

JB TREPAGNIER



IN THE ZONE

THAT SUPER SECRET SPY SCHOOL I'M
NOT SUPPOSED TO KNOW ABOUT



BOOK TWO



IN THE ZONE

JB TREPAGNIER

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ONE



Jordan

When Casper, Blue, and Black announced the new mission to us and said it would be a slow burn, perhaps I took it the wrong way or just hadn't been an agent long enough to understand. The only reason I got sent out on my second mission was that they thought I would be pretty arm candy for Red long enough to distract a botanist so I could go up to his hotel room and steal his research. It ended up being so much more than that.

In what seemed like a whirlwind, I got caught over my head in a pretend relationship with the botanist, who happened to have a fetish for feet and had to keep him entertained with mine several times. My best friend for years soon became my boyfriend and his work was implicated as possibly being involved with Hex, the hacker who managed to breach nearly every business that was a front for secret agents. We were also now living with other agents and my trainer. I was pretty sure I was into Luke and Casper and Bailey was my bi awakening, but I was still figuring all of that out.

The secret agent breach was pretty much the only reason I was here. After the breach, online classes about becoming a secret agent started popping up and I was stupid enough to think that would remotely prepare me for what I was doing now. Since I was dead-ass broke at my insurance job and paying for those classes, instead of signing up at a Krav Maga studio like I was currently learning, I thought YouTube Tae Bo videos would teach me to fight. I couldn't afford a gun, so I tried to teach myself to shoot with a potato gun and ended up getting stalked by pigeons for potato droppings for a month.

Luke wasn't even teaching me to shoot yet. He said guns should only be used as a last resort because leaving bodies brought too much attention to us and I wouldn't always have time to put a silencer on. The noise would give away my location if I needed to get out of there fast. He was teaching me to kick ass with my fists and had started teaching me to throw knives, which were apparently easier to hide under some of the skimpy clothes they stuck me in.

When I found out something fishy was going on at Jeremy's job and that his boss was trying to bring him in on this top-secret project, I got work involved and now Jeremy and I worked together as agents. Together, despite being so new, we were the ones majorly responsible for the bust on Jeremy's old company, the botanist I had to let get weird about my feet, his partner, and we also managed to bag some terrorists that were trying to buy a bacterium that could be weaponized from Clarence, the botanist I worked.

Clarence left me a present after he went to prison and we now had one of his cats. Jeremy renamed him Darth Vader instead of Horace and I now loved that stupid cat, even if I wanted to forget I ever met Clarence. Clarence, apparently, still hadn't forgotten about me. He didn't have a phone, nor did he have my address. He knew I worked at Stantech, but he didn't know it was on the secret side of things. He had started writing letters from prison asking me to visit. I opened the first one that our receptionist, Betty, handed me. I skimmed through the first page and brought it to my team lead, Casper, code name Red, in case they needed it for his file. I never actually read them.

The unopened letters I handed to Casper continued to get thicker and thicker. Casper would always roll his eyes and ask if that man was ever going to give up. I don't know if *someone* here was reading them just in case he mentioned something that ended up just as illegal as him selling his bacteria to terrorists that would have weaponized it, but I was glad it wasn't me.

Our new mission was not progressing nearly as fast as how everything went down with Jeremy's old company Affirmative and Clarence, even if I still wished I hadn't had to see him that many times. Casper, Jeremy, Crimson, and Tyrian had gotten Team Burgundy access to a top-secret hacker forum. Half our team ended up getting tortured with Green's squat routine for laughing when Casper announced the contact at the forum said the task for approval on the forum was trolling some book-banning politician with baboon ass.

Much like the busts Jeremy and I got to watch, they provided booze and food when they let us watch it go down. Pretty much everyone got shit-faced and rowdy. I thought Crimson and Tyrian were going to end up having sex on the table and Bailey nearly beat Luke to a pulp when he almost dropped her while they were doing the tango across the room singing at the top of their lungs.

Black, forever our babysitter when these things went down, called the room to attention and made everyone take taxis home after Casper announced we were approved. All I really knew was that viruses and exploits had been coded into all the screenshots that had been uploaded to the forum. Casper wasn't very good at keeping Bailey and me up to date about what was going on with the computer side of things while we were doing regular training. We didn't really talk about work at home.

Casper still insisted we eat lunch together as a team. Everyone was crabby and not really in a sharing mood. I was irritated because I was having issues learning French. Bailey was fluent and helping me, but it just wasn't clicking like Mandarin did. No one could explain that to me, either. I could

now speak Spanish and Mandarin fluently, so I *should* have been able to pick up French.

Bailey was in a bad mood because they still expected her to sit behind a desk doing her magic with fake identities, but wasn't allowed to spar now that she was cleared for fight training. Luke still had her lifting weights. The rest of the team that sat behind computers all day were cranky because everyone on that forum had more security on their computers than even Affirmative, and Jeremy and Casper got in fairly easily then. We didn't have Jeremy on the inside this time.

As far as I knew from Jeremy, several people did download the screenshots from the torrent site. Only a few opened the screenshots from a phone that Jeremy's virus could get anything off. From what I heard after work, they only had access to four phones, and none of them belonged to Hex. They found Hex's account, but they rarely posted and did so from a VPN, so tracking them was impossible.

All they really knew was that Abbadon—the admin that approved them—may have been involved in the bounty, but most of their posts were either posting to ask about adding a new team or snarky posts at other members that their exploits were just child's play.

I had just gotten to work that morning and had my face buried in my hands, struggling with the French module. I didn't even notice Luke come in until he plopped right next to me. He asked me how I was doing in perfect French. Did this fucker let me break my brain struggling with this when he was fluent this entire time?

“How the fuck did you do that? I thought you moved to teaching after you learned Mandarin?”

“Elizabeth. Her husband is Somalian and his mother is from France. He speaks English, Somali, and French. He taught her Somali and French so she could impress his grandmother. She taught me both just in case I needed it for work. I lied and said I needed it for clients who visited.”

“And you waited until now to make that reveal? I love Bailey, but she's kind of mean as a teacher.”

“That’s how you know she’s invested. Let me know if she goes too far. I’ll have her do my trademarked squats.”

“No,” I moaned. “Something tells me she doesn’t like snitches. Plus, I *like* her and I’d never inflict your squats on someone I liked.”

“*Like* her, like her, or you haven’t worked here long enough to get mean? I love Bailey, but sometimes, she has it coming.”

I was already exploring my feelings with Luke, with Jeremy’s blessing. We’d been snuggling and had gone on a few dates, but it hadn’t progressed further because we were both worried about how Jeremy was going to take it. Like, he thought the idea of us all being together and getting to watch was cool in *theory*, but neither of us knew if he was going to lose it when he actually saw it.

I didn’t even know if Casper and Bailey were into me. They hadn’t shown any signs, but now I had to have the same conversation with Luke that I did with Jeremy.

“I think Bailey made me bisexual!”

Luke just laughed.

“Girl, you’ve always been bisexual. You just needed to figure that out. A few words of advice. Bailey is tough as hell because she has to be, but she’s super vulnerable about getting into relationships after what happened with her ex. She won’t open herself up like that unless you come on *really* strong, so she knows for sure you’re into her and she also knows she’s safe.

“Emily did both, but they both agreed they were better as friends. Bailey is my platonic snuggle buddy when shit hits the fan for both of us. Neither of us expects anything but comfort. Bailey will whip up amazing Cajun food she rarely cooks unless she’s in a mood and then we snuggle and binge watch something on TV.

“If you’re into Bailey, I approve. Just know that she’s complicated because of her ex. From what I can tell, she’s an amazing, supportive girlfriend once she decides to be in a

relationship with someone or she wouldn't still be friends with Emily. Emily is also *constantly* trying to find her a girlfriend, which annoys Bailey. Make sure that *you* are sure before you start anything with her. Bailey knows about twenty different ways to kill you and how to disappear when your body is found, but there's also a sensitive person in there when she opens up."

"I'd never intentionally hurt any of you."

"I know. Red expects you for lunch in about five minutes."

I made him promise to help me with French because I basically needed all the help I could get and he tended to be nicer than Bailey. I was plotting the entire walk down the hall to eat lunch with my team. Maybe his sister could help me, too. I was *really* bad at French.

Only Jeremy smiled when I walked in. Even Casper seemed to be pissed at something. When I asked Jeremy how he was doing, Red snapped at me.

"Mauve, when you're here, you need to call Byzantium by his code name and not his real name. You don't know who is listening, and they got a mole in here before. They could do it again. Do you really want to end up living apart because one of you got their name released, and the other didn't? The same goes for you, Byzantium. You can't keep calling Mauve by her real name when you're in the office."

We both pouted, and I had no idea how I was supposed to get used to calling him anything but his real name. I was having a hard time with Bailey, Luke, and Casper, too. I was introduced to them with their code names, but I found out their real names shortly after. We used our real names at home. I didn't know everyone's real name, so I didn't have a problem with them.

"We got fussed at, too," Crimson admitted. "It gets easier eventually."

It really didn't. It may even be harder than French. No one talked work stuff at lunch. We ate and decompressed. I was just trying to wrap my head around a new language and

training for my green belt exam, but these guys were deep in the hacker forum with some bad people.

When we got home, Casper told me they were the brains and Bailey and I were the brawn. We needed to stay in our lane until we were needed. And then my uptight crush had all the jokes because apparently, everyone knew how bad I was at French. All Jeremy would tell me at night was how much he hated everyone on that forum and that things were going super slow.

When I went back to training, Bailey trailed along with me.

“Think if I get the jump on Green and beat his ass, he won’t stick me on weights again?”

“That would be sexy as fuck,” I blurted out.

It really would. Bailey was teenie tiny. You’d *never* suspect she could hold her own in a fight with my big, sexy moose just by looking at her. It was sexy, and I *did not* mean to say that out loud. Bailey just cocked an eyebrow at me. My roommates knew Luke and I were exploring something, but we hadn’t had a chat about it yet.

“Is Green getting his ass beat a kink for you?”

Only when Bailey did it. My brain diarrhea wasn’t going to say that, though. Thank the goddess for small favors because I was just as surprised as everyone else that didn’t accidentally come out, too.

We were both surprised when we got to the training room. It would have been time for fight and knife training. Luke always sent Bailey to the infirmary to be checked out before she lifted weights, even though they kept saying she was clear. He gave her a shit-eating grin and asked her if she was ready to shoot today. He claimed he had a bet going with Casper if her aim had slipped while she was benched.

“Fuck you, Green,” she snapped.

I wasn’t shooting today. Our training area was in a sub-basement where no one would hear us. Luke took us to an area

where there was a booth for Bailey and another area off to the side where I could throw knives at a target.

“Your first test on knife throwing,” Luke said. “Can you hit the targets like you’ve been doing with gunshots in the background?”

“Give her ear protection, you dick. She’s going to be right next to me. Boss is going to beat your ass if you break her,” Bailey said.

He handed me rubber earplugs and told me that was all I got. Luke asked me to wait a minute and went to check on Bailey. I could see her from across the room and she looked hyper-focused. She would fire, reload, and go again. I could see the target and the body of it was about to fall off because she had hit the head so many times.

I *definitely* wanted to be Bailey when I grew up, but I didn’t think I liked guns. I’d never been around them before, but even with earplugs, they were *loud*. The only thing I wanted that loud was my music when I was doing my trademarked ass-shaking moves or body surfing at a concert.

Luke pulled another target out for her and came over to me. He told me to keep my back to Bailey and throw like she wasn’t there. I prepped my stance, but right when I let the knife go, Bailey’s gun went off behind me, and my knife sailed wildly past the target. I’d gotten pretty decent with knife throwing, but stick a gun in there and I *sucked*.

“That was bad, Mauve. If you’re in the middle of a gun fight, out of bullets, and need to go for your knife, you need to tune out the gunfire and be accurate.”

He wasn’t joking with me this time and was totally serious. I wasn’t angry with him and was actually glad to have Cadmium here with me. I needed to learn this way.

I cleared my mind of everything else, the way Bai had taught me when she was helping me with my Mandarin. I hardly heard the gunshots behind me at all every time I let the knife fly from my hand. If I didn’t know better, I was a little more accurate today.

Luke finally gave us a water break and led us to the sparring area. Bailey was cracking her knuckles like she couldn't wait to wail on Green, but he sent her off to weights again. Her eyes flashed, but she did what he asked. They had already gotten into a screaming fight once, and she was told to follow his training routine exactly as it was laid out.

When he finally dismissed us, Luke pulled me aside before I went to hop in the shower.

"I'm not *nearly* as good at French as Bailey is, but we decided we'll both help you."

"Why'd you sit there watching me struggle with French and never help me?"

"Because I'm a fight instructor, not a language teacher. Black was the language teacher before we switched to modules, and he was heavily involved in their creation. You're always doing things your own way and got a native speaker to help you with your Mandarin. You and Bailey have this *will she, won't she* thing going on that you and I don't. I can take you on dates to places Elizabeth and her husband go where you can practice, like you did with Mandarin. It's a win-win."

"You're my favorite moose."

"I know," he smirked.

TWO



Casper

I had all kinds of reservations about Bailey being Jordan's French tutor. She was the best at it out of all of us.

Sometimes when she got mad at Black, she'd switch to French and no one knew what she was saying but him and Boss if she was in the room. Black was a *master* of languages.

No one knew if Bailey was going to end up brawling with Jordan, stealing her from Jeremy, or whatever was going on with Luke, or corrupting our new agent. Because I definitely didn't know what was going on with Luke and Jordan or why Jeremy seemed okay with it, but I kind of got the feeling she liked Bailey that way, too.

And I was feeling left out because Jordan was insane in the most amazing way.

I *should* have been irritated that she wanted details on what we were doing. We were all on the same team, but we had different jobs. There was a *very* high chance she was going to

have to go out again before she was ready, and we needed her as trained as possible.

I thought hiring Jordan was going to be a mistake, but she picked things up exceptionally fast when she was focused. She put her own spin on her training, but she got it done. She was distracted this time, and I didn't know how to fix it. I didn't know if it was new crushes or her just really wanting to know what we were getting up to on that forum.

She finally cracked two days later at lunch. We avoided talking about team stuff at lunch. It wasn't any rule anyone set. We all just decided as a team to chat about everything but. We joked and got to know each other better. There were some things we might never know about each other, like our real names.

That shit took *trust*. Crimson and Tyrion were the king and queen of TMI when it came to their sex life. I wasn't a prude and was open to new kinks, but some of the shit they talked about just *had* to be found on the dark web. Like, we all knew about the fucked-up nipple thing with icing sugar and a spatula, but it might be awhile before anyone other than Jeremy and the people who vetted and hired them learned their real names. *I* knew because I was working with Jeremy to see who was involved at Affirmative, but we were the only two.

"I'm getting really tired of not being kept in the loop on anything that is going on. I thought we were supposed to be a team, working together. I know nothing about what the four of you are doing, nor what you have found out. Why should I be the only person who doesn't know what is going on?" Jordan yelled.

I wouldn't normally give a shit if someone under me was mad at me. In fact, I'd send them to Luke for squats, for screaming at me. This girl was a weakness of mine and maybe looping her in on some of the boring stuff would help her focus.

"Mauve!" I yelled when it didn't look like she was going to stop. "You're right. We're a team and everyone should be kept up to speed. What do you want to know?"

“Everything!”

“We don’t have everything yet. It’s slow and frustrating and that forum appears to be a big pissing contest of who can brag the most. We only got into phones and computers of a few people on the forum and they only seem to be a small piece of the puzzle. The ones we have access to, they’ll post on the forum bragging about some amazing code they just wrote, but when we go through their computer, it’s some half-baked code that isn’t finished and will never work when we download it and try to see how it works. We appear to only have access to braggarts with no substance. I have no idea how they got approved.”

“I want to find this Abbadon,” Crimson said. “As soon as they post what they have, they demand they prove it and use it on someone. They want results posted or the poster to stop talking out of their ass. The thread generally ends there. I think the really talented people on the forum don’t post until they have something great and we managed to join at a dead point in the forum.”

“Have you found any information on Abaddon and the other admins?”

“We have the names of two other admins. Amon and Asmodeus. All names related to hell. We just don’t know if they are on the team or they are just the creators of the forum.”

“Do you have anything good?” she asked.

We were getting there. I would have brought this to Boss and then the entire team when we had a full picture, but we weren’t quite there.

“Yes. Abaddon has posted there will be a new bounty with something he cooked up with Ashley. Ashley was promising something that would give them unfettered access to a highly monitored database insurance adjusters use that would make stealing identities easier. There’s also some kind of exploit that is going to route any insurance payments to anyone on the forum who wants it and can scrub the check to cash it.”

“When will it be posted?”

“It should be waiting for us after lunch.”

“And am I going to be told about it?”

“Sorry, Mauve. I thought you wanted to focus on training and not the computer stuff we’re doing. I hear you are struggling with French, and I didn’t want to distract you.”

“Fuck you, Red. You don’t know what’s best for me. Green is helping me with French, too. If Cadmium and I have to go out again, we need to know about everything. I still haven’t forgotten you sent me in blind, not knowing about Clarence’s foot fetish.”

I’d *never* forgive myself for that. Clarence would have been a lot to manage for a senior agent. The *only* agent I knew who would have masterfully handled him and laughed about it later was Bailey, and sometimes I wondered if Bailey’s brain was wired a little wrong. And I still thought that after hearing about Crimson and Tyrian’s nipple thing.

“I don’t know how many more ways you want me to say I’m sorry for not telling you about his porn history. I’ll call you in when we find out about the bounty, but it’s going to pull you away from your training.”

“Then pull me away from training. You never know if this bounty might involve me.”

“I don’t think it will, but I’ll be better about keeping you in the loop. Just focus on training for now.”

I really didn’t. I was *hoping* we could get enough for a bust and a lead on Hex without even leaving this office. I cared about everyone on my team, but Jordan was becoming special to me and Bailey was like my psycho little sister, who set my stuff on fire when we were kids.

Jordan, at least, knew she wasn’t ready to go out. We all knew that and she wasn’t *supposed* to work Clarence. I was. No one knew he was going to be more into pretty blondes who used to model than a massive ginger who was willing to give him a lot of money. I was a guy. I liked being a guy. We could get really stupid sometimes.

She *might* have been interested in going out if Clarence's cat wasn't territorial and attacked her when she was stealing his data if everything with Clarence hadn't gone down after. That cat was now living with us and was actually very sweet. He had already bonded with my cat. Our building had insane security, but if anyone got past it, Darth Vader would fuck anyone up if they broke in. Seriously, Jordan had to have her wound drained.

Bailey was another story. Jordan and Bailey were a lot alike. You couldn't cage either of them. They were both free spirits. Bailey had tasted the freedom that came with traveling the world, working marks that weren't like Clarence and she wanted that again at the expense of her health. We weren't going to risk her, and Luke was taking the brunt of it in training.

Even though Jordan *said* she didn't want to go out again and I believed her, there was a part of her that secretly did. She might not have even admitted it to herself yet. I'd gotten to know her enough that all this computer stuff didn't interest her. Jordan was proud of Jeremy when he pulled something off, but she got that look on her face like she'd checked out and went to whatever Jordan thought about when she was bored as we started talking technical stuff.

There was a part of Jordan who wanted to work the people on this forum and help bring them down. And these people were *much* worse than a kinky botanist.

THREE



Jordan

I stomped out with Bailey at my heels. She was proud of me for yelling at Red and kept trying to tell me so. I didn't want to hear it. Why was that so hard? Last time I checked, I was still a part of this time.

“Look, I'm totally with you,” Bailey said. “Red had it coming. We can and do bring people down from behind a computer, but it's usually people who are completely hopeless with security that keep incriminating shit on their hard drives. We don't *need* to work them in person. That's very rare, and it's not going to be these guys. It's probably going to involve catfishing some guy who smells like swamp ass because he doesn't want to leave that forum for twenty minutes to take a shower. I don't know *how* we are going to do it, but it may involve us. That computer shit bores me to tears, but he *needs* to keep us in the loop about developments.”

I didn't want to be anywhere near someone who smelled like swamp ass. Was swamp ass better or worse than Clarence's cologne? Had I even smelled it before? All the guys I'd been with washed their assholes. I might have been

dumb enough to follow a talentless bass player to New York, fist-fight a few groupies over him, and then realize I could do better, but he was obsessive about his showers. Did I even want to see what swamp ass smelled like for science?

Luke took one look at us and sprung into action.

“I don’t even need to know. Take it out on the target and get over it.”

He left me alone and went to work with Bailey. She was spot-on with her targets, like every time since she joined me I was getting *much* better at hitting the target with Bailey’s gun going off. It was still *loud*. I asked Luke about bringing my earbuds and playing music to block it out, and he told me absolutely not.

Luke did something different this time. Bailey didn’t shoot as much before he stopped her and had her come over and help me with my knife throwing. Bailey was much shorter than I was, since I was quite tall and all legs, but she had a lot of tips Luke didn’t since he wasn’t built like a woman. She would talk, demonstrate, then stand off to the side and watch with her arms crossed.

Bailey was actually a wonderful teacher, even if she was blunt. I always managed to pick something up, and even Jeremy mentioned it when she was training him. The whole French thing was just me not getting it.

When Luke called us onto the mats, Bailey asked when the endless weight training was going to stop and shot him daggers when he told her it would stop when she looked like she could handle taking a punch. Honestly? I didn’t know how much more ripped he wanted Bailey to be before he let her start fighting again. She hadn’t exactly gotten soft when she was injured and in physical therapy. She’d done a ton a strength training in the pool while she was healing.

She stomped off to weights, and Luke was teaching me to block different kicks and punches. I was getting more frustrated the more kicks and punches I blocked that Red hadn’t come and gotten us to let me know what the bounty was. He promised!

Green got frustrated with me and told me to take a break and go take out my frustrations on the punching bag. I wailed on that bag, punching and kicking it for what seemed like ages, but my temper was rising and it didn't make me feel any better. Blue stuck their head in right when one of my knuckles cracked open and started to bleed.

“Green, wrap that for her. Mauve, you and Cadmium are needed with the rest of the team. Don't be mad at Red. I heard your outburst at lunch. He needed to talk to higher ups after the bounty was posted. This had to go up to Boss.”

“Why?”

“Get your hand wrapped so you're not bleeding on the table. You'll be filled in when you get there.”

I sat there tapping my toe while Luke wrapped my hand and fussed at me for not stopping before it bled. I was too angry at Casper to react to Luke when he told me I would be benched for fight training until my hand healed. Bailey had already left, and I was the last one in the room. I was surprised Blue and Black were there and the intercom was back on the table. I didn't know if Boss was also making an appearance.

The intercom buzzed, and I realized Boss was there with us. “I don't want to send a brand new agent and an agent who has only just been cleared back into the fire. Mauve's insurance background will pay off for this. Cadmium won't have to fight for this mission, but you're going to have to keep your tongue in check or it's going to cause problems. Black, fill them in.”

The intercom went silent. Like the last time Boss joined us this way, Black seemed to want to make sure Boss was totally gone before he started talking again.

“We all know Affirmative wrote programs for insurance companies. They wrote everything from underwriting to claims. We didn't know this, and we found no record of it on any of Ashley's devices, but Ashley was working on something. Ashley was working on a claims software for nonstandard insurance companies. There appears to be a lot of fraud going on with those companies. Anything from policy

fraud to staged accidents. What they worked up together, it's totally evil. Insurance companies use a database to track how many accidents a person and a vehicle have been in. Some companies use it and some don't, but it's a great asset for pinpointing these staged accident rings.

“Abaddon had Ashley write what looks like a harmless insurance program to pitch to clients. It does a lot to be honest. These hackers could commit insurance fraud by deleting data from the claims database to hide their previous activity.

“There's also another database that is heavily monitored that shows enough information if you're trying to find contact information on someone that they could use it to assume their identity. It's ripe for credit card fraud. There's an exploit in the program that lets someone piggy back when an adjuster accesses it and download the information and do searches under their credentials like it was them. The hackers get that information while the adjuster would probably get fired if caught.

“They didn't stop there. Once they are in, they can change addresses for people. After the adjusters get that information after they've spoken to them, they have no reason to think it's been changed. Not all of them confirm the address when they call to say they are cutting a check. The check gets routed to someone who can scrub it and deposited to an account the admins own. It's supposed to be additional funding for bounties the admins post. Ashley didn't completely finish the program, but it's mostly working. The bounty is to work out the kinks.”

“How does my insurance background pay off in this? I just took the information over the phone and it got assigned to an adjuster. There's all kinds of training and a state exam to become an adjuster. From what I've heard, the adjuster's exam is very difficult. I have zero experience being an adjuster and don't know the first thing about it.”

“You will now. An attorney who specializes in insurance law is going to come tomorrow morning and talk to you and Cadmium. He will think he's only talking to you because Stantech is thinking of writing insurance programs now that

Affirmative is out of the picture. Pick his brain for anything that may help you because the both of you are going undercover with the company Abaddon has told us someone implementing this new program in two weeks, despite everything that went down with Affirmative publicly. There's a small company in Louisiana who is using Ashley's program, despite everything."

"And how are you supposed to get around the Department of Insurance?" I demanded. "I wasn't an adjuster, but I heard everyone in the background talking about them like they were this big, green boogeyman."

I looked it up once because everyone was so worried about them. The Department of Insurance was a big fucking deal. They didn't just fine the company. They'd fine adjusters and agents personally. They could take your license away and end your career. I didn't want to fuck with them.

"Mauve, settle down. We've done this before. The Department of Insurance will know there are two agents going in because of Ashley, but they won't know who the two of you are. And you're probably not going to be happy with this next news either. You're going to have to travel, both you and Cadmium."

