at the core team.

"I'm convinced she's not far. Did you send them back to the warehouse in Clarksville where you started?" he asked.

"They're on their way right now," one agent replied, barely getting the words out as Perez fired more at them.

"Send another team farther south, near Burtonsville and look at the warehouses behind the Farmer's Market. Keep me posted on what they find at the Clarksville warehouse today. It might be different from what they saw last night."

The agents with him made notes and began to disperse.

Trujillo stopped them halfway out of their chairs.

"Go run a report on all drug operations here in the past two years and associated arrests, as well as suspected drug lords behind those operations. Profile the ones who run things like our witness photographed. I want to know who's in, who's out, who's recently out, and what connections they have to our suspect."

Then later, when Elisabeth had been found, unhurt but with a message from their perp, she pushed her way into Perez's office.

"I know who it was," she told Perez angrily, slamming the door shut behind her. "I recognized his voice. I could tell you what cologne he wears!"

The pacing and hair pulling had continued for nearly twenty minutes, and Trujillo slipped in questions between her breaths. She didn't always answer, so he repeated his words.

"You said he wanted to give me a message," Tru reminded her, hoping he'd get an answer this time. The perp was a big-time crook with his finger in many pies, causing lots of trouble. It was exactly who they suspected had taken her. Hopefully, she could give them a lead or two, maybe the promised brand of cologne.

He reclined in his leather chair, and his handsome, Hispanic features returned to their accustomed calmness as he watched her rant around his office. His overwhelming relief at her safe return lay hidden.

"That is the message," she explained, waving her arms, "that our team is vulnerable, and I was very easy to snatch and anyone can be snatched any time. And our surveillance teams can be lured away and tricked any time. He can play with us whenever and however he wants."

"A perimeter breach," Perez commented.

He indicated the chair opposite his desk and she sank into it, exhausted.

"We are vulnerable."

"You mean me," Elisabeth corrected.

"No," he responded, shaking his head, "I mean we are vulnerable. Do you know what your nickname is in the department, behind your back?"

He knew her nickname?

"Double-oh-eight," he said pointedly. "So...we know why he did it, Elisabeth. And we know why he picked you."

Perez offered her the badge that held her name and number for more than eight years, left behind in the scuffle when she was abducted.

That was earlier today and his brief errand at lunch found him behind a pillar in the parking garage instead of back at his desk.

He tried to focus on his responsibilities, but her face and that sexy, short hair of hers kept popping into his head. The gun against her breast. The way she crossed her long legs, the thighs that went on forever. The way she moved, sat, stood, walked, laughed, winked, folded her hands in her lap and puckered her lips. Jesus. The way she always picked up the team's empty food cartons when they worked late.

Perez rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. His time was up. He locked his car and headed for the elevator.

He sighed as he pressed the button.

Elisabeth and he might never be together, but she should always be there to remind him.

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