

The explosion ripped through the hall like a hellish fireball, leaving chaos and devastation in its wake. Charred confetti rained down from above as smoke billowed through the air. The presidential nominee was missing. Ian McCullough's heart pounded as he scanned the scene. He had to find James. The sight of the first responders rushing to aid the wounded spurred him into action. Secret service agents were already combing the debris around the stage, their movements frantic and purposeful. Out of the corner of his eye, Ian spotted a glint of something shiny on the ground, a monogrammed cufflink. Recognition struck him with a visceral force. It was one of the anniversary gifts he had given James. With desperation fueling him, Ian shouted, "Over here! He's over here!" Ian scrambled to the edge of the collapsed stage. His desperate attempts to lift the structure were futile. The secret service detail, alongside a squad of firemen, swiftly intervened, pushing him aside to use hydraulic jacks on the massive wooden platform. The creaking and groaning of the wood echoed in Ian's ears as they carefully raised the wreckage. Firemen pulled James out just before the stage gave way in a splintering crash. A dust cloud enveloped Ian, blurring his vision. In the haze, he glimpsed James being whisked away. Ian fought to catch up with the firemen carrying James's unconscious body, but he was swept aside by the panicked tide of people evacuating the building.

Out on the sidewalk, Ian faced a barrage of questions from reporters. Emergency vehicles, their lights flashing, lined Convention Center Boulevard. The entire scene was a surreal, macabre circus. Spying one of the firemen who helped rescue James, Ian pushed through the throng of people. "Hey, do you know where they took the senator?" Ian screamed. "He's being taken to University Medical Center," the fireman replied, his face etched with concern. Ian thanked him and pushed through the crowd. The streets around the convention center, which had been cordoned off, were now choked with cars, first responders, and camera crews. Navigating through the dense, swirling crowd, Ian walked toward the French Quarter. With mechanical precision, Ian's body moved forward while his mind remained trapped in a labyrinth of nightmarish images. The humid New Orleans air clung to his skin, thick with the mingled scents of bourbon, jasmine, and Tabasco sauce. It hung heavily, like a shroud. Ian's mind drifted, transporting him back to that warm spring evening of March fifth, the night James had first shared his presidential ambitions. Their dining room had been bathed in soft amber candlelight, the table adorned with crisp white linens Ian had carefully pressed earlier that afternoon. Crystal wine glasses captured the flickering light, their refined edges creating small prisms that reflected across the walls. Ian had spent hours preparing a menu that told their story, each course a carefully curated celebration of their years together. The cufflinks had been his masterpiece. Crafted by an artisan who specialized in customized metalwork, they were more than mere accessories.

Each link bore James's initials in an elegant, flowing script, the letters intertwined so intimately that they seemed to breathe with the same rhythm as their relationship. The twenty-four-carat gold caught the candlelight, warm and rich, a tangible representation of their deep, unbreakable bond. When Ian presented them to James that night, the vulnerability in his eyes spoke volumes. These were not just cufflinks but a promise, a private emblem of their commitment to one another. A violent shudder tore through Ian's body, shattering the tender memory. Suddenly, all he could see was a blood-splattered cuff, James's hand emerging from beneath the stage, the cufflink's intricate engraving barely visible beneath the dried blood, a brutal testament to how quickly hope could be transformed into horror. A group of boisterous tourists, their laughter sharp and discordant, collided with Ian, jolting him from his nightmare. The French Quarter continued its relentless celebration, a cacophony of jazz and drunken revelry. He moved like a ghost among the living, barely registering the kaleidoscope of colors and sounds surrounding him. A nearby bar's raucous applause caught his attention. As he stood at the threshold, Ian's eyes were drawn to the television mounted above the bar. The president, a man Ian had long despised, was delivering a national address, his carefully crafted words sliding like poison into the nation's consciousness.

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