Cadmium was sitting there shaking her head like this was awesome, but how was I supposed to train and do this mission like I had been doing before? If this ended up being a long mission, how long was I going to be away from Jeremy? Black saw the look on my face.

"I know we're throwing you into the fire early again. Try to keep up with training while you're there. Byzantium will be with you with his laptop, seeing what's going on with the forum. We've created fake identities with adjuster's licenses for you and Cadmium and we've gotten Byzantium in the same company as IT support. Red is going to run point and we are sending Green too since this involves Cadmium's old stomping grounds and we don't know about her ex."

Now even Jeremy was getting excited. I still wasn't and didn't think I was ready. Jeremy asked where we were going

and Black told me something I didn't know, despite all my years working in insurance. He told me Louisiana was a high insurance fraud state, so we were going there. I still wasn't biting, even when he told us that we would be working in an office in New Orleans. I had always wanted to go there, but not like this.

“How is this supposed to help us catch Hex? It's not giving us any information if we stop them.”

“No, but we can't let them do this. Think about it. Now that there is a bounty up, the forum should be more active. If we can manage to find a way to convince the Department of Insurance to tell USA Agency to only let a few of you use that program to test it, then Red has a plan for The Four Horsemen to be the ones that crack the bounty. He thinks we'll find out more about Abaddon and Hex.”

“I remember my old office had a fraud department. They called them SIU. How are we going to get them involved? Are we just busting the hackers or are we stopping insurance fraud, too?”

Black grinned at me. “You're going in as an adjuster, Cadmium is going in as SIU, and Byzantium is going in as IT. We have all our bases covered. We know more about insurance than you think, Mauve.”

Cadmium saw me pouting. “Come on, Mauve. New Orleans. Think about all the food, drinks, House of Blues. I've lived there before. You're going to love it.”

“What about your ex?”

“Has moved back to Alexandria. As far as I know, he'll be several hours away.”

“Why don't you do shit like drink sweet tea and say *bless your heart* more?”

“Bless your heart, Mauve, that doesn't mean what you think it means in the South.”

“Mauve, if you're done offending Cadmium, everyone can go. Be here ready to work in the morning. We need to start moving things into place. USA Agency is going to start using

that program in two weeks and Abaddon will start posting more details on the forum. We need to learn everything we can so that we're prepared.

FOUR



Jordan

My roommates couldn't stop talking about the mission in New Orleans. Even Bailey was excited about it and I was worried about what was going to happen with her ex there. Luke was prepped and ready to beat his ass. I think we were all prepared to defend Bailey's honor. I could probably get some blows in. Casper had a few black belts, but between Casper and Jeremy, they could ruin his life without getting up from their computer.

Despite Casper telling me I had been kept out of the loop so long so that I could focus on my training, everything I was working on had totally come to a halt. My days were spent with Bailey in her office pouring over USA Agencies' policy and Louisiana insurance law.

I needed someone in here to explain *several* Louisiana rules of the road to me. Like, if you were on a two-lane road trying to make a left-hand turn and someone decided to pass on the left when you were clearly sitting there with your blinker on, you were at fault if you turned into them. That was

fucked up. There was also some questionable passing on the shoulder laws.

I never got my license. I was perpetually grounded in high school, so withholding teaching me to drive was punishment. I asked my ex to teach me numerous times, but I'm pretty sure he never did as a means to control me. If I couldn't drive, I couldn't go anywhere unless my parents approved and drove me or he was with me. I didn't need a car in New York. Parking was a nightmare and walking or taking the subway was easier.

We were all back at the apartment and I was still ranting about Louisiana passing laws.

“Jordan!” Bailey yelled. “Half the politicians are corrupt and if you're related to one, you can get away with anything. See my ex. A lot of those baffling traffic laws aren't about making sense. It's about collecting money from the tickets they give. You're going to lose your mind when you get there and not properly enjoy it if you obsess about everything that doesn't make sense.”

“There's more?”

“They don't even remotely water down the drinks in New Orleans. It's probably strong enough to get your mutant ass drunk. If something doesn't make sense, just drink until it does like my stupid uncle.”

I walked over to the counter and leaned down a bit. Darth Vader climbed up on my shoulder and draped himself behind my neck. I walked over to Bailey and sat back down.

“That's so cute it makes me want to barf,” she said, scratching his head. “And I don't have to worry about him getting hair on my laundry when I don't put it away right off like Casper's cat. She does it on purpose. “

“It's nice and warm.”

“Between you, Jeremy, and Casper, this place is infested with cat beds. We have that massive bean bag chair Luke bought when we all got drunk trying to cheer Casper up after his girlfriend left that he never uses. We also have this massive

sectional they are allowed on. She has options. I love that cat, but she does it because it bothers me.”

“At least she’s not pissing on it.”

“You shut your mouth and don’t give her any ideas.”

After my little rant, no one brought up work at all aside from Casper asking Bailey what she planned on showing us in New Orleans. She snapped to attention and started talking about all the places she would take us to eat and everything she would show us. I managed to forget for a little while what they expected me to do and just enjoyed what I might see while I was down there.

Jeremy and I snuggled into bed when everyone decided they were tired.

“Do you think Bailey will be safe in New Orleans?”

“Boss is a mama bear and not just with us. Many people don’t like her because she doesn’t pay herself much more than her employees. The company is wildly successful and the profits go directly into new products or she invests it in her workers. People hate it because they don’t want *their* workers to know all that is possible if they take a pay cut.

“I’m guessing Boss figured out Bailey’s real identity when she hired her and never stored that information anywhere out of respect for Bailey. She probably knows exactly who Bailey’s ex is, too, and is just waiting for Bailey to say she’s ready before she takes him down.

“Boss says she’s sending Luke just in case, but I’m willing to bet if he shows his face, she has an arsenal of evidence somewhere to make sure Daddy can’t keep him out of jail this time.”

“You’re probably right. Boss has this way of being insanely terrifying and my hero at the same time.”

“Enough about Boss,” he said, nibbling on my neck. “I keep thinking about watching you with Luke, but you’re both holding back. I hope that’s not because of me.”

I moaned when he bit my ear.

“Well, yeah. You don’t have any fight training and Luke is a very firm moose if you got mad about it. I just really don’t want to hurt you.”

“Oh, you won’t. Every time he takes you out or you snuggle on the couch, I keep thinking it’s the night I get to see those massive hands all over your body. I can’t stop thinking about it. I’d *never* pressure you, but you have the patience of a flea, and the *only* reason you haven’t climbed that yet could only be me.”

“That, and I’m nervous. He’s a very big moose. What if he has a big moose ding dong? Like, yours is huge with shinies. I have narrow hips, Jeremy. How can I make all that porn I watched come to life if you two are going to kill me with your weiners?”

“I love you, Jordan, but never call my dick a weiner ever again.”

“Can I call it Love Shaft if I change the words to that B52’s song?”

“Jordan,” Jeremy growled.

“Quit complaining about what I call it and put Girth Vader to good use.”

“Oh, you are going to pay for that,” he said, flipping me on my stomach.

Jeremy wasn’t massive and Luke hadn’t gotten his hands on him, but he was still pretty strong considering he spent a lot of time behind a computer. He yanked my pants off and *spanked* me. I let out a yelp because I never expected that from Jeremy. My parents never even spanked me growing up. I *loved* it when Jeremy did it.

“Do that again,” I moaned.

Jeremy straddled my waist and got right up in my ear.

“You don’t get to call it a weiner and Girth Vader and get to call the shots tonight,” he growled in my ear before he bit it.

Joke was on Jeremy. I had no idea what he had planned, and I didn’t really care. I was completely into this, whatever it

was. He could do whatever his kinky little heart wanted. And Girth Vader was a *good* name if he wasn't going to let me change the lyrics to an eighties song.

“I'm going to fuck your ass, Jordan.”

“Not a punishment.”

“I'm going to bring one of your porn videos to life by fucking you with one of your toys, too.”

I broke into goosebumps. I'd *always* wanted to try that, but I had enough trouble flirting with one guy, much less two. I'm sure there were apps for that, but I felt weird ordering double penetration off the internet like pizza. Plus, I wasn't trying to get murdered or have an awkward trip to my gynecologist for antibiotics. That shit *never* happened with pizza.

“Again, not a punishment.”

“Call it an incentive to get your freak on with the moose.”

I was *always* more likely to get over my shit and do something if there were incentives or someone did it first for science. Jeremy purchased a lot more toys than I initially had since we moved in. We had a whole dildo arsenal and Jeremy *did not* like it when I tried to sword fight with them.

Jeremy prepared me like a fucking butt master before flipping me back over on my back. I moaned as he eased his way inside me. He *always* took his time, so it wasn't uncomfortable and it was just as perfect as every time we had sex.

Jeremy always checked in on me once I had all of him. Girth Vader was not a small Jedi. It wasn't stomping around trying to conquer the galaxy because it was compensating for something. All he had to do was take his pants off and the rebels would surrender, it was that impressive.

“I'm fine. You always take care of me.”

My boyfriend was a geek, and he wanted everything he purchased peer-reviewed. Jeremy never bought sex toys unless he cross-referenced reviews across several sites. I wasn't even judging because he was using them on me.

He bought this pretty amazing rabbit vibrator that made my eyes go back in my head and my toes curl. He chose that one for this experiment and I couldn't have picked a better one myself.

Jeremy slid the rabbit in and situated the ears on my clit. He turned it on right when he started fucking my ass. I wasn't stupid. I knew porn was totally unrealistic and set stupid expectations about not having to pay the plumber if a pipe busted, your landlord was a cheap ass, and you were dead-ass broke, but this? This was pretty fantastic.

I was definitely trying this again with a certain moose. Jeremy usually took his time, but his face seemed strained.

“Fuck! I can *feel* the rabbit and you're so fucking tight like this.”

“Oh, shit. I'm going to come.”

“Please do because I'm trying not to.”

Jeremy shifted the rabbit slightly. It hit my G spot just right and situated on my clit perfectly. Oh, fuck. I'd had some insane orgasms with Jeremy, but this was fucking intense. I didn't think the aftershocks were ever going to stop. When they did, I was a total noodle.

Jeremy got up to clean us both off and got behind me so we could spoon. Whatever was going to go down between Jeremy, Luke, and me could be thought about later. Jeremy broke my brain, too, it was that good.

I was going to sleep like a baby tonight.

FIVE



Bailey

There was a lot I hated about Louisiana. When I was still living there, I couldn't wait to get out and live in a different state. Now that I couldn't really go back, I was homesick as fuck. I'd lived in several states in the US and had the opportunity to travel the world working for Boss. I saw a lot of beautiful things. I took in many different cultures. Maybe I romanticized it now that the option was gone, but I compared all of it to New Orleans.

My ex was a protected species in more ways than one. Who you knew was important in the South. You could get away with anything if the good old boys were covering it up. Unless someone with equal power made a stink about it and the local news picked it up so public outrage became too big to ignore, you'd never pay for a single thing you did.

The Matherne family was off-limits. They had a long history in politics. If they weren't politicians, they were cops. I

filed my report when Carl was still at police academy. I had his DNA in more ways than one and they still opted not to look into it. The cops knew damned well I was missing because several people reported it and they were trying to find me. They just didn't believe me when I said who took me.

Carl was a cop now, and he *still* hadn't given up on finding me. He was just using police resources now. If he hit a snag, he'd harass my parents or my sister. They had restraining orders he violated all the time. I *missed* my family. They had no idea where I was or what name I was using, but we found ways to talk that he couldn't trace. My family reported him all the time, but he'd never so much as gotten suspended. So far, no one seemed to want to look into exposing him, so he was getting away with it.

Going back was a tremendous risk, but I was tired of him dictating my life. And I wasn't a college student anymore. I had resources. I had fucking *Boss*. She never probed, but she had this mama bear thing going on that I opened up a good bit. I never told her my real name or his because I didn't want him doing anything stupid with her livelihood. She never asked either, but Boss told me all I needed to do was give her the word and he would pay.

I believed her. Boss had a *long* history of bringing down shitty men who thought they could get away with anything.

I was ready to go home. You could leave New Orleans, but it would stay in your blood. My roommates were my family. They knew things about me I'd kept hidden for years now. I wanted them to know everything. For them to *really* understand me, they were going to have to experience New Orleans. I was going to show them everything.

It wasn't weird for Black to find an expert, lie to them, and bring them in to chat with us to prepare us if we were going undercover. We did the girlfriend/boyfriend thing sometimes, but we always had a cover. We needed to sound like experts on a ton of shit.

This was going to be one of *those* assignments. We didn't just need to sound like experts. We needed to be as close to

one as possible. This was one of those special ones where I wasn't going to have to pretend to be interested in a straight man. I got to use my brain.

I don't think this attorney knew what to do with Jordan or me. He specialized in insurance law and looked old enough to be my great-grandfather. Lee Diaz had probably seen some shit in court because he just sat there when Jordan started ranting about that crazy passing law she didn't like.

One of the things I adored about Jordan was her passion. She was literally taking this passing law personally, and she didn't even know how to drive. I knew how to deal with Louisiana drivers. If I could avoid having everyone else drive while we were there, that's what I'd be doing. It wasn't just the aggressive drivers. There were *massive* potholes that would damage the rental car.

The insurance company we'd be working at was non-standard insurance. They specifically wrote policies for the people no one else would insure. From what Lee told us, some of their clients weren't supposed to be driving from a legal standpoint but were going to do it anyway, so *someone* needed to give them insurance in case they got into an accident.

Their policies were stricter. Jordan had questioned if it was legal to deny their own insured's collision coverage if their license was suspended or they got a DUI. It was a good question. I had a feeling it was or it wouldn't be in the policy. I knew if that came across our desk, we were going to get yelled at.

Neither of us knew that if you were fleeing from a police officer and crashed into several cars and even a house, none of the damages you caused got paid for because you were committing a crime. When I asked who was supposed to pay for that then, he just shrugged and said those people had to use their own coverage and they might dock that person's pay or suspend their license until they paid the damages back.

I didn't drive anymore. I drove a nondescript beater car that was ugly as sin but ran like a dream when Boss's team arrested me. That ugly-ass car cost a lot of money when my

job options were limited, and you didn't want anyone looking too hard at your credit when it was all a fabrication. It wasn't even *my* fault we all got busted. The only reason I joined that group was extra money. At the time, I thought it was the worst thing that ever happened to me, but then Boss adopted me and gave me a better option.

“You'd be surprised by how many circumstances you might need your own coverage. It's good to have. In red-light disputes, if you say the other person ran the red light and they say the same about you and there are no witnesses, it generally ends with both parties being denied and having to use their own coverage. Liability laws vary depending on what state you're in. In Louisiana, someone can run a red light or a stop sign and you can still be found partially at fault if you should have been able to see them and avoid the accident. Parking lot accidents where both people are backing up at the same time, depending on who hit who where, sometimes ends with a 50/50 liability decision where both of you are fifty percent at fault and have to pay for the fifty percent of your damages that the other insurance company doesn't pay.”

“That doesn't sound right at all!” Jordan said.

“It's called comparative negligence. Be grateful you aren't going to Alabama. They have a pure contributory negligence law. If the adjuster even finds you one percent negligent, the entire claim gets denied.”

“Who comes up with this twisted shit, anyway?” I blurted out. Maybe I was siding with Jordan now.

“Not all places are like here with so much access to public transportation. You'll start understanding this all better when you start talking to people taking claims. You'll talk to people who are upset, angry, going through a range of emotions after an accident. Sometimes, they want to take it out on you, even though your hands are tied due to law or policy. You can't let it affect you like this conversation has.”

Jordan and I were going to have a whole-ass time with this. At least she had practice with her previous insurance job. Everything was a big deal to Jordan, and I loved that about

her. You could slap peanut butter on bread and hand it to her because you were making yourself a sandwich, and it was the same as cooking a five-course meal and serving it to her at a candlelit table with rose petals.

I just wasn't nice and didn't like people yelling at me.

"How often do staged accidents and fraud really occur?" I asked.

"More often than you would think. The more you do it, the more your Spidey sense will start to tingle when things aren't adding up."

Was I surrounded by comic-book geeks? Casper had an entire collection.

"Give me examples of things that don't make sense."

"Oh, there are several ways. A minor, rear-end accident late at night where both cars have way more people in them than there are seats. They are all claiming serious injuries and there's hardly any damages to both cars. A single car with way more people in it than there should be swerves to miss an animal and hits a street sign. Everyone in the car is seriously injured and there's only a scrape on the car. SUI will get involved and start asking for cell phone records, checking connections between everyone involved in the accident, and go to the scene to take photos of skid marks or the sign if necessary. Social media has made things easier. People post a lot of things publicly that are practically a confession."

"How do you know the ins and outs if you're an attorney?" Jordan asked.

"I wanted my daughter to go into law. She studied insurance law, passed the bar, then ended up joining the police force. After she hurt her shoulder after making detective, I wanted her to join my firm. She always wanted to do her own thing. She's doing quite well as the top SIU investigator at a major insurance firm. She comes for dinner every Saturday night and sometimes tells quite the stories.

"Even if the job involves a lot of telling people no and getting yelled at, I promise you, some of the stories you will

hear will be more creative than any book or movie you'd experience. Sometimes, the wildest stories end up being true and sometimes, they are a complete fabrication."

"I don't think I can do this," Jordan said, rubbing her forehead. "This sounds worse than French."

"Hey," Cadmium said, finally speaking. "I'll be there helping. For a hot minute, I was getting into a ton of accidents until I *wasn't*. You know what I mean."

"Were you at fault for all those accidents?" Lee asked.

"New Orleans traffic is a special kind of Hell. It's probably better that I'm taking the subway and cabs now. Fewer headaches and screaming on my part and I don't have to deal with insurance that keeps getting raised every time I get into an accident," I said.

I wasn't smashing into anyone on purpose. Traffic in New Orleans was total shit. Some people were resigned to their fate and others got malignant about it. You had to be aggressive to avoid the aggressive drivers. I was usually taking corrective measures because someone was driving like a spooze when it happened.

Lee looked a little horrified, but most of those accidents weren't even my fault. Traffic was usually at a standstill and I had witnesses. Didn't stop those bitches from jacking up my rates every time it happened.

"You don't know how people drive where I grew up. I'm actually from Louisiana and they drive more aggressively there than they do here."

Lee cleared his throat and changed the subject. "Have you studied the No Pay, No Play law in Louisiana? Several other states have adopted it, but it's going to be a major part of your claims investigation. I looked into it."

"I read it," I said. "It doesn't matter if someone was drunker than Cooter Brown, rear-ended you, then assaulted the cop at the scene. If you let your insurance lapse and it wasn't active at the time of the accident, you're fucked."

“I wouldn’t have phrased it like that, but yes. If you don’t have a policy in place at the time of the accident, you’re denied policy limits, even if you’re not at fault.”

Between Jordan and me, Lee was going to need a stiff drink and a bubble bath when he got home. I was a lot. Most of the time, I could rein it in for work, but I was losing it. I blamed Jordan. We were going to feed off each other when we got to Louisiana and Daddy Casper wasn’t going to know what to do with us.

“How is that a major part of the investigation? Just seems like it can be easily verified,” Jordan said.

“Actually, it depends. My daughter talked to a friend who works in a No Pay, No Play state. Some companies have a website up where you can just plug in a policy number and date and see the information. Others, there’s a number you call to verify. Some companies write policies in No Pay, No Play states and have no system set up to verify that the policy is active. And I don’t think either of you is considering excluded drivers. You have to verify that policy is active on that date, at that time, and the driver is covered. If the driver is listed as an excluded driver, it’s denied. Some companies, if the driver isn’t on the policy, can’t give you an answer until they’ve done an investigation as to if they driver should be covered or excluded. When you actually start working, if someone is driving your insured’s vehicle and they are not on the policy, that’s an entirely separate investigation on your end.”

“I’m going to suck at this and get fired on my first day,” Jordan moaned.

“Buck up,” I grinned. “Would you rather be in an office learning something new or would you rather be with Clarence again?”

Lee had no idea what we were talking about and was shooting us both bewildered looks. Jordan could do this. She could handle French, too. Jordan managed to do whatever she decided she *wanted* to do. The reason I wanted to wring her neck was that Black told her if she was fluent in Spanish,

she'd have no problem with French. She psyched herself out and decided they were so similar, it was too confusing.

Lee excused himself and said he had a meeting, but told us both he would come back at any time to answer our questions.

“Want to go spar? You look like you're about to blow a gasket,” I said.

I might not be able to comfort Jordan in the way *I* personally would have. She wasn't my girlfriend, even if I really liked her. Luke's methods worked, and she seemed to have some kind of throuple thing going on. Luke's love language worked on all of us, though Casper never really took him up on platonic snuggles. Hitting things was cathartic.

“You know he's not going to let you.”

“I'm not the one pissed off right now. I do what's needed. You stew on it and freak out. Go punch something.”

Hitting things would make *me* feel better, too. I loved Luke, but I had half a mind to kick him in the junk again. Everyone had cleared me and I didn't go soft when I was injured. Yeah, I was stuck in bed for a *long* time, but I busted my ass in physical therapy. Even when they had me back at a desk, I was doing strength exercises. I could spar right now.

Before we could even get to the training area, Blue came and got us and said we were needed. I didn't know if I needed to hit something or if I really wanted to know what news they would give us. I didn't need to know all the boring technical details like Jordan did. This wouldn't be a dangerous mission, but we needed as much information as possible before we went out.

When I joined the rest of my team, I was finally not looking at a bunch of crabby people hunched over either food or computer screens. Casper was actually smiling for once.

“The forum has started to blow up now that the bounty has been posted. Abbadon is egging people on and a bunch of people who have been quiet are starting to post. A lot of their bounties are just about bragging rights or whatever you can steal from the target. This one has high potential for long-term

money for the team who cracks it, either through those checks or credit card fraud from identity theft.”

“Any news on Hex?”

“Hex is a ghost. It was like they did that one huge bounty and then disappeared. Many people don’t believe we exist. Abbaddon is into a lot of conspiracy theories, but they are a lot wilder than us.”

“Aren’t the threads organized?” Jordan asked. “Wouldn’t there be a thread just for bounties where you could find what it was called, then search for it.”

“We tried that. We can’t find it. We don’t know if they deleted it.”

“They probably archived it!” Jeremy yelled, slapping his forehead. “You know how old seasons on the *Dr. Who* forum gets archived? I’ll bet it’s there.”

“Great work, Byzantium. Everyone go home and get some rest. We’ll look again tomorrow. It’s going to be difficult with our team split up, but we’ll manage. We have a rental house. Luke and I will be staying there while the three of you go to the office. I’ll be communicating with Crimson and Tyrian via chat and the rest of you with ear pieces and mics. You’ll all have some kind of camera to attach to your clothes. You won’t be in any danger at the office, but I might see something on the screen you miss and we need to keep an eye out for Cadmium’s ex.”

For a very long time, I just wanted to forget him and everything he did to me because making him pay seemed impossible. I’d been around all these people enough to know that nothing was impossible.

Bring it on, Carl. If he did find me again, he wasn’t going to find the same woman he’d kidnapped.

SIX



Jordan

Before I knew it, I was packed up and on a plane. Unlike the times I flew before, they had booked us business class. I had way more room than I needed and Bailey and Jeremy let me have the window. Bailey wanted the aisle and Jeremy didn't care where he sat as long as it was by me. Casper and Luke were across the aisle. I drank a whiskey sour right after takeoff and fell asleep because it was an early flight.

When I woke up, Jeremy was focusing on his laptop and Bailey was snarking with Luke about fight training. I guess Jeremy paid for Wi-Fi. I got my reader out and started reading the kinky book Luke recommended. Luke had the hook up with book smut that unlocked new kinks. Jeremy got my attention and told me he thought he found something. Bailey, Luke, and Casper all snapped to attention, but we couldn't all crowd around his laptop. Business class was roomy, but it wasn't *that* big.

"I think found the bounty in the archives. It was posted on Halloween two years ago. Abaddon didn't post it. Someone named Baba Yaga posted it. That's a witch from Russian

folklore. They don't outright say it's hacking secret agencies, but this has to be it. They offered a shit-ton of money and inside help.

“She wanted the proposals sent to her off the forum so they couldn't be tracked. She posted a number to message her on and everything was done there. I'm guessing she got rid of the number and destroyed the phone. I would if I pissed off that many people with black belts.”

“We've been operating under the assumption that Hex was this evil genius that turned agents, but what if it was Baba Yaga? Hex just wrote the exploit they were paid to write,” Bailey said.

I was guessing Blue bought out business class in case we needed to talk work stuff when the crew wasn't in the aisle. We all had a vested interest in figuring this out. I wanted answers for Luke because he missed his other sister. This person did it once. It would be harder to do it a second time, but they could try. They'd probably get dangerous on their second attempt.

“Bench this until I can talk to Boss, but I'm working on a theory,” Casper said.

I wasn't mad at him for keeping secrets or not bouncing ideas off of us. Boss was the best person for that. We all knew better. We all went back to what we were doing until the plane landed.

I had no idea we would be staying in a house instead of an apartment. Probably because I wasn't paying attention like I should when Casper was talking about travel arrangements. We picked up our baggage and went to get our rental cars. I had no idea why, but we only got one and Bailey wouldn't let anyone else drive. She may not have kept her car, but apparently, she kept her license up to date and work had gotten her an insurance policy.

I sat in the front seat gripping the armrest and was questioning why no one who didn't drive like a crazy person didn't get a rental for me to ride in. Everyone in Louisiana seemed to take it personally if you needed to merge and either

drove way too slow or way too fast. Bailey gunned it and raced in front of the huge pickup that was looking right at her and refusing to give her space to merge. She laughed, gave him the finger, then cut across two more lanes into the left lane.

“Bailey, you know we’re here to work accidents, not get into one, right?” Casper asked. I was pretty sure he was getting carsick back there.

She just laughed at Casper and told us to watch how everyone else was driving. I thought New York drivers drove like maniacs, but Louisiana really had them beat. I had a feeling when I got to work Monday, I may be talking to some of the people on the road with us. Traffic finally died down when we got to narrow roads, but Bailey was swerving like a drunk person. I asked if she had too much to drink on the plane and if she really wanted a DUI our first day here.

She laughed at me again. “The sober people swerve all over the road avoiding the potholes and the drunk people drive a straight line right over them. Oh, shit. Hold on, we’re going to have to go right through this one.”

She wasn’t joking about the potholes. I thought we were going to end up ass end of the car up in a pothole, but we bounced back up and started driving. If I hadn’t been buckled in my seat, I probably would have knocked my head on the roof.

“Shit, Bailey, why don’t they fix those?” Luke yelled.

“Louisiana politicians are too busy paying women to put diapers on them.”

“What?” Luke demanded

“Don’t ask.”

She finally pulled up to the curb of a charming shotgun house I fell in love with right away. As soon as we walked in, I saw hardwood floors leading all the way to the back. There were enough bedrooms for all of us if Jeremy and I took the room with the queen bed, Casper and Luke took the one with two twins, and Bailey got the smaller room to herself.

“There’s not a lot of room to fight train inside and the backyard is tiny. We should probably switch to stretching. We can focus on your French. I can also help Robert with his Russian,” Bailey said.

“Robert?”

“Fuck, did you pay attention at all before we left? He’s Robert, you’re Amber, and I’m Jody. You have to call us that both here and at work because you don’t know who is watching. We have IDs for everyone and I’m guessing you didn’t read your background file either. Go sit on the couch and read so you don’t get tripped up and blow our cover.”

Bailey left to go to the grocery store and Jeremy and Casper were engrossed in that forum again. I wanted to ask what else he had found, but I had to read my file. Luke sat next to me, yoinked me, up and put me in his lap so he could rub my shoulders while I read.

The past few times I was sent on a mission, they sent me to a computer to read a file with everything I needed to do. I didn’t really have to assume an entire identity last time. The first time, I was just supposed to pick up a briefcase, which ended in disaster when I barfed on someone. The second time, I was just told to let myself be seen drinking and pretend to be drunk then slip away to steal data. I was only given information on the target and didn’t have to learn a new identity. This was big girl stuff now.

I opened the file on the laptop they gave me. My new name for the next few months was Amber Dilley. I was from Michigan and graduated from Ohio State University with a major in dance. My career was ended when I hurt my knee after graduation and I’d been working in insurance ever since.

Was that supposed to be some epic joke? I *did not* show Black my trademarked ass-shaking moves on numerous occasions for him to poke fun at me and make me a professional ballerina. My moves were *awesome*, but they totally weren’t ballet. I was going to yell at him when we got back. Bailey yelled at him all the time and she was still alive.

I was supposed to have gotten my adjuster's license in California and was licensed in Louisiana, Illinois, Indiana, and Texas. I hoped no one asked me to prove it because I only studied Louisiana insurance law.

My interests were supposed to be reading—which was true, dancing—which was *only* true at concerts, and learning new languages. I was starting to think this entire identity was to make fun of me. They all knew I was struggling with French and I had a feeling the dance major was put in there as some passive-aggressive jab because I thought Tae Bo would teach me fighting before I got hired.

I noticed links at the bottom of the file to Amber Dilley's social media, and LinkedIn profiles. I was surprised when I clicked on Facebook that my profile had been created shortly after I got hired and there had been regular posts supposedly from me. Like when Casper showed me the profile of the woman who was trying to seduce Jeremy and bring him into the secret project at Affirmative, I saw my face on photos that were close to my body, but not my actual body. My face was imposed on a body and posted with people I didn't know like we were friends.

I noticed a change in the profile as I was scrolling through the wall. My relationship status changed to *in a relationship with a Robert Gill*. Jeremy's photo was staring right back at me. When I clicked on his profile, it had been created right around the time he had been hired, too. As I clicked between our two profiles, there were more photoshopped photos of us traveling and eating together. I wondered who had done it.

When I checked to see who I was friends with, I had over two hundred friends. I found Bailey under Jody Nielsen and it looked like we had just become friends recently. Who the hell was doing all this if Casper and the rest of my team had been spending all their time on the forum?

“Did you know about this?” I asked Jeremy, showing him my screen.

“Yeah. I saw it when I read the file before we left. There are dozens of fake profiles out there for us with different

names. Some of them have us photoshopped with different color hair and eyes in case we need to change our appearance. Some of them say we are from another country and the entire profile is in another language. Isn't that fucking awesome?"

"It's weird. Who's doing it?"

"Who do you know that got benched, sat behind a computer all day long enough to create all those profiles, and it drove her mad enough to demand to go active again?" Bailey called from the door. "You need to help me bring the groceries in. There's zero food here."

It looked like she had bought out the store and it seemed like we were bringing bags in for ages. She started setting things on the counter and told us she would be cooking tonight. A Louisiana specialty and promised we would love it. She swore if we ate her cooking long enough, we wouldn't order takeout once while we were here. She also warned us pizza here was not like New York pizza. She saw the look on both my and Jeremy's face when she announced that and snapped at us to grow up and eat proper food.

"Robert, get back on the forum while I'm cooking. I want news when we eat. Amber, start posting about your new job. Now that we're here and you've assumed that identity, the posts will be your own now. I'm not pretending to be you anymore. It's all going to be you, cupcakes."

I pretended I was in the middle of a novel and started posting about how much I liked the house and was excited about my new job. I got distracted by this wonderful smell wafting from the kitchen. I wandered in and peered over Bailey's shoulder. There appeared to be some sort of brown goop in there she kept stirring.

"What is that brown shit and why does it smell so good?"

"I'm going to pretend you didn't disrespect my roux. You can't make gumbo without a really good roux. Lessons from my granny."

"Your granny?"

“I do have family here. It hurts being here and not being able to visit.”

“Then Jeremy and I will come up with a plan so you can.”

“Robert, Amber. Robert. You always need to call him by that name here. If you slip, something will go wrong.”

“Sorry. Robert and I will think of something.”

Bailey looked at me sadly. “I’ve been at this longer than you have. I don’t think there’s a way for me to see them without him finding out. My family moved away from Alexandria because he kept bothering them, but he’s a police officer and knows where they live. He would know if I showed up there for a visit and whatever you are plotting to get back at him, stop now. He’s the type that would just throw you in jail and Black would have to pull strings to get you out. Give it up. Now run along and build your presence online. I’m a big girl and can deal with this on my own.”

“Just drop it,” Luke whispered when I sat down. “You’re going to end up opening old wounds for her and probably get all three of us arrested.”

“Anything new on the forum?”

“Yeah. Tons, but you’re going to have to wait until we eat so we’re all in the loop. Remember the scene you made about not being kept up to date? It’s vital all of you know every little detail now that we’re here and I don’t like repeating myself,” Casper said.

“Oh, come on. I wasn’t that bad, and I did end up needing to know. We’re here now, aren’t we?”

“And you’re totally distracted. Have you memorized your file? Are you going to be able to call them by the correct name?”

“Are you seriously lecturing me?”

“You flipped your shit when you found out what you were going to have to do here. You’ve been too busy flipping out you’re going to fuck up, you didn’t prepare properly. I’m only saying this because you need to hear it.”

“I know. But I have a really great memory once I’ve read something. That profile is fiction. I have my background down. I just need to get used to calling everyone by different names.”

“Practice over dinner, even if it seems like you are saying names too much,” Casper said.

“Casper? You’re getting annoying and telling me what to do.”

“I’m just trying to help,” he said, looking just as frustrated as I was.

Low-key Casper was amazing. Bossy-pants Casper needed me to kick him in the buttocks.

The house was an open floor plan, so we could smell everything Bailey was cooking and she could hear us.

“He’s right,” Jeremy said. “You *have* to call us by the right name. I know it’s confusing because you still struggle with our code names sometimes.”

I stuck my tongue out at him.

“Traitor.”

“He’s right,” Luke said. “I haven’t been an agent in a while, but you love this. You don’t want to mess up this early.”

“You three might want to go bang instead of fighting,” Bailey called. “You’re messing up my gumbo vibes.”

“I’m not thinking about anything except the smell coming out of the kitchen. I’m starving and it smells amazing,” Jeremy said.

“Don’t rush perfection, Robert. There’s beer chilling in the fridge and I got wine for me.”

I hopped up and grabbed two cold beers for the three of us. Bailey was prepared, but I had never heard of Abita beer before. Bailey had gotten Strawberry Abita, something called Purple Haze, and a few other cases of beer from Abita. She saw me looking at it, told me it was a local beer, and to try the Purple Haze or strawberry first.

“I thought you hated beer.”

“This is the only beer I like. I’m still sticking to wine tonight because I’m an adult. Food will be ready soon.”

I think we all lost our shit when we tasted it. We had all had beer from all over and this was hands down one of my top five. I had hardly finished half when Cadmium called us in. She had a big stew pot with what looked like soup and an enormous bowl of potato salad.

When I was serving myself, it looked like there were shrimp and sausage in there and I practically inhaled my first bite because it smelled so good. The flavors that exploded in my mouth weren’t like anything I had ever tasted. I didn’t even know what kind of sausage it was. I didn’t care. I knew I should take a break and tell her it was good, but I couldn’t stop eating.

I heard Bailey snigger and looked up from my bowl. “If you’ll hold off on inhaling the gumbo, you’re supposed to add filè and some people mix their potato salad in, but I don’t.”

She handed me the filè and told me how much to use. I had no idea what it was, so she just told me it would thicken it. She had a small smile on her face when I asked what kind of sausage I was eating and what the green things were. I had no idea what andouille sausage was, and I didn’t care what it was made from. I’d never had okra before, but I decided I liked it. She explained the filè was dried leaves from sassafras trees and seemed quite content when we all mixed potato salad in our gumbo with our second helping.

“It’s even better this way!” Jeremy yelled.

“I love it when you cook for us,” Luke said.

“I agree,” Casper said. “And you rarely do.”

I dug in. We all looked up from practically inhaling our food when Bailey cleared her throat.

“Now that I’ve exposed y’all to gumbo, perhaps you remember we’re here for work? What did you find out on the forum?”

Now that she was back home, Bailey had slipped a little, and I was detecting a hint of an accent from her. I had no idea what her background file said, but if it said she was from somewhere like Michigan like me and she was going around calling people y'all and talking like she was from here, she would blow her cover.

“Can we talk about the forum tomorrow and just let me eat tonight? Between the beer and the food, I’m quite happy right now,” Casper groaned.

Since when was Casper not all about the job?

“You’d better start talking as soon as you wake up, or I won’t cook Louisiana food for you again and I’ll hide all the Abita.”

We didn’t talk. We agreed to all her demands because we just wanted more food.

SEVEN



Luke

Bailey was already in the kitchen waiting and set plates in front of us with what looked like her trademarked breakfast food. She *only* cooked this when she was stressed. I walked up behind her when she was setting plates on the table and wrapped my arms around her waist. She was my platonic snuggle buddy, so she wasn't going to kick my ass and I wasn't being one of *those* guys. We did this shit all the time.

“You're upset,” I said where the others couldn't hear.

“I'm dealing.”

“I'm here if you need me.”

“I know,” she whispered.

“What in actual fuck is that?” Jordan demanded.

“Biscuits and gravy and grits and shrimp. Stick to your ribs food. Eat up. You'll like it, I promise. I made the same roux I

did with the gumbo for the gravy on the biscuits, just a lighter roux.”

Much like the gumbo, Bailey had made this for Casper and me before. The gravy was savory and had sausage in it. I’d never had anything like it. I had no idea what a grit was other than it looked like cream of wheat when she made it the first time. It was totally different. It was savory with shrimp, butter, and she grated parmesan in it. Bailey had to order the grits online because they weren’t really popular in New York.

Bailey woke up early to cook. It looked like she didn’t know if she wanted to watch us enjoy her cooking or tap her finger and demand we hurry up. She wasn’t eating. She did that sometimes when she was stressed and she was already so tiny.

“Nope,” I said. “Fix a plate and eat with us.”

Bailey scowled at me.

“I’m not letting you leave until you eat, Frederick,” Casper said.

“Yes, Daddy.”

Casper always called her by our pet name when he was pulling rank. It was sure to get her to do what we wanted. Bailey knew better. She liked to talk about Jordan’s metabolism and complain that she couldn’t eat like her, but Bailey got all runty and mean if she skipped meals. Casper and I sat there and watched her finish her breakfast. We had to do that sometimes because we loved her.

I was pretty sure Jordan and Jeremy were in love with her cooking because they kept raving about it. Good. She needed to hear that. Bailey was one of those people that *needed* to spoil other people when she was the one that needed the care.

As soon as we stood to put our plates in the dishwasher, she ordered us into the living room to tell her what was going on with the forum. Casper and Jeremy had been glued to that forum. Casper went into our tiny backyard to call Boss and had been chatting with our teammates before bed. I swear to shit, if Boss and the rest of our team didn’t like their sleep,

Casper would have been on the computer all night and disturbed my beauty rest. It took a solid eight hours a night to be a big, sexy moose. I also couldn't believe I was calling myself that now that Jordan made it a thing.

“Baba Yaga rarely posts. We think it's a woman, and she has access to a lot of stolen cash. I don't think she's a hacker. She hires them and throws a lot of money around if the return is going to make her richer. The breach didn't. I talked to Boss, and she agrees with me. We need to start operating on the theory that Baba Yaga was one of us,” Casper said.

It pissed me off if she was. I had a lot of opinions about it. It at least got Bailey out of her funk.

“It makes sense. We get paid extremely well, but shit happens. Casper, you could have died or caught something really nasty in that shit tunnel when you were making your escape. If you had a cut anywhere, you might have lost a limb. If I had fallen an inch to the right, I never would have walked again.

“I don't think she fired you, Casper. There had to be another reason your name didn't get leaked. Not everyone works for someone like Boss. They could have had a career-ending injury and gotten a settlement they weren't happy with. She'd have the names of a lot of the other agencies.”

“I don't think she ever had a career-ending injury,” Casper said. “Boss and I think she was a prolific agent. Think about it. We know about the other agencies, but we don't know the agents. When we travel, we check in with them so they know we're on their turf and don't fuck anything up. We report to everyone here, but we also let those agencies know what we are doing so it also doesn't mess up anything they are working on. Sometimes, their cover business is a part of *our* cover.

“We talk to agents there, but she'd never be close enough to one to know they wouldn't rat her out. Even if you're unhappy with your boss, you aren't going to shoot yourself in the foot and fuck over *that* many of your coworkers. We thought the bounty was done and everyone got hit at the same

time. We're starting to think there was only one inside person. It was Baba Yaga, and she hit the agencies she traveled to.

“We think she had one particular agency in mind. She wanted to expose the one she was working for because she was angry about something. It wasn't every single agency, just a good bit of them. Enough for one agent who got sent out a lot to hit in two years with a program no one would think to look for in the server rooms until it was too late.”

That was just...I lost the ability to even. This woman fucked over all those people *and* my sister because they were mad at their boss? Get another job. If they liked being an agent, they traveled around to plenty of agencies and could have picked a better one. Fuck, they hit ours and everyone *adored* Boss except for other CEOs that she made look bad.

I didn't get it.

“Anything that affects us when we go to work?” Jeremy asked. “We need to figure out where the office is so we don't get lost on our first day.”

“Yes. Black has contacted the Louisiana Department of Insurance. They know we have three people undercover, but they think it's just because we think there's something fishy with Ashley's program and we can fix it. They are putting pressure on USA Agencies to not use it. USA Agencies is giving pushback because they've apparently always used Affirmative's software and they needed to update it. They've agreed to train Amber and Jody on it to make sure there are no kinks. Robert is supposed to be the IT specialist who irons out any kinks.”

“How is that working if we are brand new employees and the company doesn't know who we are?” I asked.

“USA Agencies was audited by the Department of Insurance a few years ago and got into a lot of trouble. They had to pay huge fines and ended up declaring bankruptcy. They laid off a ton of employees and are short staffed. They've only recently started hiring again. Since they have so few adjusters, rather than training all of them on a new software that the Department of Insurance may tell them they can't use

because of the association with Affirmative, they are going to train Amber and Jody as temps because of their experience.”

“How does this lead us to Hex and Baba Yaga?” I asked.

Jeremy shot me an evil grin.

“That’s where I come in. What I’ve been told is that I’ll have full access to the program and if Amber and Jody come across any issues, I can make whatever changes I want so that they have a successful transition to this program.

“I’ve been working in the background on a virus before we left. If I can hide it in the code, when you or Amber access the database, technically, it’s supposed to erase any records you viewed and send them to anyone on the forum trying to win that bounty. It’s going to take time for them to gather enough information on someone to blackmail them. I got rear-ended three years ago. It should have been an open-and-closed claim, but the other driver claimed someone tried to sideswipe him and that was why he rear-ended me. The claim ended up taking almost a month until the police report was ready. He forgot he told the officer at the scene he was eating and dropped his burger in his lap.

“Claims take time and you aren’t always going to be accessing that database. That should give me enough time to totally change the program so it mixes up the data it sends to the people on the forum, doesn’t actually delete anything from the claims database, but sends them wrong information. Like, you access the database to look at two people. Instead of deleting the data and sending it straight to anyone who is looking, the data stays, but send them a mashup of the two people you looked at and not data they can use. I’m also looking for a way to hide an exploit into the data that gets downloaded to people trying for the bounty that gives us access to their systems.”

Bailey cackled. “I knew I liked you, Robert. I’m glad you’re one of the good guys and using this shit for good instead of the people on that forum. If I wasn’t a lesbian, Amber may need to worry.”

“Watch it,” Jordan growled.

I just chuckled at how utterly *clueless* my roommates were. Bailey wasn't even remotely interested in Jeremy, but she *was* into his girlfriend. And Jordan was ready to make my kinky books come to life with all of us. Jeremy was, apparently, into watching and we had his blessing.

Bailey was never going to say anything because she thought Jordan was completely straight. Casper was still gun shy after his awful ex. I *never* got what he saw in her. If history told me anything, Jordan was going to wait until the most inopportune moment or maybe just when she had them alone and then there would be some brain vomit involved.

I knew because it was adorable when it happened to me.

But they needed to get to work. I didn't mind being here strictly to protect Bailey. She was one of my best friends. I didn't particularly like staying in this house while she was at the office where he could get to her.

But I trusted Bailey. I might not have been letting her throw any punches because she needed to focus on beefing up a bit, but I knew she could.

She kicked me straight in the nuts when I asked her to show me what she had. That was with no training. I was so proud of how far she'd come.

If he tried to grab her again, he'd seriously regret it.

EIGHT



Jeremy

This shotgun house was pretty nice. Someone had put a lot of care into renovating it. It was cozy. It was a house, but it wasn't nearly as big as our apartment back home. We had the entire top floor. And Boss was fucking something because she was hardly charging anything for rent. I looked at bigger apartment for Jordan and me that would allow a pet when I asked her to move in with me. That was before I knew the truth about what she was doing and I got recruited.

Even with four of us paying rent on that penthouse, it wasn't enough to cover how much a space that big would have cost. Boss was not only *not* charging us extra for two cats, but she all but demanded to pet sit Darth Vader and Angie.

Casper told us Boss had a deep affinity with the goddess Bast and spoiled the shit out of all her agents' cats when they were on assignment. I woke up before everyone else and had a text from her with Darth Vader wearing a sweater she'd knitted and wrapping himself around her shoulder. He was clearly making himself at home and being treated like a king.

I woke up before everyone else. As much as I wanted to eat Bailey's cooking again because motherfucking shit, that was good, she might not want to cook a feast when we actually had to be in the office. I found the blender and was already making protein shakes for all of us when everyone started to stumble in. I didn't have some of the things I did at home, but I could make do with what Bailey got at the store.

"What the hell did you do to this shake? It tastes like Italian Crème cake. I've been making this way longer than you and I've only managed to get the protein powder they give us to a slightly more tolerable chalk. You made a pinky swear to share shake recipes and then you're skulking around while we are sleeping making them like a blender ninja," Luke said.

"I had to make this on the fly because I don't have all my ingredients. I can share. I wasn't sure if Bailey was going to have time to cook again. I want more Cajun food."

"I'll give you whatever the fuck you want if Robert shares his recipes with me. The lunch they give us at the office is actually good for just being lean meat and steamed veggies. I have no idea why they haven't found a better protein powder yet."

"Tell you what, Jody," I said, smirking. "You keep cooking us this fabulous Louisiana food, give us a proper tour, and I'll make the shakes every morning. I'll keep sharing the recipes."

"That benefits all of us," Casper said. "Amber and Robert, are you prepared for your first day? Know your background?"

"Did they put I was a dance major to poke fun at me?" Jordan blurted out.

"No one is making fun of you. They put that in there because after all the training you've been doing, your body is amazing and you don't look like you sit behind a desk all day. It was either put in your background that you dance or put in there that you're a black belt like Elizabeth. It was my idea to say you were a dancer. I thought a black belt might tip someone off. You have the body of this hot dancer I dated when I got to New York. I didn't do it to make fun of you," Casper said.

Casper was *totally* into my girlfriend and I was here for that. I got all my insecure jealousy out in college. I was *that* guy my freshman year and ended up losing all my friends. I learned who I was and how to be a better person. Eighteen-year-old me would have been an asshole about this. Adult me didn't care Jordan was into other people. I was secure in our relationship and frankly, the idea of watching her with people I cared about was hot as fuck.

Also, it didn't matter how amazing I tried to be. I knew Jordan enough to be able to anticipate her needs. But I was learning new things about my girlfriend and that was a good thing. I'd never be Luke. I could never give her what he could. Bailey and Casper were also completely different from me.

Casper hadn't outright flirted with her, but he just told her she had a fantastic body that reminded him of an old fling, so he was getting there. That, of course, sailed right over Jordan's head, even though I knew she was into Casper, too.

"I'm starting to feel like a piece of meat," Jordan moaned.

Luke and I met each other's eyes and groaned inwardly. We were both rooting for the group thing for different reasons. Luke had known Bailey and Casper longer than I had. I think we *both* wanted her to say anything but that.

"He paid you a compliment. Everyone wants a dancer's body. There are entire workout programs that promise it. We do need to leave because New Orleans traffic is terrible," Bailey said, rinsing her glass in the sink. "I'm driving. None of you are prepared for this."

I sold my car when I went to New York because I didn't need it and parking was a nightmare. I kept my license active, so technically I *could* be driving right now. I was pretty sure everyone in the car would have a little less anxiety.

If the light turned yellow, Bailey gunned it, even if we were all screaming she wasn't going to make it. She made a dozen unsafe lane changes, especially when you considered a lot of these people seemed to take it personally she wanted to get over. Only a few people seemed to drive like actual humans. They either drove just like Bailey or they were in the

left lane going twenty in a forty and making everyone who was actually going the speed limit drive like Bailey.

We were flying until we weren't. We eventually hit gridlocked traffic.

“Get comfortable because we're going to be stuck like this for a long time. Also, I regret nothing,” Bailey said, connecting her phone to the car.

Bailey was a reader, too, but she preferred audiobooks because she could listen to them when she was stuck at her desk doing all the shit she hated, but happened to be pretty good at. Bailey liked her sapphic smut, which is what she put on for the rest of us to listen to. The first time I met Bailey in her office, I learned that about her. She happened to put it on right in the middle of an explicit sex scene.

It took forever and her book happened to be *very* spicy, but we eventually made it to the office and found a parking garage. Bailey led us up the street to the office. She was pointing out the street cars and asked if we got a look at the cemeteries on the ride.

“No, we were alternating between fearing for our lives and listening to your kinky book,” Jordan said.

“I was trying to beat that epic shit storm we got stuck in when traffic stopped. It was worse than the last time I lived here.”

“Then we can leave earlier instead of driving like maniacs. What do you think they are going to do if you wreck the rental car?”

“Hush. We're here. We need to go straight to HR to get keycards, parking passes, and they probably want to prep us since today is our first day. Act normal, no freaking out, and remember your backgrounds and training.”

I had no idea if Bailey had been here before, but she seemed to know where she was going. There was a glass door where we had to be buzzed in, then sit and wait for someone to come get us. A small, older lady came to fetch us.

“Wait, don’t tell me. You look like a dancer, you must be Amber. My granddaughter has been in ballet lessons since she was four and does the Nutcracker every year with the local company. She’s old enough to be an angel now. Have you ever done the Nutcracker, dear?”

“Of course. It was always my favorite.”

I was seriously hoping she didn’t ask her what parts she played. My parents took me to see it when I was really young, but I hardly remembered anything about it. Jordan definitely wouldn’t know.

“It wouldn’t be a proper Christmas in our family without going to see her dance the Nutcracker. She wants to work up to being Snow Queen. I saw that you were a dance major. Were you ever Snow Queen?”

I decided to save her. “She was Snow Queen a few times before I met her. The dance program at Ohio State is more modern dance based than ballet, so she didn’t really get to do the Nutcracker in college because she was too busy to do it outside of school.”

“Such a shame. Do you still try to do it now? You look like you’re still in dancing shape.”

Jordan looked like she was about to panic. You wouldn’t be able to tell unless you knew her, but Jordan was a rotten liar. She could do this. I put my hand on her back where this woman couldn’t see and Jordan instantly calmed.

“I hurt my knee in college. My Nutcracker years are behind me. I don’t perform anymore, I just take classes,” she said easily.

“Even as a party guest? I’ve been a party guest before when my granddaughter was young and too scared to go out on stage. It’s mostly just pantomime.”

“Too many terrible memories. I’d rather be performing full out like I used to before I hurt my knee.”

“I understand, dear. So, now that I’ve met Amber, you must be Robert and Jody. I’m Evelyn. Come with me so we can get you situated.”

Evelyn led us to her office and started handing out parking passes. She made us go stand against the wall to take photos of us for our ID badge. She kept fawning over Jordan now that she thought she was a dancer about how she was so pretty and she wished she could have seen her perform Snow Queen.

She wanted Jordan's photo to be perfect. Evelyn clearly didn't know Jordan. She took beautiful modeling and candid photos, but ID photos were *not* her strong point. If she wasn't trying, it was perfect. She always ended up with some goofy face with ID pictures.

Evelyn ended up taking it several times until she was happy with it. When she took our photo, she just told Bailey and me to smile and snapped the photo rather than fussing with our hair and adjusting our shirts. Should I be upset my girlfriend was prettier than me? Nah. That was a bonus. Thankfully, our photos weren't total disasters, and we were sent to someone named Savannah, who would be our trainer.

Savannah almost had a Brooklyn accent, but it was different and not as strong. Bailey talked like that sometimes now that we were here. She called us *honey* or *sweetheart* rather than our names. I didn't mind, but I wished she used our names more because Jordan wasn't the only one of us struggling with all the different names we had to go by.

“Okay, sweeties, so Jody and Amber are already trained on Louisiana law and I've been told you've already read our policy. If you have any questions, ask me over the next few days. For now, I want you learning this new program. Our old software is out of date and only runs on Internet Explorer 8, so we have to stay on Windows 7. We want to update everything. We've been wanting to get everyone new computers for the last year, but we can't because the software we need won't be compatible without downgrading Windows. This new program will allow us to do that.

“Even if the company that made our software got up to a mess of trouble, they always did good by us. Damien, the owner of the company, knew we were looking to update and pitched this program to us. He promised we would be the first to use it. The Department of Insurance doesn't want us using a

program made by Affirmative because they think it's tainted, which is stupid because whatever Damien got up to on the side, Affirmative's software has always done us good.

“So, Amber and Jody, you will be test subjects and Robert is here to clean up any bugs with the software since we can't contact Affirmative. My two dears, if you come across any issue or bug, you report them to me and then bring it straight to Robert. This cutie right here needs to get it fixed as soon as possible and email me right away that the bug is fixed.”

She shot a wink at me and I heard this little growl from Jordan. I wasn't even thinking about the fact that she might have just sexually harassed me on my first day. Windows 7? That was so old it personally hurt my feelings.

“Cutie, I want you on this computer checking the code. My two darlings, we have two computers that we just purchased that have the program installed on them. Before you hit the floor with it, you're going to spend the next week or so learning to use it. If you don't understand something, ask me. If it's something I haven't been told about, this fine young man will look into it.

“We've loaded several closed claims into the program and we haven't made it live yet. We want you to navigate through it and see what it can and can't do. The ISO tasks have been closed since the claim is closed, but you can see them in the history. Uploading police reports and medical bills are simple. When you get them, you just click on the documents menu on the left and it pops up an upload screen. You pick the drop down of what it is, upload the file, and you're done. Easy peasy. I'm going to check with Evelyn while you sweeties fiddle around with the program. I'll be back later.”

“What's that about?” Jordan asked Cadmium when she left. “She was hitting on Robert right in front of me!”

Bailey rolled her eyes. “No, she wasn't. She was being a boomer Southern woman.”

I wasn't the kind of guy who was going to start a fight because someone hit on my girlfriend. But Jordan was banned from a few shitty nightclubs because *she* was. I knew about

the groupies. Jordan regretted everything about that relationship *except* the fistfights with the groupies over him. In fact, I was pretty sure she was fucking proud of the fact that she won and was banned from a few bars.

We *did not* need Jordan putting a beatdown on Savannah because she hadn't realized that kind of talk wasn't appropriate anymore, even directed at men. Besides, being called cutie by a woman in her seventies wasn't *nearly* as bad as what I had to deal with the last time they sent me undercover.

"Relax, Amber. It's harmless. It's not anywhere near like what I had to deal with last time. Now, we can't talk about this anymore and have to learn this program."

"You can do this," Bailey said. "Stop psyching yourself out and absolutely *no* brawling on this assignment. If you want to hit someone, hit Luke when we get home."

See, this was why the whole group thing was perfect. I absolutely did *not* want my girlfriend throwing punches at me, but Luke got off on that.

NINE



Jordan

I was mumbling to myself as I started clicking through the program. Lee had warned me a little about ISO tasks. They would generate for the database we were trying to prevent things being deleted from. They would populate anytime anything was unknown. I quietly clicked through the first claim that was in my task list. Even though I was supposed to be learning the program, I read through all the notes so that I could learn claims better.

I was nervous about this whole assignment because of my previous job. They kept us separated from the adjusters and they never spoke to us, even in the break room. A few people in my department would try to transfer if an opening became available on that side. We heard all kinds of shit and got yelled at all the time, but none of us were allowed to transfer and be an adjuster for the most part.

They required a college degree. They didn't care what it was in, but no bachelors, no transfer. I didn't even try to go to college because it was this whole-ass cycle of me being too broke to afford to work part-time while I went to school and

anything I would have majored in wouldn't have had a big enough entry level salary to do anything about my brokenness. They probably also wanted five years experience, which I had no way of getting.

I had the adjusters built up in my head as these super smart people doing what I'd never be able to do. But look at me now. I was a fucking spy. I was learning my third language and I could physically beat their asses now. I needed to stop psyching myself out. If Boss didn't think I'd be an asset on this, she wouldn't have sent me. Bailey, Casper, and Jeremy could have done this, but Boss chose *me* to come.

The first claim I looked at was a three-car rear-end accident. It looked like notation was really important and the adjuster tried numerous times to reach the lead car. The middle car seemed impatient and called every day for a status update. The adjuster left notes that she advised the middle car that the claim could not progress until they spoke to the lead vehicle. I saw a note from her manager with a to-do list. The manager also wanted her to contact the lead vehicle at all costs to find out how many impacts they felt and how hard they were.

It looked like when they uploaded this claim, they uploaded the photos and estimate, too. I watched the claim unfold before my eyes as I looked at the photos and read notes from both the adjuster and her manager. Once the estimate from the middle vehicle came back, the urgency of contacting the lead vehicle was greater and I learned why from the manager's notes. It was something I had never considered when I was at my insurance job just reporting these types of claims and sending them to adjusters. No one ever told me to ask this and I kind of wondered why.

I looked at the photos of the middle vehicle again when the notes from the adjuster and the manager both noticed that the middle vehicle had extensive front-end damage and minimal rear-end damage. The adjuster was using the database I was told about where you could plug in everything you knew about someone and it would spit out every phone number, email address, and home address that person ever had. I made a note

to mention that to Jeremy because it really could be used for identity theft.

The adjuster finally reached the lead vehicle and I read through their statement. I found out why the number of impacts and how hard they were was important. The lead vehicle stated they felt one hard impact at first, then a less severe impact after that. That contradicted the middle vehicle's statement that our insured rear-ended him and pushed him into the other vehicle. The adjuster had to figure out liability based on the fact that the middle vehicle rear-ended the first vehicle, then we rear-ended him and pushed him back into it.

My head was spinning as I read that she found our insured one hundred percent at fault for the rear of the middle vehicle, fifty percent at fault for the front of their vehicle, and fifty percent at fault for the rear of the lead vehicle. I didn't even know how that was supposed to be paid out. This was almost like reading a novel between the statements from the middle driver and the adjuster.

Then the plot twist came into play. The middle driver was claiming all sorts of injuries and was being treated by a chiropractor. Every time he called, he was claiming something new. The adjuster had been having difficulty verifying that his policy was active because his insurance company didn't really have a system set up to verify the whole *No Pay, No Play* thing that was law here.

She ended up having to set up a claim with his insurance company just to verify it and the adjuster at his company kept saying that they couldn't verify yet. The police report finally came in and I read it. It confirmed everything the adjuster had already confirmed in her investigation. She called the middle vehicle's insurance company and faxed it over.

She received a call back from his adjuster a few hours later. Apparently, his policy had lapsed for a month. At the accident scene, he stayed in his vehicle and called to renew the policy. The reason she couldn't verify before was that she had to verify the exact time of the accident to make sure he really did have a policy in place and wasn't trying to game the system.

I had been too busy reading the claim saga to really get a feel for the program. Now that I was done, I started clicking around. It seemed pretty straight forward. If you wanted to add a note, there was a button for that. If you wanted to upload a file, it was right there under documents. I was able to pull up the closed ISO tasks, and they looked like they wanted things like VIN numbers, addresses, and didn't like unknown names.

I must have spent several hours on that claim because Savannah finally came in and asked if we had any questions. I didn't, and neither did Bailey.

“What about you, sweetie? Understanding the code?”

“I've gotten a handle on most of it.”

“Great. The three of you can go eat lunch. We don't really have a cafeteria here. Most people bring lunch or go out. If you need some recommendations for places to eat, holler at me.”

“I got it covered,” Bailey said.

“Where are we going?” I whispered on the way out.

“The Bon Ton Café. Do you two mind if I order for you?”

My stomach gave a deep rumble at whatever food this place could possibly have and if it would be better than anything we had so far. Jeremy and I both nodded in agreement. I think I got hungrier the longer we walked. I asked where we were because I really had no idea. I was informed we were in the business district and Bailey promised to take us to the quarter that weekend. I was excited to see it, but wondered how she was going to manage to take us out to a popular place like that if her ex would know if she visited her parents. I didn't bring it up because Jeremy was right. I would just open old wounds.

We got to Bon Ton, and the waitress came to take our drink order. Bailey handed her back the menu.

“We'll take the crawfish bisque for everyone, fried crawfish tails, and shrimp Remoulade to share as an appetizer, and for the entrees crawfish Étouffée and shrimp Étouffée for these two with plates to share. I want the grilled fish with

lemon butter sauce. Bread pudding with whiskey sauce for dessert for everyone to share.”

“You must eat here a lot, but I’ve never seen you here before and I’ve worked here for two years.”

“I’ve been away a while. These two have never been here before. Thought I’d show them the best places to eat.”

“Your food will be out shortly. Hope your friends enjoy.”

“What did you just order?” Jeremy asked.

“You’ll like it, even if my version is better. We won’t be eating out for lunch every day. I just didn’t have time to make lunch. It’s too expensive to eat out every day.”

“If you’re planning on cooking what they serve us for lunch, I want lunch making duties, too,” Jeremy said. “I think I can spice up those veggies and meat.”

“You’re seriously challenging someone from Louisiana on who can spice that up more? You’re on. I’ll make a deal with you. You continue making the protein shakes since you seem to have a gift with them. I’ll make lunch since everyone here is going to get offended if you bring something that hasn’t been seasoned properly. I don’t think anyone over the age of sixteen can eat like the two of you. We’ll alternate cooking dinner once I’ve exposed you to all the recipes I want you to try.”

“Deal,” Jeremy said, holding out his hand.

They shook on it and Bailey asked if either of us were able to pick up anything from working in the program. I admitted I was less nervous and that I might actually have fun with this mission. Jeremy said he was working through the code and he was getting close to finding the exploit that downloaded everything to the hackers working on the bounty. He thought he could crack it by the end of the day.

Bailey was about to say something when the waitress came out with our appetizers. Bowls of soup were placed in front of all of us as well as shrimp. Bailey daintily sipped her soup while Jeremy and I inhaled it and reached for the shrimp. I was a little wary about the crawfish, but I was always willing to try anything once. Mother fuck, that was delicious.

Bailey leaned back in her seat and eyed me. “Remember that lesson I gave you about the proper forks to use when you were working Clarence? You said you knew the proper fork, and you proved it, but you’re totally savage when you get food you like.”

“At least I eat it and I’m not sitting here wasting time taking photos of it.”

Jeremy had to pretend to like someone at Affirmative who took endless photos of her food. I ate with them once. She ordered a rainbow bagel and had to take photos of it from endless angles and upload it to social media sites before we could actually eat.

“You probably should take a few photos. Give me your phone. I’ll snap a photo of the two of you eating here. We need to build up your social media presence in case anyone at work starts looking.”

Jeremy took out his phone with me and we both noticed we had requests from Savannah. We accepted and stopped eating long enough to have our photo taken. Bailey told us to check in at Bon Ton and try to post on the way back about the food. We had time after we finished the appetizers so we were both fiddling around on our phones when the food arrived.

Jeremy and I split both our plates and shared. If I could have sat there and purred like Darth Vader while I was eating, I would have. Bailey was eating her fish and told us her Étouffée was better, but this was close. Jeremy stopped shoveling food in his face long enough to ask her to make it one night. When the bread pudding came out, I thought Bailey would share it with us, but she reminded us Luke wasn’t going to let her spar until her body starting looking closer to mine and she didn’t have my metabolism. Honestly, Bailey had an amazing little body, and they were both stupid about that.

I was in a food coma on the way back and just wanted to take a nap. I didn’t even drink at lunch, but I was so satisfied and the food was so good, I wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed with Jeremy and pass the fuck out. Savannah was waiting for us when we got back.

“Good choice going to Bon Ton for lunch, my babies. Where are you staying? Maybe I can suggest something for dinner. I’m glad Amber ate a full meal. Evelyn said she’s a dancer, and she needs some meat on those bones.”

I was not a fan of hitting on my boyfriend or body shaming me for being skinny. I knew *why* I couldn’t blow up, but it would feel fantastic if I did.

Bailey cleared her throat and changed the subject. “Any training tips? We’re both getting used to the program and Robert is learning it.”

“You both have impressive backgrounds. I’m sure learning a new program is easy and something you already have experience with coming from bigger insurance companies. Robert really has the hard job here. Working out the kinks you two discover. I think I’ll have the two of you play around for the next three days to give him time to learn it, then you’ll hit the floor with it. There’s a claim in there for both of you to review that our old SIU investigator got involved in. You can both read through while you’re learning the program to see how we handle things. Save that for tomorrow, darlings. It’ll probably take all day to get through it. It was like the Hannibal Lecter of insurance fraud.”

“What did they do?” I asked. I was curious after reading about the three-car accident and I was a fan of the Lecter books, movies, and television series.

“Saying Hannibal Lecter is a sure-fire way to get her interested,” Jeremy said.

“Oh, right. I forgot I saw the two of you were dating on social media. I’d never pick her for a serial killer fan with that angel face. You need all day to read the file and it’s best to read it as it unfolded in the investigation. This would be good for both Amber and Jody to read to see how we deal with fraud here. Play with the program for the rest of the day and read that one tomorrow.”

I wanted into that file more than anything, but I did what she asked. My logins had already been approved and Jeremy had told us over lunch that we could try to learn the database

today because the exploit only worked on open claims. I logged into the database we would be trying to prevent data being stolen from. I tried searching by names and VIN numbers in the claim I was looking at.

I could see right away how this information could be used for harm. I could see all sorts of information in that database, ranging from phone number, home address, social security numbers if they were collected. I could see who each party's insurance was with at the time of the accident. If that policy was still active, those hackers could cause all sorts of mischief if they blackmailed someone.

Next, I moved to the program I had logins for to look up people's contact information. Lee had told me about it and also warned me that my activity would be monitored. He told me one of his daughter's coworkers had lost her job and her license looking up both her boyfriend and someone she thought he was cheating on her with.

I only plugged in the names of the people in the claim I was looking at. I hoped that program didn't give these hackers access to this system. In addition to phone numbers, home addresses, and any emails that had been used, I was also looking at three mugshots for one of the people in this claim.

Bailey, Jeremy, and I were the only people in the room, but I wasn't about to mention anything related to the mission while we were at the office, no matter how much I wanted to.

"Are y'all ready to go home?" Cadmium asked when it got closer to five. "Traffic is going to be a bitch again."

"Yes, but we need to stop by the store if I'm making shakes for breakfast. I need several things."

"What are you making for us tonight?" I asked.

"Nope. You're just going to have to wait and be surprised."

We finally got out of work and she wasn't joking about the traffic. Once we managed to navigate our way through all the one-way streets and got to the main road, the car crept along at a snail's pace. It took an hour and a half to drive twenty minutes back to the house.

I flung myself on the couch and kicked off my shoes. Jeremy plopped next to me and got out his laptop to read that hacker forum. Casper was already deep into the forum and Luke looked like he was going stir crazy.

I didn't have much to do since Jeremy and Casper wouldn't talk about the forum until they were ready, so I pulled up Amber's social media and stalked Savannah. Bailey must have been right about the flirting just being some boomer southern thing because she seemed happily married with two grown kids, six grandkids, and eight great-grandkids with a ninth on the way. Her wall was full of smiling posts of her family and playful banter between her and her husband. I noticed she called everyone who posted on her wall by the same pet names she called us. It must just be how she talked.

Casper didn't need to ask us about how our day went because he was watching and listening.

It took a while, but Bailey finally called us into the kitchen and like I suspected, I had to drag Jeremy away. I couldn't hear what he was mumbling when I pulled him into the kitchen and he didn't stop until he took a bite of whatever it was in the bowl in front of it. He knew what it was because Bailey texted him, but he hadn't told me because he was too busy with the forum.

"I've had jambalaya before, but it didn't taste like this. This is way better."

"Let me guess, you had it somewhere some savage put canned tomatoes in boiled rice with the wrong sausage, no seasoning, and called it jambalaya. Tomatoes are okay if you're making the Creole version, but the rest of it can be wrong."

"It had hot dogs."

"Don't ever repeat what you just said to me and punch whoever served that to you on behalf of everyone in Louisiana."

"Um. It was my mom trying out a new recipe."

“Then I’ll teach you the proper way to make it and you can show her the mistake she made.”

I didn’t say anything, but there must have been some fake jambalaya recipe floating around outside of Louisiana with hot dogs because *my* mom made it, too. I didn’t really like it, but ate it and was nice about it. This was superb.

“What’s the dessert?” I asked.

“Bananas Foster. You’ll have to wait until the flame goes out before you eat it,” Bailey said, lighting our whole-ass dessert on fire.

“Who let Bailey play with fire?” Luke asked.

“Shut up or you can’t have any.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Luke said.

Bailey was really spoiling us and I could tell she was happy to be home, but I couldn’t help but think something was bothering her. I was going to have to get her alone and ask her.

TEN



Jordan

It was weird being in this house. The house itself was adorable and cozy. I loved this house. I didn't love how thin the walls were. The walls were cockblocking me. You could hear *everything* going on in other parts of the house. If someone stayed up to watch TV, you could hear it. If Luke and Casper were chatting before bed, it was like we were in the room with them.

Which meant they'd all hear my sex noises if I got sexy with anyone. I never recorded myself having sex to make sure I didn't sound weird because that would also be weird, but what if I made donkey noises and no one told me? If I kept the entire house up with donkey noises, someone would definitely say something. And frankly, that was something I didn't want to know about myself, thank you very much. How did one even break that habit? Practice in the bathroom when no one was home? That was also weird.

Jeremy was the first one awake and had protein shakes waiting when we all woke up

“This tastes like a cinnamon roll. If I don’t have a text on my phone with the recipe, I’m going to twist your arm behind your back until it breaks or you tell me,” Bailey said.

She wasn’t really going to attack Jeremy. We all knew that.

“Check your phone. It’s there. No arm breaking necessary. You going to share some of the recipes you’ve cooked for us here or am I going to have to have my girlfriend twist *your* arm.”

“I’ll give you cooking lessons when we get back, but some of the ingredients are hard to come by in New York unless you have someone here overnight them to you so they don’t spoil. Now we had better get going to beat traffic.”

“Keep playing with that program,” Casper said. “The sooner she gives you access to live claims, the quicker Jeremy and I can do our thing making sure that program is safe. Crimson, Tyrian, and I are trying to find anything we can about Baba Yaga. Boss is working with the other agencies that got hit trying to put together a list of agents who might have visited all of them on assignment. She’s being tight-lipped because it very well could have been one of ours.”

“I can’t imagine it being one of us,” Luke scoffed. “She has these amazing mama bear vibes, but once upon a time, she and Black were the deadliest agents in the world. Even if you were somehow mad at her for something, you’d have to be stupid to betray her.”

“We all love Boss, but some people could literally live in Utopia and be unhappy because they want more. We were hit, too. We can’t rule out it wasn’t one of us until we’ve fully investigated,” Casper said.

“Now you’ve got me thinking about everyone I’ve trained.”

“It could have been someone who made agent before Boss moved you. As much as I want to talk theories about all the people I couldn’t stand, we *really* need to leave if we’re going to get to the office on time,” Bailey said.

It didn't seem to matter how early we left, we got stuck in gridlock traffic as soon as we got close to the entrance ramp to the business district. We had parking passes this time and an assigned spot, so we weren't driving around the garage looking for a free spot. We got to the office just in time and had key cards to get us in this go. Savannah was waiting for us and gave us a wink when she told us if we wanted to read the significant amounts people went through to commit fraud, to take a look at the case number ending in 3415. After getting deep into this stuff, some of it was more interesting than the kinky books Luke recommended, just without all the fucking. Don't get me wrong, there was a time and place for a half-demon woman to have a threesome with the kraken and a minotaur, it just wasn't at work.

She went to chat with Jeremy and I pulled the file up. I tuned out everything she was saying to Jeremy because it was probably just about the inner working of the program. I wanted to see what was so Hannibal Lecter about this file and I might learn something to help me when I hit the floor. I scrolled all the way through the notes. I scrolled all the way to the beginning when the person who had my old job took the call where the claim was reported and entered their notes. They had a different form than I did, but it was easily readable.

This was more than any claim I had ever taken. According to the initial report, there were eight adults packed into a hatchback that probably barely sat four. They were driving down a road when a hail storm started. The hail shattered the windshield, causing the driver to lose control and rear end a vehicle with eight people piled into an even smaller car. All sixteen people in the vehicles were claiming they were injured.

I got to see the investigation from the start. The adjuster started with the weather channel page, checking news outlets to confirm it really did hail in Shreveport that day. After finding several stories that there was a hailstorm, screenshots were uploaded to the file. I noticed the adjuster spent the next several hours getting recorded statements from both drivers and every single passenger in both vehicles. All the statements in each vehicle lined up exactly, almost as if the facts had been rehearsed. I saw she had thrown in a different question for

each person that could have been meant to confuse them. Every single person answered that the impact was so hard, they didn't remember.

The injuries ranged from extreme neck and back pain, to persistent headaches, and someone claimed they chipped a tooth. Five people were claiming that their brand new cell phones were damaged, and they wanted to claim that under the property damage. The adjuster had a plan for that, too. She told every single one of them to send her a photo of the phone, take them to a repair facility, and email her an estimate of the damages. I had a feeling I would be using that when I hit the floor.

As soon as she spoke to both drivers, she scheduled an appraiser to go out and take photos and write estimates on their vehicle, then put a flag on the file for SIU to take a look at it. I played around with the new program until I knew how to flag like that. She had left ample notes about looking for hammer marks when the photos came in and wanting to talk to the appraiser once he had viewed both vehicles.

There were notes from both her manager and SIU outlining a plan and it was all contingent on those photos. Appraisers, apparently, went out in the order they got assignments so it was a few days before those photos came in. Every single person in both vehicles blew up the adjuster's phone wanting an update and claiming more injuries. Neck and back pain had progressed to spasms and headaches had progressed to blinding migraines.

The photos were uploaded before I got to the adjuster's notes, so I looked at them first to see if I could pick anything up on my own without her notes. They sent photos of their phones, too, and they definitely weren't brand new and the model they were claiming. Those phones were at least six years old.

I went through photos and the close-ups of the hail damage. They were all a perfect circle and there was a tiny half circle around the sides. I wasn't a trained adjuster, but that looked like a hammer mark to me. There were still more photos, so I looked at the close up of the front and rear of the

vehicles. There were only a few scrapes on the front and back of both cars. It looked like they hardly bumped each other.

I must not have noticed everything. When I got to the adjuster's notes after speaking on the phone with the appraiser, the hail marks were definitely hammers as I suspected, but what I didn't notice was that the scrapes on the front and rear bumper were most likely caused by a key or some sort of knife. The small dents in the front and rear had rust in them like they were old.

SIU took over the file from there. I knew Bailey would be doing SIU and not me, but I started to read, anyway.

"Sugar, you going to stop and eat?" I heard Savannah say. I noticed the rest of my team was staring at me.

I apologized and got up to go to the breakroom. We didn't get to talk much once we found it, but Bailey was right. Much like Jeremy's gift with the shakes, she had our lean meat and steamed veggies tasting good. When Jeremy asked her what she did, she said she sliced the chicken breasts and stuffed it with capers, covered it with dill and the veggies had dill and a little ghee.

I couldn't ask Jeremy what he had learned about the program. "Jody, what do you think about that file we're in?"

"It's something else, eh? Robert, what have you learned about the program?" I eyed my surroundings and noticed most of the people in there with us had started to file out.

He leaned forward and so did we. "I've already found the exploit. I found it before we left yesterday. I would have mentioned it, but we got caught up talking. Before you got home and while you were cooking, I wrote a program that neutralizes it. I got up really early this morning and started writing the exploit that will mix up the data they get and give us access to their systems. I should have it finished when we get home. I uploaded my program with a flash drive after Savannah left and I'll do it with the exploit probably tomorrow when I finish."

Bailey and I were both murmuring good job when we realized we had to get back to work. I got back to my file and Savannah wasn't joking when she said this file would take all day. I got into SIU's investigation. He also got recorded statements from everyone and tried to throw them off with his questions. He took the investigation a step further and went to the scene and took photos of the road. He noted there were no skid marks anywhere when they would have slammed on their brakes when the windshield would have shattered.

He had already noted the windshield looked like a hammer had been taken to it. He also called for something I didn't know about called a rod assessment. The appraiser went back out, even though they had already noted that they thought the damage to the front and rear bumper had been caused by a key.

The appraiser used something to try to line up the scratches on the front of one vehicle to the rear of the other. They ended up not matching. By the time I left for the day, every single person in the vehicle had been busted for fraud and it was proven there was no collision, they had simply taken a hammer to the vehicle and scratched it up. The entire claim was denied and none of their medical bills were paid.

Bailey wasn't going to the store, so we took the back roads. On the drive home, I was telling Jeremy all about the fraud. This was all *utterly* fascinating.

I finally noticed a cemetery on the way home. I remembered Bailey asking if we saw one. I noticed some of the graves were four to five feet in the air. I asked when we finally got home and wished I hadn't. She told me the graves were elevated because during hurricane season if they weren't above ground, coffins would pop out the ground like some horror movie and just float right down the street if it flooded.

Bailey set to cooking, and we all crowded on the couch. I didn't need to have my face in a laptop digging in hacker forums, so I snuggled with Luke. My phone went off, and I had a text from Boss. Darth Vader wasn't going to want to come home with us after this. I didn't know how to knit him fancy clothes and he looked pretty fucking proud of himself in that sweater.

“Do they make tiaras for cats? We need something big to bribe our cat to come back home with us. Do you think he likes shinies?”

“Not as much as you do,” Jeremy said, winking at me.

“You don’t strike me as a diamond girl like my ex,” Casper said. “You’re not even wearing jewelry when it’s not a training hazard.”

“Oh, I’m not. Jeremy’s dick is pierced, and that’s the kind of shiny I can get behind.”

“Do I get a safe word for piercing my dick?” Luke asked.

“I get the two of you are attached to yours and Jordan is fond of them, but even if you bedazzled them, they are ugly as hell and messy as fuck. You’re going to spoil my cooking. Back me up, Casper.”

“My dick is beautiful and a perfect specimen of cocks, Frederick,” Casper said.

Bailey threw a whole wooden spoon at his face.

“Don’t ‘Frederick’ me when you’re waxing poetic about your dick. You’re making shit weird. Come eat and no fucking dick talk after I slaved in the kitchen to feed your ungrateful asses. And fuck all of you for making me sound like my mom.”

I sat down to ask her what she had made for us. She told us crawfish pie and smothered okra, but she seemed to be in a bad mood after all that dick talk. We all knew, and we weren’t going to continue. Casper jumped immediately into work. I got it. I was having fun and found all this fascinating, but we needed to fix this program and get back home. Casper was trying to watch all three of us and check in with Crimson, Tyrian, and Boss, so he missed some things. He wanted updates from Jeremy.

“It’s designed so that when a company buys it, there’s a high-level admin, me, who creates the user accounts and can download bug reports. I found a backdoor in it with a second admin. It took a while to find it in the code. Someone, I think Abaddon since he was working with Ashley, has the second

admin. Once the program goes live, the second high-level admin can create other admins for the program, but instead of downloading bug reports, it downloads what the adjuster accesses on the computer.

“Ashley didn’t get all the kinks worked out before he got arrested. The second admin has remote access, and that’s what everyone on the forums has. No one is supposed to upload new code until they are sure all the bugs are working because they know about the first admin. They don’t think IT at a small insurance company is smart enough to find it, but they know they are going to be looking extra hard at this program because of where it came from. They aren’t going to risk it until it’s working.”

“I’m confused,” I said, taking a break from the delicious crawfish pie. “How are we supposed to bust anyone if we are preventing them from completing this bounty?”

“Think about it,” Cadmium said. “We’ll have something else to pin on Ashley and he is writing code that we will most likely get access to Abaddon’s computer. We’ll prevent them from doing this and do it in a way that they end up blaming Ashley. If we can get into the computers of some of the other admins, we might be able to get more info on Baba Yaga and Hex.”

“I just don’t see why you and I are here and why Robert couldn’t do this from New York.”

I looked up when Bailey sniggered. “Come on. I saw your face when you were going through those files the past two days. Your interest is piqued, and this is way more fun than looking at a botanist’s pecker while he tries to suck on your toes.”

“Don’t remind me about that. Okay, I find the files interesting.”

“No more complaining. You like the food, you’re enjoying the assignment, and this weekend, I’m showing you all Bourbon Street. You’re having *fun*.”

“Okay, yeah. This is actually a *lot* of fun.”

“Have fun and consider this a vacation,” Luke said. “I’m going to kick your ass in training when we get back.”

“If you don’t treat me the same and let me spar, I’m going to kick you in the dick again.”

Casper just sat there with this shit-eating grin on his face.

“Now, now, Frederick. You were the one that said no dick talk at the table.”

We all started giggling, even Bailey. Relaxed and joking Casper was my favorite.

ELEVEN



Jeremy

Our first week at work flew by. I couldn't speak for Bailey, Casper, and Luke, but Jordan and I were having a *lot* more fun on this assignment than the previous one. Neither of us had to pretend to be into anyone else and we got to work together. They said when we were trained, they were going to partner us up where I'd be the brains watching from behind a computer and she'd be the brawn kicking ass. We actually got to work in the same office for now.

Bailey was taking us out to a very public place I'd never been before, but had heard about. It was full of people and an easy place for her ex to spot her. I saw Bailey at home without her wig, contacts, and how she preferred to dress. People spent hours at the salon to get their hair that light shade of blonde.

Bailey wore hers cropped short and longer on the top. She covered it with brown wigs and styled them as nondescript as possible. She had these gorgeous Elizabeth Taylor eyes, but she wore dark-brown contacts. Bailey had contouring down to

an art. It didn't *look* like she had much makeup on, but she make her eyes look smaller and her pixie nose look straighter.

The only reason I could tell the difference between Bailey and Bailey when she was hiding was that we lived together. The only way anyone else could tell was if they were obsessed with her and spent way too much time thinking about what their ex looked like years after they went into hiding because you're a psycho.

Bailey refused to tell us where we were going until we were all dressed for a night out and waiting for our ride share to get there. She said parking was a nightmare where we were going and she wanted to drink, too.

"There's a drag bar in the Quarter that I went to all the time in college when my ex was out late drinking with his buddies. Those queens helped me figure out who I was, and I dumped him for a girl in one of my classes. He never knew I was going there.

"When I escaped from him and he got away with it, I couldn't go back home because I was scared he'd hurt my family to get to me. I needed a place to crash while I got things in place to disappear.

"They have an apartment in the back for anyone in the community that might be homeless for any reason. I shared it with a sixteen-year-old kid whose parents kicked him to the curb when some idiot outed him before he was ready.

"I made a ton of friends there. They taught me the basics of creating a persona, but instead of it being a flashy drag one, it was one to blend in. There was this guy who was there every night my friend Miss Lavish Lazuli was performing, who was kind of a criminal.

"They snuck him in the back to teach me how to steal identities without getting caught. In exchange, Lavish did a song just for him. He was kind of weird and asked her to perform the Pokémon theme song, but he was really fucking good at what he did without getting caught. He taught me everything he knew. Lavish was my fairy godmother because she had a whole-ass costume made and performed that fucking

song just to get me that information so I could get out and not get caught later.”

“Why am I not shocked your villain origin story is utterly fabulous, Frederick?” Casper asked.

“If anyone, and I mean *anyone*, is still at that club who helped you, they get free moose hugs if they are into that,” Luke said.

We *all* wanted to at least meet them. Bailey hadn’t given us all the gritty details of what she went through, but she’d told us enough to know she had gone through something terrible. Her local law enforcement had completely failed her and because of that, she had to deal with her trauma completely away from her family so that psycho didn’t hurt them. Everyone at that club sounded amazing, not just to Bailey but to anyone else who needed help.

“So, I looked at their page and the events are a little different from the last time I was here. They are doing bingo until nine, then there’s an hour break between events where you can drink and order food. They start performing at eleven. Lavish is running the place now, but should be doing a set tonight. I recognize some of the names performing, but some of them must have started after I left.”

Jordan grabbed Bailey and gave her this enormous hug. She looked like she needed it. We could have seen a drag show in New York, but *this* particular club in New Orleans was important.

It wouldn’t mean the same thing to Bailey and Bailey was now family.

TWELVE



Bailey

I was born in New Orleans and grew up here. I was forlorn when my dad's job transferred him to Alexandria when I was fourteen and I had to go to high school somewhere else. I made damned sure I went to college at Tulane in New Orleans. I met Carl in high school and in hindsight, I should have just told him to go fuck himself when he wasn't happy for me that I got into a school like Tulane because he didn't want me going to college.

Driving through the Quarter brought back all kinds of memories. We studied our asses off, but we partied, too. I jumped out as soon as we pulled up to the club. This was my secret happy place. Carl wanted his boy time with his friends, but he never liked me going out unless he was with me. While he was off drunk probably at the strip club and thinking I was alone in my apartment, I was having my life completely changed by the queens at this club and one lesbian bartender.

I ran to the front door and everyone I brought with me followed. I had my wig and contacts in, but I hadn't contoured as hard tonight. I didn't want to be completely unrecognizable.

We paid the cover, and the hostess was arguing with someone who wanted to sit in the VIP section. She sassily informed them they weren't VIPs and could sit at the table they were given or leave. She whirled around to face us.

"Can I help you, sugar? If you're going to be dramatic like *that*, I'm not in the mood."

They were dressed to the nines with perfect makeup, a flawless wig, and poured into leather. She looked different the last time I saw her, but I don't think I'd ever been so happy to see someone in my entire life. This was Phoenix, the sixteen-year-old I roomed with in the back of the club while I was hiding from my ex. I couldn't communicate with any of them when I left because Carl would use his police and political connections to get this club shut down. I *always* wondered what became of Phoenix.

I jutted my chin out.

"Once upon a time, in the back of this club, you taught me how to contour. How am I doing? How are *you* doing?"

Phoenix squinted and then his face lit up.

"Baz! It's been forever! Oh, my god, is it even safe for you to be home?" he asked squeezing me tight.

"I'm here for work and I've got friends who can protect me. He would have made himself known already if he knew I was here. We're leaving when we finish up."

"Well, unlike those *rude* people who just accosted me, you're definitely VIP. Lavish is going to lose her shit you're back and Ruby is still slinging drinks. You need to say hi. I *hate* doing the hostess thing. I go by Tequila Sunrise when I'm working. I'm going to make Anna Conda swap with me so I can be your waitress in the VIP section until my set starts. Trust me, you *don't* want her taking your orders. She'll probably bring it to the wrong table. We keep telling Lavish to

make her a permanent hostess, but what she lacks in brains, she makes up for in enthusiasm.”

Lavish and her strays. I’d never comment on that because I was one of them. Anna Conda might be a shitty waitress, but Lavish would find a place for her. Phoenix marched us straight up to the bar, where Ruby was slinging drinks like she was when I was still in college. Ruby was a lesbian and fairly gently helped me figure out why I always got more excited around a girl in my art history class than I ever did around my boyfriend without smacking me in the face with a giant *you might be gay* two by four.

“Look what the cat dragged in! She’s wearing a wig and contacts, but Baz is here for work and decided to visit.”

Ruby shrieked and came around the bar to hug me. I introduced her to my friends and Phoenix moved to take us to our table. Ruby grabbed me and held me back.

“*Please* tell me you’re with the hot blonde with legs for days.”

“She’s very straight and with at least two of those guys.”

“Please. I’m not going to ask what you’ve gotten up to in the time you’ve been gone, but these people are more than coworkers. They know the truth and you’ve brought them here. The giant beefy one never stops scanning the club for threats and the blonde girl might be with two of them, but she wants you in on that, too.

“Just something to think about. Anyway, the new bingo games are an enormous hit and you’re going to love them. Lavish mentored Phoenix when he said he wanted to perform here. They do a set together on Saturday night that is phenomenal, so you’re in luck. You also got here early, which is good. When those two are performing together, we eventually have to stop letting people in because it’s a fire hazard.”

I gave Ruby one last hug before I joined my friends. Everyone seemed pretty sure Jordan wasn’t totally straight and into me, but she was also just very friendly. I didn’t want to

ruin what we had going by bringing anything up if everyone was wrong.

I was insanely happy for Lavish and Phoenix. Phoenix had no intention of coming out to his parents until he was in college and away from them. One of his classmate's parents took that choice away from him. He was living in the back of a drag bar dealing with the fact that his parents disowned him and he still managed to be one of the most upbeat people I knew.

I always associated bingo with something my great grandmother would do for fun before the internet, but I'd never experienced it with drag queens. It was *amazing*. Lavish Lazuli was up there calling numbers and she was just as funny as I remembered her.

Phoenix kept the drinks coming. They didn't water down the drinks in New Orleans and Ruby was a master mixologist. I wasn't Jordan or Jeremy. I had limits, and I knew what they were.

I didn't feel right. I hadn't drunk that much, but I felt seriously fucked up, even though we had ordered food. I felt like I couldn't breathe and there were too many people in here. That didn't use to bother me.

"I'm going to get some fresh air," I said, stumbling out of the VIP booth.

Luke moved to follow me, but I stopped him. I just needed ten minutes alone in the alley at the back of the club and I'd be fine. When I got back inside, I'd order a sandwich to soak up the alcohol in my stomach.

I was ignoring my instincts. Something wasn't right. I realized that as soon as I stepped outside. Carl was waiting and snatched me. How had he even gotten something in my drink? I was way too fucked up to fight him.

"Welcome home, Bailey. You aren't escaping me this time."

I wanted to hit him. Since I couldn't, I wanted to scream for Luke. I didn't do any of that.

I blacked out.

THIRTEEN



Jordan

Bailey had literally just left and wanted to be alone, but I could just feel in my gut that something wasn't right. I'd been around drunk Bailey. This wasn't drunk. Bailey knew these people, but I didn't. I couldn't imagine anything bad happening *here*, but her ex was in the same state and I didn't trust him.

Also, Tequila Sunrise had disappeared, and she'd been a pretty attentive waitress. I pushed my way out of the booth and grabbed Luke.

"Bailey drank more at our busts and she didn't get like *this*. Something is wrong."

We all marched to the door at the back where we saw Bailey go. We were met with a whole sight. Some guy with no neck was holding a very drugged Bailey up and was trying to carry her out of the alley. Tequila Sunrise was blocking his way and ready to fight him with her high heel.

"This is official police business. Move out of the way or I'll be forced to arrest you."

“Oh, we know all about you, Carl Matherne. You’re a kidnapper and a rapist. We know what you did to her and what you’re planning to do again. She’s not into you. Get over it,” Tequila sneered.

We all moved into place because we could see Carl had a gun on him and we didn’t want anyone getting shot. Jeremy was looking at something on the wall pretty hard instead of Carl. Whatever he was focusing on, he was plotting.

Carl Matherne just looked like an asshole. Where was his neck? He looked like a frog in a Polo shirt who tried to make up for his frogginess and lack of neck by working out a lot. He didn’t wear his muscles like Luke did. He looked like a lumpy, neckless mattress.

Luke was my hero. He towered over Carl by several inches. I already knew Luke had *way* more training than Carl did and if he went for his gun, Luke would get it away from him.

“Don’t do anything stupid, man. We *all* know Bailey’s story and what you did. You don’t want to fuck around and find out with her new friends.”

He really didn’t. Carl Matherne really wasn’t smart. He wasn’t on duty and according to Bailey, his jurisdiction wasn’t anywhere near here. He tried to drop Bailey and go for his gun. Casper swooped in and caught her. Luke brought his moose fist down on the top of Carl’s head and he collapsed on the ground. That probably wasn’t going to do him any favors with the complete lack of neck thing. He might need a chiropractor to get that half-centimeter of neck he did have back.

Before we could even do anything, the alley was swarming with cops. Tequila Sunrise must have called them. I saw an ambulance at the end of the alley, so maybe she just called to get Bailey to the hospital since she’d been drugged and the cops came. The EMTs joined us.

Casper sprang into action and started explaining what happened. We were *all* witnesses that he tried to kidnap her again and she was clearly drugged. Bailey’d told us what

things were like here. I believed her since she had to run. But there were *multiple* people in this alley who caught him trying to kidnap her. They couldn't say all of us were lying.

Maybe that was just me being naïve. As soon as they pulled out Carl's badge and ID and saw who he was, their entire demeanor changed. They were looking at *us* like we were in the wrong.

"Who knocked out Carl Matherne?" one of them demanded.

"I did," Luke said. "He went for his gun when we were trying to stop him from leaving with Bailey. He's already kidnapped and assaulted her once."

Any *sane* person would have realized Luke saved us all from getting shot and something terrible from happening to Bailey. We weren't dealing with sane people. They all whipped their guns out and trained them on Luke.

"On your knees with your hands behind your head!" one of them yelled.

What in actual fuck? Why was Luke getting arrested? He got on his knees and *let* them put handcuffs on him. Tequila Sunrise wasn't having it.

"Oh, fuck no. He was stopping us from getting shot. Carl Matherne is a rapist."

"Shut up or you'll go down to the station with him!"

"For what?"

Jeremy grabbed me when I started shrieking. They started manhandling Tequila Sunrise and put her in handcuffs, too. I didn't even know *why* they were arresting either of them. Casper was chatting with some officer who wasn't doing all the arresting when I noticed they were taking Bailey and Carl away.

"Where are you taking her?" I yelled.

"To the hospital," Casper said. "They are taking Luke in for assaulting a police officer until they can get Carl's statement at the hospital when he wakes up. They said they'd

meet us at the hospital to get our statements when we are calmer.”

“Calmer? What the fuck?”

“Come on,” Jeremy said, slipping an arm around me.

Casper came to the other side and wrapped an arm around me, too. He’d apparently already ordered a ride share to the hospital since we didn’t know where we were going.

“Don’t tell the officers, but I grabbed Carl’s phone,” Casper whispered.

“I have a plan, too,” Jeremy said.

Luke was in jail with Tequila Sunrise, but I could *always* count on Jeremy and Casper to have a plan.

FOURTEEN



Jordan

We paced the waiting room for what seemed like ages. The cops never came to get us. I hoped Carl was good and knocked the fuck out. I hoped smashing the top of his head like that with no neck meant he couldn't poop for two weeks. I *hated* him.

Casper was off to the side with his phone. He was either talking with someone or fiddling with it. Jeremy asked me if I needed snuggles or revenge for Bailey. Um, both? If he could get her justice, I wanted that. Jeremy was engrossed in his tablet. He brought that thing everywhere. And my poor moose was in jail!

Finally, the doctors came to get us. They let us go sit with her while she woke up. Carl had given her a massive dose of Rohypnol. He practically ODeD her and they had to give her Flumazenil. She was still sleeping. Bailey looked so tiny in that bed.

I sat there holding her hand while Jeremy and Casper did their thing on their tablets and phone.

“Has someone called Boss?” I asked.

“First thing I did. She also—”

Before Casper could finish, the same three cops that treated Luke and Tequila Sunrise like shit came in and they were all giving us stink eye.

“Carl is awake. He told us how the big guy drugged his girlfriend’s drink and you all assaulted him when he tried to get her out of there.”

“If he actually had a neck, I’d tell you it was full of horse shit,” I said.

“Excuse me?” the cop glowered.

“She’s right,” Jeremy said. “There was a camera in the alley that belongs to the club. I took the liberty of hacking into the feed. I downloaded the whole thing. While we were in the waiting room, I checked the club footage, too. I found where Carl slipped the roofie in her drink when Tequila got stopped by another table with our tray.

“Now, you *could* arrest all of us, seize my tablet, and try to cover this up like the last time he did this, but I’ve already emailed all of this to our boss in New York. She knows you’ve got her other employee in a cell for absolutely no reason. You *really* don’t want to piss her off.”

The cops looked like they were ready to strangle Jeremy and break his tablet, but just then, there was a knock on the door.

“Ah. That would be the backup I called,” Casper said. “Boss knew he might try something and had a plan.”

Casper opened the door and Deepthroat came in followed by another older man I swore I knew from somewhere. I couldn’t place it. I *knew* that face from somewhere. And I really hoped Deepthroat didn’t recognize me because the last time I saw him, I barfed *all* over him. And his eyes were right on me.

“How is your stomach, dear? Are you feeling queasy?”

“Fine!” I squeaked.

I mean, technically, I drank four Hurricanes, split shrimp nachos with Jeremy, and ate a whole bowl of crawfish queso, but none of that was from a gas station and I *could* have kept going.

Deepthroat walked over and flashed something to one of the cops. I saw him visibly pale. I knew Deepthroat was CIA and one of Boss's exes, but I didn't know they were still close enough for him to come here and rescue one of her agents.

And it was still bothering me that I couldn't place where I knew the other guy from. Then, it hit me.

"Oh, my shit! You're that guy that prosecuted that guy! When I was in elementary school, I think both of my parents wanted to fuck you!"

He gave me a slight bow of his head.

"LaMarcus Daniel. And that guy was the former President of the United States. I told you this generation still knew me. Anyway, Bailey Breaux's boss took an interest in her case. She pulled her rape kit and had it tested against a sample of Carl Matherne. It was a match.

"She's been calling once a week for several years. She called the police *and* the attorney general here. Boss recorded the calls and had them transcribed. She had copies made of the results and sent them by certified mail to both offices. Boss has records of who signed for them. I believe the police chief *and* the attorney general told her to get fucked when she followed up after the evidence was in their hands."

"She also brought it to the attention of the federal government. This level of corruption can't go ignored. I suggest you let Luke and the drag queen you arrested go and actually arrest the criminal in this case," Deepthroat said.

"Actually, I took his phone," Casper said. "It fell out of his pocket when he fell. You don't just need to arrest him. He got a taste for it with Bailey. You need to send someone to his house *right now* because there's a girl there that needs help."

"Shit," Deepthroat swore, storming out with his phone.

LaMarcus just glared at them.

“There’s probably been a *lot* of girls that needed help over the years. We’re going to be looking into this and the level of corruption it took to cover it up. I suggest you go make arrangements to release our people and do what you need to do to get the Matherne boy in prison.”

Holy shit. Boss had been quietly working in the background this entire time. Of course, she knew. I doubted she knew about the other girls or we would have already busted him without Bailey’s blessing. Boss would *always* take care of us.

Bailey’s ex was finally going to pay and they couldn’t cover it up this time. Especially since I knew my boyfriend. If they tried and Bailey was okay with it, he’d blast it all over social media. Casper was still furiously typing on his cell phone.

“Guys like Carl piss me off. He’s not owed anything. And what the fuck is *up* with his neck? Let’s see them cover it up when I blast this all over social media,” Casper snapped.

Casper was really my hero. We *all* would have gotten arrested if he hadn’t stayed calm at the scene and he was clearly pissed. Casper was the one Boss trusted with her side plan and he delivered. He kept his cool and got Deepthroat and LaMarcus here before the cops could arrest us, too.

I was *done* pretending like I didn’t like him. I flung myself at him and pressed my lips against his. He stiffened for a minute, and then passionately kissed me back.

“Thank you. I’m pretty sure you saved us all from getting arrested or shot. And read *everything* into that kiss because I mean it.”

Casper kissed my forehead.

“I mean it, too. We have to be strong for Bailey now.”

I knew. I looked over at Bailey in her hospital bed. I was *done* pretending I wasn’t into all of them. I crawled into her bed and pulled her to my chest. She might not return my feelings, but everyone could use a good cuddle.

FIFTEEN



Luke

Wow. I'd never been arrested before. Tequila Sunrise was sitting next to me. She'd taken her wig and heels off, but I hadn't caught her real name. Of all things to get arrested for, knocking out Bailey's ex was top two. What was up with that man's neck? It was like a chin on collarbones. How did he swallow?

"Thank you. He would have shot me and run off with Baz. You can call me Phoenix when the wig is off. I don't know what Baz does for work now, but you can clearly handle yourself."

"I love the nickname Baz. We didn't know her real name for the longest. Her pet name is Frederick with us. She's a badass now. If he hadn't drugged her, she could have beat his ass herself, even with the gun."

"I believe it. Do you regret getting arrested?"

“Are you kidding? Bopping that fucker in the head was immensely satisfying. I’d do it again.”

“The only reason I didn’t stick my heel in his eye socket was that I saw the gun.”

I eyed Phoenix’s heels. They were about six inches with a tall platform.

“Can I ask you a question and I mean absolutely no disrespect?”

“Sure, but I have my heels if you piss me off.”

“How do you walk and do everything I saw at the club in those heels? I’d fall over and break something.”

“Well, you’re a *big* boy, so you’d have to practice with smaller heels first. And I’m guessing tucking might be a bit difficult,” he said, eyeing my crotch.

“I’m with the hot blonde.”

“What’s *with* the hot blonde? Because she was all over you and the sexy geek, but I got vibes she’s into the ginger and Baz, too.”

I threw back my head and laughed. At this point, we were both trying to distract ourselves from what was going on with Bailey. Was she okay? Had she woken up? My friends weren’t sitting here in jail with me, so I was guessing Casper stepped in and made sure we *all* didn’t get busted.

“She has a big heart, and she’s into all of us with the blessing of the sexy geek, who she was with first. The ginger is getting over being cheated on by a frankly awful woman and honestly, I don’t know who’s worse at seeing the giant-ass neon sign someone is into them—Bailey or the blonde. Anyway, I hope I’m there when it happens because it’s going to be explosive. You met the blonde a bit when you were waiting on us. You should see her when she’s nervous.”

Before Phoenix could even say anything, some surly-looking motherfucker came to our cell. He was posturing like he was going to beat our asses, but I could kick his in multiple fighting styles. I didn’t even *like* fighting when it counted.

Sparring was one thing. I wasn't *trying* to hurt anyone. I'd happily hurt this man if he tried to fuck around and find out because I had a feeling he wasn't going to come at me first. He was going to go straight for Phoenix.

"The two of you are free to go. Apparently, you have friends in high places," he spat.

Phoenix and I collected our shit they took when they booked us and made it out to the parking lot.

"I don't have any friends in high places. There's some high-up politician who likes sneaking into the club and watching my sets. He sends me flowers, but his wife and the people who vote for him just *would not* like that at all. He pretends to be anti drag all over the place, but he secretly loves the queens. He's not going to swoop in and save my ass. Certainly not when Carl Matherne is involved. He's probably friends with his shitty dad."

"Bailey has a mama bear in high places looking out for her. She's looking out for all of us. Boss is *much* more effective than a closeted politician overcompensating by hating on what he really loves."

Phoenix started stuttering.

"You aren't talking about Stantech Boss are you?"

"You know her?"

Boss was pretty famous in the corporate world, but I didn't take a drag queen in New Orleans to be getting this excited about her.

"Are you serious? She's trans and like, a major hero in this community, even if you don't live in New York or follow finance. It was legal to fire us for our sexuality until a few years ago. They get around that now by making up something stupid and lying about it. Boss is a fucking pioneer. She was an out and proud trans woman before many people were doing that. She started a whole-ass corporation and was successful at it despite all the hate she probably got.

"She hired and nurtured people from our community back when other people overlooked the fact that we knew what we

were doing just because we were gay or trans. I'm still young, but even *I* know about Boss. She has a ton of foundations for people like me whose parents kicked them out for being gay. I can't believe Baz ended up working for her!"

"Well, I'm guessing she got us *both* out of jail. We all knew Bailey's story, even if it took a while for her to tell us her real name and we didn't find out Carl's until we got here. Boss has always told her to just say the word, and she'd make him pay. She probably had a plan and a backup plan when we came. Do you know what hospital they would have taken Bailey to?"

"Already on it. We carpool to the club since parking is a nightmare. It wasn't my turn to drive tonight, so I'm not leaving anyone stranded and they know not to wait for me. I just texted Lavish to let her know I'm out. I ordered a ride share for us. All the queens that knew Baz before she left want to know when she wakes up so they can visit and make sure she's okay. The bouncer tonight was hired after Bailey and I switched with Anna Conda so I could chat with Baz. If *anyone* had been working the front door or hostessing that knew her, he wouldn't have been let inside. He must have been skulking in the shadows or someone would have seen him and kicked him out since she was there."

"Girl, Bailey and the rest of them were here for work. I was *just* here to protect Bailey. I should have gone out there with her. I should have known something was up with those drinks."

"Poison tasters went out of fashion when the peasants overthrew the monarchy. What were you going to do, drink it first?"

"Oh, god no. Bailey kicked me in the balls once and I taught her how to fight after that. If I got between her and booze, there would have been a brawl. I've been in a drunk cab with her and I should have known."

"I was the one bringing the drinks. I still don't know *how* the drugs ended up in hers. Ruby keeps an eye at the bar for that. She kept your drinks behind the bar until I came to get

them and then handed them directly to me. I took them straight to your table.”

We walked into the hospital and got directions to Bailey’s room. Casper and Jeremy were sitting on a tiny sofa and Jordan was passed out in Bailey’s bed snuggling with her.

“I guess she decided to make her move.”

“She kissed Casper, too. And he kissed her back,” Jeremy said.

“Ooh,” I said.

“You’re both children,” Casper groaned.

“What happened while we were in jail?”

Casper filled me in. I suspected Boss, but Boss really wasn’t fucking around. Deepthroat was an ex-boyfriend who had a mutually beneficial relationship with her now and she brought him cases the federal government might want to look at. LaMarcus was the former attorney general of the United States who prosecuted a former sitting president for the first time in history and got them jail time.

LaMarcus still worked for the attorney general’s office and he was also one of Boss’s lovers. It wasn’t public knowledge he was in a relationship with a trans woman when everything was going down with his big case. That was over a decade ago. He was out and proud with her now.

The fact that Boss sent them *both* down here meant she wasn’t fucking around. And then Casper dropped the bomb that he stole Carl’s phone when I knocked him out and he was doing this to other girls. If Boss had known about that, she would have confessed to Bailey she found out his name to get her blessing about sending a team of agents to his house to bust him and rescue anyone there.

If there were more agents than just us, they would have been here. I was guessing if Deepthroat and LaMarcus weren’t here, they were handling it. Jeremy explained to Phoenix *how* the drugs got into Bailey’s drink. Casper followed up with assuring Phoenix that Carl clearly had a history of doing this

and barring Carl screwing up, it would have been difficult for Phoenix to have caught him drugging the drink.

“Poor Baz. I’m glad all of you were there because he would have shot me and got away with it. When we were living together in the back of the club, she didn’t want to talk about what he did, but she had *so many* bruises all over her. She probably should have stayed at the hospital a little longer, but as soon as she wasn’t dizzy as fuck because he was withholding food and water to make her compliant, she forced them to discharge her because she didn’t feel safe. Those fuckhead cops wouldn’t even put a guard on her door when she said it was Carl.”

I knew what I needed to do. Bailey never *talked* about it when she was thinking about him, but she always wanted to snuggle and watch TV. I’d play with her hair and we’d just sit in silence until she felt better. Bailey had Jordan, but she needed to wake up with *all* the snuggles.

It was going to be a tight fit, but I crawled into Bailey’s hospital bed and smashed her between Jordan and me.

SIXTEEN



Bailey

I didn't know where I was, how I got there, who was in my bed, or whose really nice boobs were in my face. The last thing I remembered was playing drag bingo and waiting to see Phoenix and Lavish perform. I wasn't at the house we were renting. It smelled too sterile, and this bed wasn't as comfortable.

I felt terrible. I had a pounding headache and my mouth was dry and tasted like ass. What the actual shit happened last night and why didn't I remember? I *never* got drunk enough to forget what happened.

I knew who was spooning my back because Luke was my snuggle buddy. I couldn't imagine him being in bed with me if I went home with someone. Luke and I *never* did anything like that. It would be weird.

I cracked my eyes open and why was it so bright in here? I groaned and dealt with it. I was in the hospital and Jordan and

Luke were in my bed. Why couldn't I *remember* anything?

"Someone better tell me what happened last night," I groaned.

"I'll tell the doctor she's awake," Casper said, leaving.

Jordan filled me in about what happened in the most Jordan way possible. And she didn't stop to give me time to process or ask any questions.

"I could just tell something was wrong because you never got like that when we drank together, so we followed you and found Tequila Sunrise trying to stop him. What did you see in him, anyway? He literally has no neck. Like, I've seen people with hardly any neck, but I don't even know how he has a functioning throat to swallow food and water. Like that is less neck than I've seen on people who I thought had no neck.

"And then Luke had to bop him on the head to prevent him from shooting us and taking you, which was like, seriously satisfying, but I don't know what I would have done if he had left that alley with you. I was *so* mad because he was touching you like he had the right and he didn't. And it's stupid because *I* want to touch you, but I'm not an idiot and I don't think you're into every single girl just because you're gay. I just think I might be a little gay, too."

Jordan confirmed what literally everyone had told me in the most Jordan way possible. She also looked embarrassed as all fuck like I was going to kick her out of this cramped bed and never speak to her again.

And then she just went for it and kissed me.

I thought about kissing her all the time. I had thought it was impossible but wondered what it would be like. I didn't picture it happening like this. I wasn't sure if they pumped my stomach, but my mouth tasted like they had done something vile to treat me. I pictured this going down with candles, roses, a dinner I cooked, and a toothbrush. A toothbrush played a giant part in this fantasy.

Bless this girl. She must *really* like me because she didn't seem to care, so I just kissed the shit out of her back until the

doctor came in to check on me and found me making out with a former model with a giant moose on the other side of me.

He cleared his throat.

“You seem to be erm...feeling better.”

“I don’t remember shit, my head hurts, it’s too bright in here, my throat is dry, I’d really like to brush my teeth, and I’d love to know what happened to the guy who was brought in with me.”

“Your memory may or may not come back. The dose he gave you was pretty high and not very safe. They said he lives in Alexandria. I’m thinking he gave you too much because he didn’t want you to wake up until he got you home. We can get you something for the headache and turn the lights off. There’s water on the bedside table, but you might want to ask one of your guests to leave the bed. They aren’t really meant for more than one person.

“As for the man who came in with you, the FBI has taken over and have two people guarding his door. He’s handcuffed to the bed and not really going anywhere. The only people allowed to see him are me, the nurses, and people trying to find out what happened to the other girls on his phone. Right now, he’s refusing to talk until he gets a lawyer and someone calls his dad. I never voted for his dad and don’t particularly care for him, but the son doesn’t quite realize daddy isn’t getting him out of this one.”

“Good,” Phoenix said. “You didn’t see her when she escaped from him the first time.”

I wasn’t mad at Boss for going behind my back, finding out his name, and trying to get justice. I was mad at myself. If I had *any* idea he kept doing this after I escaped him, I would have sicced Boss and her entire agency on him. She would have done more than testing DNA and harassing the cops and the DA.

She would have sent someone down to work him and they would have eventually figured it out. All those other girls were on me.

“Hey!” Luke growled, squeezing me. “If you’re blaming yourself, I’m finally going to let you spar with me, but I’m going to beat your ass.”

“It’s not your fault,” Phoenix said. “You weren’t even in the same state. He’s been going to work every day for *years* to an entire office of cops and detectives. Some of them hung out with him and probably went to his house. *They* should have known. Pretending like *your* case never happened is one thing. Covering up a serial? Not even Daddy has enough money to pay for that without someone talking. How were *you* supposed to know halfway across the country when his coworkers who are supposed to arrest people like that, didn’t?”

“When did you get so fucking smart, Phoenix?”

Seriously, I was still seeing Phoenix as that sixteen-year-old kid who hadn’t figured *his* shit out yet and couldn’t even remotely help me with mine, so he taught me how to contour so I could hide better because that’s what he *could* do.

“Bitch, you know I had a 4.3 GPA when my parents kicked me out and was taking all AP classes. I got into Tulane on a scholarship and when I’m not looking all fabulous like this, I work in a lab with my own research grant doing science shit above your head.”

“Don’t sass me. My head hurts. When can I leave?”

“Oh, I looked up your file the last time he did this since you were treated here,” the doctor said. “Since he’s currently handcuffed to the bed and being guarded by the FBI and can’t get to you, I trust you won’t check yourself out against medical advice.”

“How long am I looking at, doc?”

“Sunday night at the soonest. The drug has a short half life.”

“I can work with that.”

“I don’t love what he did, or that I got arrested, but he would have gotten rid of the other girl once he had you home, so she’s safe. He’s finally going to pay and so is everyone who

ever covered for him. And you got a banging hot new girlfriend,” Phoenix said.

“Yeah, I did, didn’t I?”

“Welcome to the group thing,” Jeremy said. “I’m completely okay with all of it, but just this group.”

“I’m not even sure how I’m going to manage all of you. Jeremy’s cock is pierced, Luke probably has a big moose dick, I’ve never been with a woman before, and Casper probably has hidden ginger superpowers,” Jordan said.

The doctor chose that moment to excuse himself. Things were definitely looking up. I could *finally* visit my family again.

SEVENTEEN



Casper

It wasn't some giant revelation that Bailey was a shitty patient. The nurses didn't know what to do with the giant army of drag queens that showed up after Phoenix told them she was awake and accepting visitors. They were a pretty rowdy bunch. Bailey didn't have a roommate here, but the nurses threatened to kick everyone out multiple times if we didn't keep it down.

Honestly? I hated what happened to Bailey. I hated that it happened when she was with us. But watching her with her friends that knew her before Carl did what he did and then helped her after? I loved everything about it.

Bailey never talked about her shit. She had other ways of coping that involved cooking, burying herself in work, and beating the crap out of Luke and me.

Bailey, of course, demanded to be released as soon as her friends left, even if her doctor wanted her to stay until the

drugs were totally out of her system. She wouldn't take no for an answer and technically, she was out of the woods, so they let her go. She wasn't in danger, but she didn't even want to be in the same building as him.

We were all back home and in this giant snuggle pile on the couch. I couldn't believe Jordan was into me. I knew she was dating Jeremy and had something going on with Luke, but I never dreamed I'd be included in that. I was *happy*.

Jordan was just so different from my ex. McKinley always wanted more. She didn't even like my momma's cooking. McKinley thought Italian food had too many carbs and refused to eat it. If I made it for myself because I was stress eating, she'd expect an entire second meal for her with as little carbs as possible. She wasn't happy with any gift unless it cost two months' salary.

McKinley constantly accused me of cheating on her. She was rabid about it and always demanding to see my phone. She was projecting because she had been stepping out on me the entire time.

And even though McKinley had been cheating on me with another agent, I was okay with all of *this*. Was it really cheating if we were all friends and knew about each other? We had Jeremy's blessing. I think all of us knew better than to try to cage Jordan.

They had to be back at the office early in the morning, but we were all glued to the news. Carl Matherne had gone national. The FBI rescued one girl from his attic. They were still searching his yard, but they'd already found two bodies.

My phone went off. Jordan was just sort of draped across all of us like the very tall queen that she was. I didn't particularly feel like moving, but the only people with this number were work. Boss was better at work-life balance than I was and the only reason anyone would be contacting me right now was everything going on.

It ended up being Deepthroat. When I hung up, I didn't know how to tell Bailey the FBI wanted her statement. She *never* talked about it. I should have known, but several of the

drag queens mentioned her bruises and the doctor talked about how dehydrated she was the first time she ended up here. Bailey told her story once. She clearly didn't want to go through it again or she would have talked it out with us instead of beating our asses.

“I have no problem giving another statement to people who are actually listening and are going to do something about it. We need to wrap up this assignment. I can stop with the contacts and wigs, which frankly I hate, and I can dress how I want to dress. They are keeping my name out of things and no one has shown my photo, but Jody needs to be long gone when Bailey comes back to testify. Everything we do from now on needs to be perfect because at any point, my name and photo could get released. Clearly, *someone* recognized me and called him.”

“I'm close,” Jeremy said. “We're mostly stuck right now because I can't do everything I need to do until someone on the forum *thinks* they've won that bounty so we can get more access.”

“And that's going to happen any day now because they are posting that they are getting close. Keep playing with the program. Jeremy has already altered the original exploit so they aren't getting any actual information they can use,” I said.

“Some of these claims are insanely fucked up,” Bailey said. “It would get my mind off shit since Luke still won't let me hit him.”

“If we had the room, I would *completely* let you wail on me right now.”

“I'm going to take a shower. Want to join me, Jordan?” Bailey asked.

Jordan let out a little squeak, but she didn't say no. She got up and followed her. I wouldn't mind taking a shower with Jordan and worshipping every single inch of that insanely hot body, but I don't think any of us wanted to get up to anything kinky in this house. The walls were paper thin and you could hear everything.

Bailey couldn't kick Luke in the junk again, so she was going to blow off steam in another way. I was jealous, but when Jordan and I went there, it was going to be when the entire house couldn't hear me making her scream.

Which was kind of stupid because I was pretty sure we'd eventually get to the point where we'd be making her scream together. We just weren't there yet.

EIGHTEEN



Jordan

I was nervous as fuck and it had nothing to do with Bailey being a woman. I got nervous every time I had sex with someone for the first time. And now with these thin walls, I was really worried I made donkey noises. Bailey would *definitely* tell me if I made donkey noises.

I'd been a proud owner of a vagina for several decades. After I broke up with my ex, I got superb at learning how to operate mine for orgasms. I could just experiment with what *I* liked and go from there to see what Bailey liked.

Then again, I literally *just* kissed her and this could just be a shower. Maybe I was worried about donkey noises for nothing. I could save that for later. Should I just ovary up and *ask* Jeremy now that I was thinking about it? Donkey sex noises were kind of like innocently doom scrolling on the internet and getting Rick rolled. It was going to take a while to get that out of your head.

Bailey shut the bathroom door and looked at me.

“I was going to wash your hair, but there’s a bit of a height difference. Why the fuck are you so damned tall?”

“My dad is tall and skinny. Why do you want to wash my hair when *I* should be washing yours?”

“Maybe you can slouch down a bit and we can do each other.”

“You’re kinda short. Why the fuck are you so damned short?”

“Smart ass,” she said, whipping her shirt off.

Bailey had a small, tight body. It was sexy as fuck. I just stared for a minute.

“I’m sorry, but Luke is insane if he thinks you’re not strong enough to punch him in the dick yet.”

“One thing to know about Luke if you’re going to date all of us. Luke and Casper are my best friends. Luke and I have never dated and will never date. The idea is revolting to both of us. Luke would *never* label himself this, but he’s a total daddy. We don’t let him cook because Casper and I are better at it. Luke goes overboard when it comes to caring for his people. He knows damned well I’m in fighting shape. He’s being extra cautious. I’m just going to have to kick him in the dick again to prove my point. Am I the only one getting naked? We don’t have to do anything you don’t want.”

“Oh, I want,” I said, ripping off my shirt. “But if I make donkey noises, you have to promise to be nice about it when you tell me. I don’t *know* if I make donkey noises, but I’ve been having an existential crisis about it since these walls are thin.”

Bailey grabbed me and kissed me to shut me up.

“We aren’t jumping straight into sex. We’ve only just kissed and you’re new to all this. Baby steps. It’s a shower with some furious making out. You’ve only decided you’re bisexual like, a day ago. I’m not sure what kind of girlfriend you think I am, but it’s not the kind that rushes things. Besides the walls in this place are miserably thin. Maybe we both make donkey noises. Thank you for putting that in my head.”

Bailey and I hopped into the shower. I didn't need to be nervous at all. She took her time, and this was sexy as fuck. We soaped each other up and I washed her hair. It was different from Jeremy but in a good way. Bailey was tiny, but had the body of someone trained in several styles of fighting. She was still rounded in places a man wouldn't be.

It was just so perfect. She took her time with me and was just so gentle for someone who kicked Luke in the junk right when they first met. I was relaxed and extremely turned on. Dragging her to my room seemed like a good idea, but her advice was solid. I didn't want to rush this and ruin it either.

I cared for every last one of these people and wanted to keep them. I knew what Jeremy was like as a boyfriend. I was getting used to Luke. Something told me Bailey was going to be very different as a girlfriend than she was as my coworker.

Bailey wasn't just taking her time with me because I was new to all this. I needed to take my time with Bailey and Casper. Bailey for the obvious reasons with her ex. Casper because his ex cheated on him behind his back and I was asking him to share me with our roommates.

This was it. Even though I moved all the way across the country with the bass player, I never saw him as end game. This group was. I wasn't going to fuck it up.

I was moaning as Bailey sucked my nipple when we ran out of hot water. Bailey groaned and pulled away.

"I could do this all night, but, apparently, when they were flipping this shotgun to rent it out, they didn't spring for a tankless water heater like our penthouse."

"Oh, damn. It got cold really fast."

"Your nipples do this cute thing when you get cold."

"Oh, my god, so do yours!"

We rushed out of the shower and Bailey tried to towel dry me. I would have stopped her because she was really the one who needed to be spoiled right now. It seemed like something she needed to do, so I let her. I turned right around and dried

her hair because, after everything, she needed someone looking out for her, too.

“Want to sleep with Jeremy and me tonight?”

Did she even want to be alone?

“Nah. I have my thing with you, but Jeremy isn’t included in that. We aren’t at that point where I’m ready to share you in the same bed with him, even if we are just sleeping. I’m okay, really. All of you saved me. I personally didn’t get to hit him, but Luke did. He’s going to pay for everything he did and with Deepthroat and LaMarcus involved, it’s going to be hard to cover this kind of shit up again. Phoenix was right. It makes them all look insanely bad that they ignored me, hired him, and worked with him all these years and he was doing all this.”

I kissed her again and went to get in bed. It was going to be a bitch waking up. Bailey decided she wanted to leave the hospital pretty late at night and we were up later watching the news. Then the shower thing happened.

Still, this is what *needed* to happen. I wasn’t going to tell Bailey how to heal. I would just be here along the way. We all would.

NINETEEN



Jordan

I thought we were going to end up being seated with the rest of the adjusters on Monday. We didn't really know where to go, so we went back to the small room we had been working in and Savannah was waiting. She asked if we were ready to get to work. I asked if we were sitting with everyone else or staying in this room. It would work out better for our mission if we stayed in this room with the door shut, but I didn't really understand why we weren't sitting with everyone else.

“Sugar, the only people that know about the software you are testing are the four people in this room, the higher ups, and the Department of Insurance. Our workers have been complaining about the outdated software for ages. The computers they are working on are old and laggy. It's impeding their work. We don't want them to know we are testing this. We don't want to get their hopes up if it turns out we can't use it. If it fails, we're going to have to shop around for a new software that everyone is happy with, but it will take

time. You're staying in this room and I don't want you to mention to anyone else here what you are doing."

It seemed like a lot. I got this was a tiny local company that was building itself back up following a bankruptcy after they got in trouble with the Department of Insurance. Computers that old definitely needed to be updated, and I got that their software was why they couldn't, but there were plenty of places that could have gotten them a program that didn't make national news like Affirmative. It just seemed like a huge risk even if you didn't know what I knew.

That was actually fine by all three of us. There were already so many secrets we were keeping here. We got more privacy in this room and if Savannah shut the door, we might be able to talk privately. When Savannah did leave, Bailey looked directly at me and knew what I was thinking. She told me absolutely no talking out loud unless we were keeping up the pretense of reporting a bug to Robert. If we talked about anything else, do it discreetly over text.

I took my seat across from her and Jeremy took his at the head of the table. We had desktops, and he had two different laptops in front of him. I noticed he brought his tablet under his jacket and slipped it onto the table. I put my headset on and thankfully, Savannah had provided us with scripts for most accident scenarios. My task list was empty, as we had just gotten there five minutes ago, but as soon as I hit refresh, I noticed a new claim.

I opened it and read the notes from the first notice of loss department where I used to work. According to the notes, our insured had backed into a pedestrian who had a walker. I knew from reading previous cases that I was expected to call our insured first. The number we had on file didn't have a voicemail set up. That seemed to be common here, and I noticed in previous files, if there was no voicemail, the adjuster would call five times in a row before they gave up.

I was about to call for the fourth time when my line rang. I had no claims and had no idea who could possibly be calling me. I picked up the phone and gave my fake name and the company name.

“Yeah, someone called me from this number.”

“May I get your name please?”

“Bertha.” Good. My insured. I was guessing she didn’t pick up the phone because it was an unknown number and she was avoiding someone or some company. She called back to see who it was and intended on hanging up if it was someone she didn’t want to talk to.

“Bertha, I was trying to reach you about an accident you were involved in. Do you have a minute to give me a recorded statement?”

“Yeah, I got a minute, but it wasn’t my fault.”

“You can get all that out on the recorded statement, okay?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

I started out by asking her first and last name, which she gave me. Things went downhill when I asked for her address.

“I live with the Lord.”

“Is there an address we can mail you things to there?”

“Are you blaspheming, young lady?”

Jesus, my first person had to be difficult. No voicemail to leave a message and she had to make it weird when I needed her address.

“No, Ma’am, we just may need to mail you something and need a postal address.”

“I live with the Lord. That’s all you need to know.”

I made a note to look her up later to see if I could find an address on either her policy or that database.

“Can you give me the date, time, and place of the accident?”

“Yeah, last night around eight at night in my driveway.”

I didn’t ask where the driveway was because apparently it was celestially blessed. If Jesus was her roommate, he should have stopped her from backing into someone. What the actual fuck?

“Can you tell me in your own words what happened in the accident?”

“Yeah, I was leaving my house after I got home from church to go get something to eat. Joe, my neighbor, likes to set up his walker behind people’s cars so they back into him. He does it so he can go to the hospital and get the good drugs. I see him on his front porch smoking acid all the time. The Lord used to tell me to buy him cigarettes and beer since he was down on his luck, but since Satan told that man to stand behind my car, I’m not buying him a thing anymore.”

“Did you see anything when you were backing up?”

“Hell no! Didn’t I just tell you he does this on purpose? He was hiding back there where I couldn’t see him so he could get the happy pills.”

“Has this happened to your other neighbors? Do you have contact numbers for them so I could get statements?”

“They’re all out of minutes.”

“Every single one of them?”

“That’s what I said, didn’t I?”

I wrapped up the recording and promised to be in touch after scheduling an appraiser to go out and look at her vehicle since she had collision coverage. I tried to find contact information for Joe Robert, but his name appeared to be quite common and I found at least fifteen Joe Roberts in Louisiana. While I was pulling up Bertha’s policy information to find an address, since I needed to add that to the claim anyway, I thought maybe I could narrow down the search for Joe Robert if I had a street and zip code.

“Can you even smoke acid?” I wondered while I was digging through her policy.

Bailey and Jeremy both looked at me like I was insane. I told them why I was asking and I heard Bailey’s signature cackle for the first time since everything went down with Carl. It was good to hear her laughing again, and she informed me that I was going to have to get used to storytellers here.

I did manage to find out where Bertha and the Lord lived from her policy. I plugged it into the claim and went back to the database the hackers wanted access to. I couldn't find a Joe Robert on her street, but there was only two Joe Roberts in Mamou, wherever that was. I started calling both. The first Joe Robert had ten different cell phones listed, and they were all out of service or didn't have a voicemail. The second Joe Robert had fifteen phone numbers listed and five emails I would have been too embarrassed to list on any site asking for my contact information.

The first two numbers were out of service, but the third number didn't have a voicemail set up, but rang several times. I called twice, then sat back and waited. I wondered if he was going to be like Bertha and call back and ask who I was. Much like Bertha, my phone rang with a male voice asking who I was. His accent was even thicker than Bertha's and I had a little trouble understanding him.

I asked his name and explained why I called. He agreed to give me a recorded statement and when he said his first and last name on the recording, I found out Robert is not pronounced the way it is everywhere else in the world the way it is in Louisiana. When he told me his last name, he said Ro-bear. I just went with it, but I wondered how many other names I would be butchering unless Bailey helped me.

According to Joe, he was just walking on the sidewalk and didn't realize she was backing up. He couldn't get out of the way fast enough because of the walker and she bumped him. According to Joe, he didn't leave in an ambulance and go to the emergency room *for happy pills* and she only dented his walker. He wasn't claiming any injuries since her vehicle didn't touch him, but he wanted to know if we would fix the dented leg in his walker.

I wasn't quite sure how to handle property damage on the walker, but then I remembered a claim I had reviewed where the adjuster had to replace a car seat. I asked him to send me a photo of the walker and a website where I could purchase it new so I could review replacing his walker. He was totally happy and way more cooperative than my insured.

I turned to Bailey. “That guy’s name is not pronounced anywhere near how it’s spelled. How many more names like that are there here?”

“Did you get Robert or Abear?”

“Abear? How is that one spelled?”

“You would look at it and see Hebert. Don’t ever say it like it’s spelled to someone with that last name or they will know you aren’t from here.”

“Anything else?”

“Those are the main ones. You sounded like you had an interesting one. Would I need to be getting involved in that one?”

“I thought so based on that epic statement from our insured, but I just think she didn’t see him and he couldn’t get out of her way because of his walker. She claimed he’s done this to the neighbors, but they are all, apparently, out of minutes. She made up this big elaborate story to make it sound like he was trying to stage something so her rates don’t go up. Does anyone in Louisiana actually have a working voicemail?”

“Probably half and half. I have no idea if I’m only getting your SIU claims or what, but so far, my task list is empty.”

“Wait, I got a new one,” I said, diving into the file. I had hardly gotten into the reporting notes when Savannah burst in.

“Change of plans, my babies. The Department of Insurance is pressuring us to have an update about a functional program with no hinky extras sooner than the original deadline. We need both of you taking claims to fully test the system. Jody, I know you haven’t done the initial work in a long time, but you’ve done it before. We’ll need you to do it again. You’ll still get any SIU claims the two of you find, but we can’t send you anything the other adjusters find because they’re in a different system.”

“I don’t mind the extra work at all,” Bailey said, giving her a smile I knew was fake, but Savannah didn’t. “Anything to get this program up and running.”

“I’ll be manually routing claims to you since we can’t add you fully yet. I’m not going to overwhelm you with a ton like our regular adjusters because we want you to have time to find bugs while still working claims.”

Savannah disappeared and Bailey rolled her eyes. “I thought they were never going to suggest letting me do claims, too. The more we access the system, the more chances we have of getting out of here.”

Either Savannah worked quickly or they just had a lot of accidents because Bailey told us she already had a claim and we both set to work. My claims for the rest of the day were fairly straightforward and mostly rear-end accidents, but I was surprised again at how often our Lord and Savior was involved in accidents in Louisiana. What I thought was just going to be an easy rear-end accident ended up with a meandering statement from my insured about how he didn’t realize the person in front of him stopped because Jesus started speaking to him through his car radio.

I kept my voice normal, but I had no control about what my face looked like and I was glad Jared, my insured, couldn’t see it. According to the claimant, our insured rammed into the back of him, appeared to be piss drunk, and assaulted the officer at the scene. He was claiming extreme neck pain, back pain, and headaches. I asked for medical bills and set up an appraiser to go look at his vehicle.

Something about his story didn’t make sense, and I had just heard Jesus had spoken via the car radio. This accident just happened earlier this morning, and I just got off the phone with my insured. If he had really been shit faced and assaulted an officer, I wouldn’t be on the phone with him. He would be in a cell sleeping it off. I saw in several previous claims where the adjuster had checked news reports. It was still early, and I didn’t get a hit on DUI arrests, but I did get a hit on the accident this morning.

According to the news blotter, the accident happened in the morning traffic that always seemed to happen here. Backed up traffic further waiting for police to get there, but there was nothing about drunken shenanigans in regard to this accident.

Our insured admitted he rear-ended the guy, so I put the template they wanted to use, finalized liability, and moved on to my next claim.

I didn't have time because Bailey told us to stop for lunch. Casper had ended up whipping something up while Bailey and I were in the shower. We sat, huddled together by Jeremy and I thought we would talk about what he had learned on the forum, but we didn't.

Bailey started asking me in French about my claims. I was frustrated and wanted to know what was going on with the mission. I was able to ask her in broken French if we could discuss what we were really doing in this language. She rolled her eyes at me and told me my French was still rotten and I needed to be learning. I spent the rest of lunch learning French.

I only had a few claims that afternoon and Jeremy ended up having to text both of us that we needed to access the database that showed every accident a person had gotten in more because the people on the forum were getting antsy about the lack of data. As luck would have it, I had to access it a few times that afternoon, but there wasn't much time for us to talk because we were either on the phone or researching.

Bailey drove home and Casper and Luke were waiting.

"Good job," Casper said. "It sounds like both of you took some crazy claims today, but we need more. The forum doesn't know the gritty details of what's going on behind the scene, but they've guessed it's being tested for anything unwanted Ashley might have added. They are being careful with their fixes, but they need the fake data Jeremy's exploit is sending them and right now, they don't have enough.

"So, I've come up with an idea. You need to tell Savannah in addition to the new claims that you are working on, you want access to a few open claims in the office right now so that you can test how the system works with them. You'll say that you are not making any changes to the file that will affect the investigation and you won't be adding any notes or files.

You've just decided together that it's needed to properly test the software."

"Good idea, Casper," Bailey said, stirring something that smelled quite wonderful. "I wish there was a way to convince Savannah to let a few people in that room with us so we had a better chance of getting them virus-filled files, but I know why we can't."

"I can see who is accessing the files and who isn't. The teams that have never won a bounty, but are good enough to get accepted have opened the files with the mismatched contact info. Jordan took a claim with a Bertha Washington and a Joe Robert. What it looks like on their end is that an accident occurred with Joe Washington and Bertha Robert. Jeremy made the program mix up their phone numbers and street addresses in the program for the working contact information. Since it's downloading the contact info to a word document, we have certain automatic autocorrect features on. Like, say, a five automatically gets changed to a two. The numbers are all set on autocorrect. It was tricky, but we managed to get it set. The street address and the names all look correct, but the actual numbers are all wrong.

"We're in the computers of everyone who has downloaded the word docs. They are small fries compared to Hex and Baba Yaga, but Crimson and Tyrian are going through their computers to see who they really are and if there's anything we can pin on them."

Bailey looked like she wanted to say something, but the timer on the stove went off. When I asked what she was serving, she brought out broiled fish with lump crab meat and capers in a cream sauce. It was quite good, and I told her so, but I knew I needed to be talking about work.

"Think Savannah will listen about porting us over those files? Is it even possible?"

"It is," Jeremy answered. "I can see everything she does. She's manually loading all of your claims. What she's doing is going through the adjuster's task lists and removing it from the old claim system and adding it to the new so you can work it.

What we're going to have to tell her is that we just want to look at open claims because the two systems aren't linked and you wouldn't be getting real-time updates from the adjuster. It's more work for her, but I think she wants this software to work bad enough that she'll agree."

"What is our exit strategy, anyway? Are we actually going to arrest anyone?"

"You forget, I wrote insurance programs for years. Once we catch them, I remove all backdoor access to the program and code it into a workable program for the company."

"However long that takes," Bailey grumped.

"I'll give you my login and password on the forum if you want to read it. Abaddon is still taunting everyone that no one has fixed the program, even though they haven't either. Ashley, apparently, gave Abaddon a little information about how insurance claims work. If Abaddon was as good a hacker as they claim to be, they'd have already done it. I think they aren't very good at it. They make their money piggybacking off the bounties on the forum they run," Jeremy said.

"I can't tell if busting them now is a good or bad thing," Casper said. "It's like fishing in a barrel for all the criminal hackers while they are running that forum. Definitely after we catch Baba Yaga and Hex."

"It'll happen before you have to come back and testify against him," Luke said.

"Good. Because I'm unloading all over that jury."

TWENTY



Jordan

Over the next week, Casper's plan worked like clockwork. Bailey and I really only got about two new claims a day that we personally worked and Savannah sent us several a day just to test the software. Bailey and I did what Jeremy suggested and on every claim, we pulled up both databases. I ran VIN numbers and socials on every vehicle and person in each claim that was sent to me.

Bailey was doing the same and Jeremy and Casper were watching the forum from their tablets. Jeremy would make a little joyful noise every time someone opened a file, and we had access to their computers. I could admit to myself this mission was actually fun, unlike having to deal with looking at dick pics and having someone blow their load over my feet.

Bailey was right about everyone in Louisiana being storytellers. When you asked them to talk about the accidents in their own words, it must have been like old radio shows before television. I learned Louisiana swear phrases, swear words I made a note to use later, and epic tales that made minor accidents sound like a fight to the death with a fire-

breathing dragon. Sometimes, I got so caught up in listening to the tale that was being spun, I forgot to take notes. I often wondered if Bailey didn't talk like this because she had been gone so long. Bailey started talking like everyone in New Orleans ever since we got here, just a lot less flowery.

Finally, after about two and a half weeks of working claims, Jeremy and Casper let us know we'd be wrapping things up soon. We had access to a lot of new people. Abbaddon wanted this bounty for themselves, so they teamed up with a group. We had all of them. Crimson and Tyrian were back home going through their computers trying to narrow things down for a bust. Casper was sure we could get information about Hex and Baba Yaga from Abbaddon, and cryptically said we could get that information without offering them a fucking in terms of a reduced sentence.

I had my doubts about that. I'd only watched two busts, but they were all offering to throw literally anyone under the bus if it saved their asses. Nothing was free in life and Boss struck me as the type that knew people would say anything to make the torture stop if you went that route. Boss wanted Hex and Baba Yaga, but I didn't think we had some torture lair in the underground bunker we worked in.

We had hardly turned the television on since Carl's arrest. Casper said Boss had been monitoring the news so Bailey didn't have to so that we could make sure her name was being kept out of things. And if someone *did* find out her name, they didn't plaster her picture everywhere.

For once, Bailey didn't want to cook that night, so Casper took over. Bailey was irritated and pacing. I was trying to cheer her up, but I didn't know what was wrong. She'd been much more relaxed since Carl got arrested and it seemed like everyone who covered for him was at least being investigated. Something was wrong. If I knew anything about Bailey, she'd either tell us or she wouldn't. We'd just have to adjust how we supported her.

“Turn on the news. I need to hear this.”

Jeremy flipped the TV on and Bailey snuggled into me. It looked like an older, well-dressed couple had called some kind of press conference and were just waiting to address the reporters.

“Those are that shit bird’s parents. This is the first time they’ve spoken about his arrest. They are the reason he got away with everything. The cop that took my statement probably called them for instructions instead of doing his job. I’m *dying* to see how they spin this. When we were dating in high school, they kept trying to turn me into a Stepford Wife.”

A white-haired, uncomfortable-looking man stood at the podium and waited for the din to die down before he spoke. “I don’t condone the actions of my son. We always knew he was never the same after Bailey Breaux left him. The detective informed us what he did to Bailey and what he intended to do to her once he found her again. All we know is that Bailey is in Louisiana, not where she is. All we can say to Bailey and all the girls that he harmed is that we are sorry. We are setting up two charities. One for rape victims and the other for women like Bailey, who have to flee their lives because of things like what happened to her. We’d like the press to respect our privacy in this trying time.”

The man and his wife covered their faces and tried to flee while flashbulbs went off and the room erupted with questions. I could hear people asking for more information on Bailey and the rest were asking if they would be at the trial supporting their son. They disappeared without answering any of the reporter’s questions.

Bitch. Everyone involved in the case had kept her name out of their mouths, either out of respect for the shit they put her through or because Deepthroat and LaMarcus promised a special kind of hell only the federal government could provide.

Like, Deepthroat seemed relaxed and joking in Bailey’s hospital room, but I was still worried he was pulling traffic cam footage and was building a federal jaywalking case against me for puking on him. I was pretty sure jaywalking wasn’t a felony, but I was guilty of doing it a *lot*. Carl’s fuckhead dad had probably been warned and did it, anyway.

I squeezed Bailey and kissed the top of her head. I tried to read her face, but it was stone. I thought she was going to storm back to her room, but she just stayed on the couch staring at the blank TV screen.

“You know, I thought they were going to blame this entire thing on me. I thought they were going to try to buy him out of his charges. He said my name as a giant ‘fuck you’ to me because I’m sure he blames this all on me and not his precious crotch fruit, but I’m sure a lot of them are blaming me instead of him. Someone would have eventually snitched.”

“Want us to do the computer thing and fuck him up, Frederick?” Casper asked.

That was what I loved about Casper. When I first met him, he had a big stick up his ass about the rules and it seemed like he didn’t like me because I bent them. He was still all about protocol as our team lead, but if you came for someone he cared about, Casper would use his computer skills to fuck you up.

“If you find anything, give it to Deepthroat or LaMarcus instead of releasing it. Some people covered for Carl because they like his father’s politics and the rest did because they were paid. Daddy Matherne is going down for those payments. This press conference wasn’t just damage control because he had to. This was to get everyone who voted for him riled up that he had no idea any of this was going on for when the charges come down.”

“How old were you when you met him?” I asked, not knowing if I was making things better or worse. I also had no idea if she was going to answer or not.

“I was fifteen, and he was eighteen. I should have known then there was something wrong when he asked me out when I was just fifteen. I only said yes because I thought I was supposed to. The no neck thing bothered me, too.

“My parents always told me to do what made me happy. Some of my extended family thought I should settle down with some guy who had a lot of money and just have babies. I never wanted that and my parents always told me I didn’t have

to do that, but I was still very confused about what I wanted. Carl came from a rich, respected family, so I overlooked a lot.”

“Hey, you had no way of knowing. You were a fucking kid,” Luke growled.

“Subject change, please. My name is out there now. Any photo they find of me is going to be from high school or college. Deepthroat thinks someone who knew me back then and was better friends with Carl than with me recognized me on the streets and let him know I was here. He more than likely used police resources to find out where I was staying and who I was with and waited for his moment.

“It would be difficult for anyone who didn’t know me personally to put a photo of me from high school or college to Jody, but not impossible since everyone is trying to find me for a statement. We need to get Jody out of the picture so Bailey can come back. What are we looking at here?”

“We are in exit strategy mode,” Casper said. “Abaddon and their team have the exploit ready. They should upload it any day. Jeremy has learned the program enough that he’ll be notified right away. Crimson, Tyrian, and I have been through their messages enough to know it’s happening soon. Crimson and Tyrian are also working on getting things together for a bust when we get back.”

“I have everything on a flash drive I keep in my pocket,” Jeremy said. “The rest of our team has already sent me their exploit and I’ve coded my fix. As soon as they upload it, I just need to fuck the computer gently with the flash drive.”

“That’s sexy,” I said.

“That’s my cue to leave,” Bailey said. “Keep in mind the walls here are stupid thin.”

Yup. The walls were cockblocking me. I had my tongue down the throat of literally everyone here. Eventually, we’d all be making my porn fantasies come to life.

We weren’t quite there yet, and I was still worried about donkey noises.

TWENTY-ONE



Jeremy

Our last week flew by. Bailey had deleted all of her old social media and all of her friends locked down her photos. Apparently, Deepthroat told all of Carl's friends at the station to delete any photos of her. It took two days, but eventually, someone sold a photo to the news.

It was a shitty photo with bad lighting and the only other photos they could find were from her high school yearbooks, so they weren't exceptional quality. Bailey was safe. Savannah mentioned it a few times and we all just nodded and said it was terrible.

We were wrapping things up and Bailey felt safer showing us New Orleans. We got to see a lot, including ghost and cemetery tours and we got to eat at several new places.

We finally got to try Café du Monde and the beignets and coffee were worth the long wait for them. I ended up covered in powdered sugar and made a gigantic mess. I asked if Bailey knew how to make them and she promised she would teach me if I continued to send her shake recipes.

We spent a lazy afternoon at Café du Monde eating beignets and chatting. Before we left, Bailey and I had set up a few nights a week for her to teach me a few Louisiana recipes and I would teach her the ingredients I used so she could try to make shake recipes like me without my recipes.

We went back to the drag club several times. We never drove. I didn't have to be from here to see that parking was a bitch. We finally got to see Phoenix perform, and he was pretty much fantastic. I could tell why his set with Lavish Lazuli always sold out. Those two were *dynamite* together and worked the crowd like masters.

The drinks Ruby made were strong enough to get to both Jordan and me. We were stumbling back into the shotgun one night after we stopped by the club after a ghost tour.

“I was starting to think it wasn't possible to get the two of you drunk.”

“That hurricane must have been made with one hundred proof moonshine,” I slurred.

Seriously, Jordan and I were addicted to the hurricanes, but they would fuck you up so fast if you weren't careful.

“No moonshine. We do everything big here. Food, drink, parades. I'm relieved to see the two of you are human and can actually get drunk. I'm going to go sleep this off.”

We were so close to wrapping things up here. I wasn't born here, but I could see us visiting here for fun. There were some things I didn't like. Like the system that allowed Carl to get away with what he did because of who his dad was. I had a feeling they were going to think twice about that in the future. Boss's lover and her ex-lover were involved now, and they were well connected.

Bailey had packed in a ton of sightseeing after work, but we really needed to get back home, and not just for Bailey. I hadn't had sex with my girlfriend since we got here because of how thin the walls were.

And I hadn't got to watch her have sex with anyone else either.

TWENTY-TWO



Jordan

While I could have stayed and soaked up more New Orleans culture and food, I had to remind myself this was not a vacation. I'd done absolutely no training, and I almost forgot I was a baby agent. It was almost like a getaway where I could pretend Jeremy and I were living together working normal jobs. Sometimes before I fell asleep, I would wonder if this was what I really wanted. Then I'd remind myself he and I had totally different skill sets and in real life, we'd never be working at the same job.

And I loved being an agent, even if this was nice, too. Being a fake adjuster was fun, but I don't think I'd want to do that instead of being an agent. If I tried to settle down in an office job again, I'd miss all the friends I had met at work, fighting, knife throwing, and hell, even learning new languages. I knew as soon as I was back home and had Luke and Bailey helping me with my French, I'd catch on like I did with Mandarin when Bai was helping me.

Casper was counting on Abbadon looking bad when Jeremy cut off their access and no one got paid. The people

they teamed up with who did most of the work were going to trash talk. To save face, they were going to have to release a new bounty. This time, we would have a full team at home watching from their computer and hopefully, be prepared with their real identities to make a bust. He also hoped since it needed to be big, he'd bring Baba Yaga in so we could get more information.

That's when the bomb finally got dropped on me that made this mission make a little more sense. Bailey, Jeremy, and I were there under the pretense of being temps from an insurance headhunting agency. Either no one bothered to tell me I was here as a temp, or I just wasn't paying attention when it was said because I was nervous about coming and found out I missed a whole shit-load of stuff when we got to the house.

Our entrance and exit had been fully planned, and we had already reached our last day. I could get used to going undercover like this. Bourbon Street, excellent food, good company, and I actually had fun while I was taking claims. I didn't work any claims long enough to deny any liability on the part of our insured, so I didn't really get yelled at when I was in the first notice of loss department.

At my old job, most of those calls were taken when people were waiting at accident scenes for the police to arrive. Sometimes, calls came in when they had been waiting an hour or longer for an officer, so they decided to report the claim. They were upset they were involved in an accident and angry they had been waiting for an officer that long, and waiting on hold before one of us picked up to take their report generally just made them angrier. The whole thing was awful, both for the people in the accident, and being on the receiving end of their anger.

I think I preferred being an adjuster better, even if I was only doing it for pretend and only for a few weeks. It was much more interesting. My old job acted like all of us were too stupid to be adjusters because we didn't have a degree and wouldn't even give us a chance. I let them psych me out. I *did* it. I successfully took statements and even finalized liability.

The only reason I hadn't paid anyone was that I needed estimates. Fuck them right up the poop chute for making me think I was too stupid to do it.

Jeremy had already submitted a working program several days before that had been approved by the Department of Insurance. Savannah was happy we had given the company what they wanted and finally paraded us out to meet the rest of the people who worked there. Evelyn joined us. I could only imagine what kind of program they were using before on outdated computers, but they all must have been unhappy with it. When Savannah announced what we had been working on and what we had done, the room broke out into applause.

I had to remind myself this was a professional office and didn't celebrate like we did bad home when we had a bust. We weren't told anything, but the rest of the office had been told there would be a potluck at lunch. There wasn't beer and wine like at our celebrations, but there was an entire buffet table of food and everyone wanted to bring us a plate.

Someone finally came over and asked what we wanted to drink. I could see two liters lined up on the table.

"A Coke is fine."

"What kind?"

I looked at her in utter confusion. Wasn't there just one kind of Coke? Did she want to know if I meant regular or diet? Bailey answered for me and told her regular Coke was fine.

"You say soda. Everything here is Coke or a cold drink, even if it's room temperature. If you say Coke, you have to clarify if you mean regular Coke, Diet Coke, Dr. Pepper, or Pepsi. Sunkist is orange Coke, so if you want it, you have to say Orange Coke."

"What do you call coffee and tea?" I asked.

Names weren't pronounced the way they were spelled, you could pick up alcohol at the drive-thru, and cops had no issues with you walking around the streets waving a drink about. I wondered what else I would learn if I stayed here longer. This was a curious place.

Bailey was in a good mood because we were going home and explained nothing else should trip me up beverage wise. Evelyn came and sat next to me while I was in the middle of plowing my way through crawfish dip, bean dip, and queso.

“It must be nice to be able to eat at celebrations now that you’re retired. I wish my granddaughter would let go at things like Christmas, but she’s determined to become a professional.”

Thankfully, Bailey didn’t make any comments about my eating habits in front of Evelyn. People had been warning me for years that one day, it was going to catch up with me, but so far, it hadn’t. And basically, fuck those people anyway. Commenting on people’s plates are why so many people got fucked-up about food. Fight training had only sculpted my already lean frame and rounded out a few things. Jeremy liked it and I wasn’t complaining.

Savannah let us go early after we ate, so we got a half day. She winked at us and promised we could fill out our timesheets for a full day. When we got out on the streets, I asked who handled the time sheets, because I certainly didn’t. Jeremy kissed my cheek and told me he did all of ours on the computer.

“So, you two. We have an entire afternoon free before we fly back tomorrow. What do you want to do? Gamble, drink, eat? Let me guess. All three. There’s a buffet at the casino when you get hungry.”

I asked where we were going. She told us we were all going home, then we were taking a trip to Harvey to Boomtown Casino. She made us all change clothes when we got home and bundled us into the car. Bailey didn’t even let Luke and Casper say anything when she flung the door open.

“Dress snazzy, bitches. We’re going gambling. And before you open your mouth, Casper, I’m talking about using *our* money, not our per diem.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest you meant that. McKinley used her entire mission per diem in one night to play blackjack on a job and lost terribly. Black made her fess up and Boss took it

out of McKinley's check until she paid the company back. McKinley was so pissed about it. She bitched about it for months when she was the one in the wrong."

"Casper, we love you," Luke said. "You're one of the smartest people we know, but until you got with Jordan, I was convinced you had really shitty taste in women."

"That's fair. I did for a little while. I can't believe I stuck with McKinley for that long."

"You'd better stick with me for a while," I said, pinching his butt.

"I plan on it," Casper said, grabbing me and kissing me.

We laughed about some of the people we talked to while waiting for our driver to get there. I'd give it to them. They made this assignment entertaining. Some of them were upset, but most of them told me their story like they were audiobook narrators. I also didn't get any super complicated, horrific accidents, so there was that.

Our ride share finally got there. We couldn't talk about any of this in the car, so we just shot the shit about claims like we were just here on regular business. I finally asked why so many people claimed divine intervention in their accidents. I told her about the guy and the radio.

"Welcome to Louisiana. You've been trying to find logic out of all the things here that confuse you. Just embrace it and enjoy it."

Jeremy didn't talk much because he didn't take any, he mostly just laughed with us. I wasn't sure what to expect when we rolled up to the casino and I had never been to Vegas before. The whole place was loud and had a mix of slot machines, poker tables, and blackjack. Bailey dragged us over to a counter to hand over our card. I couldn't hear over the noise the amount she gave, but we already discussed in the car that Jeremy, Casper, and Luke wanted to play poker, Bailey was a blackjack shark, and I was a gambling virgin and would stick to slot machines so I didn't get into any trouble.

I could see how people got addicted to slot machines. Bailey handed me an entire bucket full of coins. On my first spin, I won sixty dollars. I would have been better off if I just cashed it out and let it be. I used it for several more spins and didn't win anything. I decided that machine was just bad luck. I looked for a machine with a name that I thought resonated with me. I walked up and down the aisles of slot machines reading names. I finally saw one *Godly Goat*. That was the one.

But there was a man sitting at it who didn't seem to want to leave. I took the machine next to him with a cartoon possum on it that just said *Rally Possum*. I had no idea what that meant, but I sat there and stuck a coin in.

"Hope you have better luck on that one that I did. *Rally Possum* brought the Tigers luck, but I didn't have much luck with it."

"I'm sorry, *Rally Possum*? I'm only visiting."

I finally got to witness someone in Louisiana tell a story live and not over the phone. His eyes lit up, and he told the story with his entire body.

"So, the Tigers are playing Arkansas, right? Losing by eight points. We thought we were done for. *Louisiana Saturday Night* comes on the loudspeaker. You know it? No? The song says something about a possum. It was the damndest thing. Right after the song mentions a possum, a *real* possum shows up on the field! Had to stop the entire game to remove it. After the possum was removed, it was like fucking magic or something. The Tigers came from behind by eight points and won the entire thing by one point. *Rally Possum* caught on after that. Thought this machine would give me the same luck it brought the Tigers, but I'm starting to think I need to sneak a real live possum in here."

Like everything else I had heard since I got here, I just agreed with him that *Rally Possum* must have been a miracle. I still wanted his machine, and he seemed content to throw coins in and chat.

“You having better luck with *Godly Goat* than you did with *Rally Possum*?”

“Nah. This doesn’t appear to be any luckier.”

“Maybe you need an animal-free machine?” I suggested, trying to get him off my machine.

“Good idea. I’m going to try one more before I call it a night. I come in with twenty, use what I win, and leave when my twenty is gone or I’ve made it back. I’ve got five bucks left, better make em count.”

His butt finally vacated the chair I wanted, and I plopped down. I was having the same luck as whoever that dude was who just left. I decided to learn from him. He quit after twenty dollars. I had no idea how much I had fed the machines, but my bucket of coins was starting to feel light. I gave up and wandered over to the blackjack table to find Bailey.

She seemed to be on quite a roll and rather shitfaced. When she saw me, she pulled me into a hug and kissed me on the mouth. There were a bunch of men who either looked disappointed she was gay or wanted to have a threesome with us. I whispered in her ear that it might be a good idea to take a break and eat. Not only was I starving, but I thought she could use some food in her stomach to sober her up.

“It’s been fun, but I’m taking my chips and calling it a night.”

The blackjack dealer seemed relieved, but all the equally drunk people around the table seemed disappointed their entertainment was leaving. We had to root around to find Jeremy, Casper, and Luke. Their pile of chips was almost as high as Bailey’s. They saw the look I was giving them and knew we needed to get some food into Bailey.

When they told their tables this was their last hand, they didn’t get the same reaction Bailey did. People were grumping they weren’t giving them the chance to win their money back. Bailey was just sober enough to lead us to the buffet. To say that buffet spread was one of the most beautiful things I had ever seen was an understatement. It stretched across half the

back of the large casino. There was a section that had things Bailey had cooked and what looked like fish and chicken. If I looked far enough, there was a section for pizza, Chinese food, and Indian food.

Jeremy and I shared a look that we both knew we wanted to jump face first into all that food, but before we did, Luke took Bailey to a table and I fixed her a plate of food. I stayed with her and made sure she ate while everyone fixed their food before going to explore the buffet. I ended up fixing two plates before I joined everyone at the table.

The casino food was good, but Bailey's versions were much better. I looked at the pizza section and skipped right past it. It was all thin crust and had weird toppings. I couldn't find anything with bacon and jalapenos and decided to just stick to the side with what looked like it had Louisiana cooking. Jeremy had just as much food as I did and we both went back for a third plate.

When all of us stumbled out to the parking lot to meet our driver, none of us were walking straight. Bailey had only sobered up a little, was quite pissed, and Jeremy and I were so full of food, I was about to fall asleep where I stood.

I think all three of us had too much, whether it was alcohol or food, and passed right out as soon as our heads hit the pillow.

TWENTY-THREE



Jordan

Thankfully, our flight home was not an early one. I was in a food coma until almost nine in the morning. Jeremy always woke up early no matter what, but I was surprised to see Bailey had beat us both up and was at the stove cooking breakfast. I looked at Jeremy in confusion because I'd been sure she would be the last one up and he'd already have our shakes made.

Bailey saw the looks we exchanged.

“If the two of you want shakes, get up and make them. I need hangover food. I won't tell Blue you ate this if you don't, though I can't imagine how the two of you have any room for more food after last night.”

“I slept it off,” I said, eyeing the eggs she was frying alongside sausage.

“I wish you could sleep off drinking the way you, apparently, sleep off that disgusting display of all that food you ate. I'm starting to think Luke is right and we need to send you to the infirmary to prove you're human.”

“Right about what?” Luke asked, stumbling in. Casper followed.

“Are you making your trademarked hangover food?” Casper groaned. “No one tell Blue because there’s no way in Hell I’m drinking a smoothie after last night. No offense, Jeremy. You work magic with them, but Bailey has some secret redneck recipe that’s highly effective.”

“Passed down from my grandfather. Blue would shit themselves at the amount of grease in it. They are a judgey little fuck considering they don’t have to follow our diet.”

“All of you get judgey about the way I eat,” I pointed out.

“No, it’s more that we’re all mildly impressed that you eat like that and you’ve only barfed on the CIA once,” Bailey said.

We didn’t talk much over breakfast. Even Jeremy and I were hungover. Bailey’s food hit the spot. We had already packed and before we knew it, we had piled into Bailey’s rental so she could return it at the airport. Like the first time she took the roads leading to the airport, I was gripping the armrests and getting a little carsick.

We finally got boarded onto the plane and sat business class again. I had a feeling Jeremy and Casper would be engrossed in reading the forum and Bailey and Luke were probably going to sleep their hangover off. Since no one was really giving me updates, I decided to read over Jeremy’s shoulder. I knew he wanted to get back into the archives, but he was doing what he was supposed to and reading the current bounty thread.

I noticed every time Abbaddon posted, Tyrian posted as Famine right after, responding to him. Jeremy hissed at me asking what the hell I was doing when I snatched his laptop away. I scrolled through the bounty and I couldn’t believe what I was reading and how Jeremy hadn’t noticed.

Tyrian seemed unusually familiar with Abbaddon. They would taunt someone about this bounty and Tyrian would join in, but it almost seemed to be in inside jokes that only

Abbaddon and Tyrian got. I scrolled through the entire bounty thread. Casper and Crimson were active participants, trolling anyone they could so that they would slip up. Tyrian wasn't doing that. He was only replying to Abbaddon and Abbaddon appeared to be the only person who got his jokes.

I read thread after thread where Abbaddon would rip on someone and Tyrian would add to it, but it was some sort of humor I didn't get and no one else on the forum seemed to get except Abbaddon. I didn't think Casper would have Tyrian trying to get close to them since Tyrian had even less training at working marks than I did. If someone was going to work Abbaddon, it was going to be Casper since he knew what he was doing.

I looked over and Bailey was passed out wearing dark glasses. She'd probably punch me in the face if I woke her up. I leaned over to Jeremy and handed him the laptop. I tried to be as quiet as possible when I asked if Casper knew what Tyrian was up to.

"What do you mean?" Casper asked.

"Do you know how good friends sometimes have secret languages when they don't want other people to know what they are talking about? Read Tyrian's messages with Abbaddon and tell me it doesn't sound similar."

Casper's jaw tightened as he read their messages on the forum. He was quiet for a good bit and kept trying to do something on his laptop that wasn't working. Casper knew better than to think repeatedly smashing the enter key was going to get it to work, but he was clearly pissed.

"You're right. I'm not sure how I never noticed. I set up all the accounts with the same password just in case anyone was out or I needed you or Bailey to jump on their account. Tyrian knew this, but he's changed it so I can't get into his account and see if he's been messaging with Abbaddon."

"You know him better than I do. You think he's a mole? They got one in before," I asked Jeremy.

“I don’t know what to think. We talked a little at Affirmative because we knew we were on the same forum. From what I knew of him from the forum, he never used his code, like I do. This doesn’t make sense. Ashley hired him because he could hack and would have eventually given him the same offer he made me if he couldn’t find anything to blackmail him with. If he was up to no good with the people on this forum, Ashley would have already gotten his hooks in him. Tyrian couldn’t stand Ashley.”

“Crimson didn’t change her password. I don’t think she knows. He might be using her,” Casper said.

“After that bet Jeremy and I made where he was sure Tyrian was into her?”

“He could have played her. I played Jane, and you played Clarence. You know it’s possible.”

“I don’t think so,” Luke said. “You can’t fake that kind of passion. He adores her. I haven’t taught her to throw a single punch, but she’s going to beat his ass when she finds out.”

“It’s either two scenarios. He’s a mole, or he’s doing his own work on the side instead of working as a team and he’s going to blow this entire mission. You saw how competitive he was with Crimson. It wasn’t just because he liked her. He was a little like that on the forum,” Jeremy said.

“Don’t you think if there was dirt to be found on him, Ashley would have found it or we would have and he would have been busted with everyone else at Affirmative? Boss is careful about who she brings in. Even more so after the breach,” Bailey said, waking up.

“Ashley was better at blackmail than hacking. He built a team of better hackers than him, but come on. What was their motivation? He paid them about two dollars an hour more than if they were on the business side because he knew he could. They were hacking to make him rich. Tyrian could have easily been hiding right under his nose as part of Abbaddon’s forum while Ashley was desperately trying to join.”

“I’m calling Boss,” Casper announced. “We can’t do anything from the plane and we are going to drive ourselves crazy trying to figure out what he’s really up to. Boss can get those answers.”

I didn’t really want to know how. We didn’t have any agents left except for Crimson and Tyrian and they were even greener than I was.

Tyrian was about to find out how scary Boss could be.

TWENTY-FOUR



Luke

We took a cab straight from the airport to the office. I really just wanted to go home, sweat out some of the alcohol and grease I had consumed in the last twenty-four hours, take a shower, and then grab Jordan and have my wicked way with her now that we were home. She told me game on before we left, but seemed cock-shy after we ended up in a house where you could hear everything.

I barely knew Tyrian because I wasn't training him. He seemed cool when I was in meetings with them. *Whoever* worked with Baba Yaga to fuck us all over had a lot of balls. Like, the kind of balls to take a job here when offered. I was furious at Hex and if Tyrian ended up being him, I was going to beat his ass myself. Boss would find out.

“Why would they want a mole in here again?” Jordan asked.

“It was stupid to send one,” I growled. “Jordan is pretty green, and she noticed the speech pattern right away.”

Which was why I was falling in love with her. She was so unsure of herself and psyched herself out all the time, but Jordan was going to make a *phenomenal* agent once she was trained.

Jeremy looked at both of us pointedly. “They aren’t going to release names again if Tyrian is a mole. It’s already been done, and that’s not their style.”

That much was true. I wasn’t one of those people that enjoyed parking my butt in front of a computer for hours. I had two modes. Sweating and chilling and chilling involved angsty TV shows and snacks. I’d been around enough to know these people never did the same thing twice. They were constantly trying to one up each other. It would be gauche among these people to piggyback off a big, public thing like what was done to us.

When we got to the conference room, Boss was waiting with Black and Blue. She was *pissed*, and she was looking straight at Jordan.

“How did you notice those posts when agents who have been here longer than you and have more training didn’t?” Boss demanded. “You weren’t even given a login on that forum.”

“I was reading over his shoulder on the plane,” Jordan squeaked.

Jordan started stammering and spouting all sorts of gibberish about reading and the coded notes she passed with high-school boyfriends. Jordan seriously thought Boss was mad at her and that was so far from the truth. She was mad at Casper.

“I’m not mad at you,” Boss said. “You did an amazing thing. Red, if you had been on point, you would have either gotten Mauve on that forum or picked up on what she saw weeks ago. You’re supposed to be team leader and a senior

agent. You let a baby agent upstage you. You're supposed to be better than this."

"I think Mauve will come to show she has many talents the longer she stays here," Bailey said, trying to take some heat off Casper. "She's being groomed to work in the field. There was no reason to create a login for her on that forum. Let's just focus on the fact that we need to find out what Tyrian is up to and we lucked out Mauve was reading over Byzantium's shoulder."

It wasn't Casper's fault, anyway. I read those messages over his shoulder when Jordan pointed them out. Tyrian didn't start getting familiar with Abbaddon until after we left New York.

"I'm sorry, but Casper was in New Orleans watching us all day through our mics and cameras *and* trying to manage the forum. He's only one person. Casper can't do everything. This isn't his fault. He needs help if you're going to break our team up like that. Respectfully. Please don't fire me," Jordan said.

Boss just sighed. We all knew Jordan was right. We were supposed to be superheroes, but we had limits. Boss could either have Casper as a team lead or an agent, but she couldn't have her cake and eat it, too. And she knew that.

"This is everyone's fuckup. I knew recruiting from that cesspit we busted was going to end in disaster. We even need to look extra hard at the people we brought in on the business side so this entire company doesn't explode. I want Mauve on this. She may be proving to be more of an asset than I originally thought."

Jordan was proving to be a bigger asset than any of us ever thought. It was just how her lizard brain worked and I was here for it. I was so ass crazy in love with this woman. If anyone was going to catch Hex and Baba Yaga, it was going to be her and it was probably going to be completely by accident.

We all scrambled to the table and Casper told Bailey to use his login and Jordan would use Jeremy's. Jordan asked the more delicate question if we were going to bring Crimson in for the investigation. Casper shot her down like she should

know better. Crimson wasn't trained by Bailey to work anyone if she wasn't involved and if she was, we would tip both of them off we were on to them.

We all backed Casper that this wasn't his fault and Boss even admitted it, but he was blaming himself. Typical Casper. He barked out orders to all of us. Jeremy was supposed to scour through the forum he and Tyrian used to be on to see if he could pick up anything suspicious and any hint that Abbaddon was ever on that forum with him. Jordan was supposed to pore through the forum and search for all of Abbaddon's posts to see if she could pick up another possible account Tyrian may have.

I was sitting next to her reading. I was looking to see if I could notice the same language that tipped her off the first time. Bailey was supposed to be searching the dark world she used to frequent creating fake identities to see if the name he gave us was really his real name.

Black and Blue were digging through personnel records and background checks on everyone that had been hired. Black asked what we were in the mood to eat. Jordan's stomach went off and so did Jeremy's. I realized how hungry I was after digging through the dark recesses of Abbaddon's posts for what seemed like hours.

Jordan wanted a bacon, sausage, and jalapeno pizza and so did Jeremy. Bailey rolled her eyes and refused to eat like that. She wanted sushi and Casper wanted Italian. He said he needed comfort food like his mother used to make. My comfort food was a chicken nugget Happy Meal with a shake and I definitely wanted the toy. If the shake machine was down again, I was going to cry. Who are you to judge me?

Black didn't want an argument over food and promised everyone what they wanted and got it ordered. Told us delivery would get there shortly. Black was short with us when he told us when the food got there, to eat and work because we still needed to go home and sleep. He expected all of us back in the morning acting like nothing was wrong so we didn't tip off Tyrian.

It was about eight at night when the food arrived. We were all eating with one hand and working with the other. Bailey was halfway through her sushi when she got a hit. She yelled her typical Bailey war cry.

“Scott Edwards *is* his real name. He didn’t lie. He’s had a Facebook profile since he was old enough to create an account. Too early to start building a fake life. He’s got his entire family listed and his profile is public. He’s not hiding anything on Facebook. If you go back in his photos from way back then, it looks like he had a twin brother. They are identical and they used to be photographed together all the time up until about the time they would have turned twenty-two. After that, the twin disappears from his photos and posts. If you go to his family members that have public profiles, the twin disappears from those photos, too.”

“Start scouring news articles. We need to know why the twin disappeared. Maybe we aren’t working with Scott, something happened to Scott and we are dealing with his twin.”

“Red, that’s the dumbest fucking theory I’ve heard. Were you not listening to a word I said? Scott is still actively posting on this profile and it’s been active since he was a teen. Don’t you think if something had happened to Scott, his mother would have reported this profile instead of staying friends with it and not tagged him in a photo from this weekend of him and Crimson eating dinner at her house?”

“Sorry, Cadmium. I’m just upset I fucked-up this early as team lead and I’m reaching at anything I can to fix it.”

“Scott is who we are working with. He didn’t apply here with a fake name.”

“What if the language I’m reading on the forum that tipped me off is twin speak?” I asked. I had a similar language with my sisters when we were younger.

“That’s the best theory I’ve heard all night, but we need to figure out if the twin disappeared because of an accident or something else. We need to figure out if Jonathan, the twin, is still alive and didn’t disappear because of something like a

horrible accident. If Tyrian is here as a mole, he didn't do a very good job of it. He used his real name to apply, and he's not hiding behind a fake identity. If he's a mole for Hex or Abbaddon, it's like he wants us to catch him."

I was listening in one ear and reading Amon's post at the same time. We had been here for four hours and I was clicking on the first thread since the forum was made. Jordan announced to the room there were no postings like what she had read on the plane until Tyrian had joined the forum as Famine.

Jeremy told everyone the original forum he met Tyrian on had only been around two years. His username was *Wonderboy*. I wondered if he was a Tenacious D fan. If he wasn't a bad guy, maybe I needed to get to know him better.

Jeremy searched all his posts and there was nothing there. His only threads were where he created a new one about code he wrote and responding to comments where people asked him for it and he wouldn't release it. His nose was clean on that forum and I couldn't find anything on the hacker forum where he had been there before.

"So, what do we do?" Jeremy asked. "He's clearly public with his Facebook and identity here. He's up to something with the Famine profile and it's like he doesn't care if he gets caught. But if he has a motive, he hasn't made that public. I also checked the bounty threads and there's nothing new involving us."

"Snatch, grab, and question? He's not trained, so it's not like he'll put up a fight," Bailey suggested.

"If we do that and Byzantium's idea that he is doing some sort of side mission is correct, it could turn him against us and we'll lose him to Abbaddon," Casper said.

"Well, I'm finding nothing about Jonathan. I can't find any death certificate. It's just like one day, he disappeared like I had to do and I doubt he had to flee for the same reason I did."

"Maybe Jonathan is somewhere on the forum and Tyrian is trying to sniff him out," I suggested.

“That’s the best suggestion so far, but what are his intentions if his twin really is on the forum? Is he looking for him for a family reunion? When he finds him, is he going to turn on us, join him, and spill our secrets? I don’t think we should do a snatch and grab, but these are questions that need to be asked,” Casper said.

“Red, do you want to get demoted again? What are you going to do, sit him down and ask him?”

“This is a delicate fucking situation, Cadmium. If we handle this the wrong way and what he’s doing is totally harmless, this could sour him on everything and tell our secrets to the wrong people. As you said, it’s like he wanted to be caught. Maybe there’s something he wants to ask us and doesn’t know how.”

“Then what is your plan?”

“I’m going to call him into a meeting with me, Black, Blue, and Boss and I plan on asking him what he’s doing with Abbaddon on the forum. I’m not going to mention anything we found out about his twin. I’m going to say that I noticed he’s been engaging Abbaddon on the forum off mission and ask what he is doing. If he tells the truth, we’ll move from there. If he’s lying, you know what we’ll do.

“Now everyone needs to go home and get a good night’s sleep because I don’t want Tyrian suspecting anything when he gets in.”

Yeah, I knew what we were going to do. Technically, there *were* other agents here and some of them scared me. My plans tonight had been to disappear into Jordan, but I was now crabby, exhausted, and my back hurt.

Maybe cuddles.

TWENTY-FIVE



Jordan

Jeremy caffeinated our protein shakes again, but this time, it tasted like a caramel mocha latte. I needed that caffeine because, between the flight and the different time zones, I felt like a zombie. Even Jeremy seemed tired and he normally had unending amounts of energy. We were all so tired when we got home. Casper was blaming himself for everything, even though it wasn't his fault, so I grabbed his finger and twisted it until he came and slept with Jeremy and me. He knew damned well I had enough training to break it.

It was amazing sleeping smashed between Casper and Jeremy, but it felt like I needed about eight hours more sleep when we woke up. Jeremy got up before we did to make our shakes, but he was dragging. I grabbed Casper and kissed him before I let him get out of bed.

“None of this is your fault. You can't be in two places at once. I'll break your hand if you keep thinking that.”

Casper chuckled and nipped at my lower lip.

“You *do* know I have several black belts, right?”

“I could take you.”

“I’ll bet,” Casper said, tickling me.

I shrieked and shoved him away.

“That’s not fair! I’m tired and hungry.”

“You’re always hungry,” Casper said, leading me into the kitchen.

We couldn’t talk about work on the walk to the office, but Jeremy and I were wondering if we would watch them question Tyrian from the movie room we watched the busts in. Since we didn’t know where to go, Jeremy asked Betty. She clacked a few keys on her keyboard and told me to report to my language module and Jeremy was needed in the computer room. I whispered to him to text me if Tyrian was there when he got up to the room.

When I got to the room, I took the language modules in, Luke was sitting in my chair with his feet on the desk and his arms behind his head. He asked me something in French and I had no idea what he said.

“Why am I on language modules with everything going on?” I sulked.

“Because you just spent a few weeks in New Orleans barely getting any training in. Bailey and I did a little French work, but you didn’t get any fight training at all. I’d beat your ass if we sparred.”

“I could take you,” I grumbled, even though I definitely knew I couldn’t.

I had hardly spent forty-five minutes on my modules when Blue came and got me. Blue was never chatty, but they told me I did a good job with the forum and they got the truth out of Tyrian. When I asked what it was, I was told it was best heard out of Tyrian’s mouth. When I got to the conference room, everyone was there except Boss. Crimson looked furious, but I wasn’t sure with who.

“Tyrian has some things he’d like to tell us,” Casper said.

“I suspected my brother was on that hacker forum after watching his posts. We were close growing up because we were twins. I was two minutes earlier than him and always felt protective of him. We started learning computers together, and we were always playing around with things we could do with code. When we got to college, we started experimenting with exploits, Trojans, and rootkits. We had this code of honor then that we would write them, but never use them. I have no idea what happened to him, but one night, while I was out, he used a rootkit we wrote. He got into something he shouldn’t have. All he would tell me was that he made a lot of money.

“We got into this huge argument about how he should give it back. He said we should discuss it over beers. I have no idea what came over him because he was never like that before. He put something in my beer and I woke up on the couch with a raging headache. He moved all of his stuff out our apartment and totally disappeared off the grid. I’d been looking for him for years.

“I’d given up, thinking one day, he’d remember being my brother and come back and tell me why he did it. I hadn’t seen hide nor hair of him until I got hired and Red had us join the forum. I suspected Abbaddon was my twin after watching him post. I started replying to him in our secret language. He’s responded because he thinks I’m with The Four Horsemen and am on his side now with whatever he is doing. I should have told all of you I had a lead on Abbaddon. I was just hoping I could convince him to come home and used his computer skills for good.”

“You believed this shit?” Bailey demanded.

“You had a twin and were doing this without telling me?” Crimson shrieked.

Bailey and Crimson erupted. Tyrian sat there with his head down shamefully. Casper was trying to scream over them to calm down and listen. Black and Blue were looking at everyone like they wanted to crawl under their desks and hide. I hadn’t recognized the intercom on the table until it buzzed and she yelled through it.

“Enough, the both of you! Tyrian is telling the truth. Cadmium, we hooked him to the machine, and he passed.”

I had no idea what machine was that she was talking about. I knew when Jeremy first got hired, Bailey was trying to teach him to beat a lie detector test. If that was the machine she was talking about, everyone here knew we had training to beat it. Bailey was the trainer for that, but that seemed to calm her. Crimson was shooting Tyrian death daggers with her eyes.

“So, what happens from here?” Jeremy asked, trying to diffuse the situation.

“We know Abbaddon is my brother, Jonathan. I’ve been talking to him like I’m a fellow hacker, not an agent. I was hoping to convince him to come home eventually, but if he’s in jail, then my family knows where he is and that he’s safe. I wasn’t just talking to him to bring him home. I was talking to him to find out where he was and information about Hex and Baba Yaga.”

“And what have you learned about them so far?” Bailey snapped with her arms crossed.

“Jonathan runs the forum. He’s good, but he’s never been very creative when it comes to hacking. He lacks the ability to think out of the box, which is what people like us need. He’s living in an affluent area of Alabama with a group of hackers that think they cracked this insurance bounty and are admins on his forum.

“He’s been trying to get me to join them, so he’s giving me information. He doesn’t know who Baba Yaga is. He hasn’t been able to track her, but he’s texted with her. She’s not a hacker, but he thinks she’s highly connected with access to money. He’s been trying to draw her back to the forum to fund his bounties.

“Hex is another story. Everyone on the forum uses a VPN because they aren’t stupid. Jonathan didn’t want to let Hex join at first because when they were messaging when Hex wanted to join, their VPN temporarily dropped. Jonathan was able to grab their actual IP before they noticed and fixed it.

“Jonathan thought he was a liability. Instead of giving them a task like we had to prove their worth, they had to solve the next bounty posted, which happened to be Baba Yaga’s. Jonathan didn’t *want* them to solve it. It was a ton of money. He was hoping he and his team got that money and he didn’t want Hex on the forum. Hex took the bounty money and didn’t come back to the forum. Jonathan is keeping their IP as collateral in case anyone traces the bounty to his forum and manages to find him. He’s also toying with the idea of selling it to the highest bidder because a lot of people are looking for Hex now.”

“One, your twin sounds like a total shit bird. Two, when were you planning on telling us *any* of that?” Bailey demanded.

“When I had enough to make a bust. Jonathan doesn’t totally trust me yet. I know he’s in Alabama, but not where. He’s refusing to give me his address until I’m physically *in* his city and send him a pin drop to prove it. The rest of his admins and friends don’t know he captured Hex’s IP. They thought he was just being a dick to him because that’s what he does now. If it comes down to it, he’s going to throw them under the bus. He only told me because I think he wanted someone to brag to.”

“Cadmium is right. Your twin is kind of a shit,” I said.

“The jury is still out on you being one, too,” Bailey growled.

“Cadmium, Tyrian understands he should have brought this to our attention as soon as he suspected Abbaddon was his brother. He knows we work as a team and any type of side mission has to be approved from higher ups. He’s not going to do it again and now he has approval to see what he can get out of Jonathan. This is a good thing. We finally have a lead on Hex.”

“I don’t understand,” I said, finally speaking. “When you were looking at Jeremy, before he came in and we didn’t know how deep in he was with Affirmative, you told me I was too close to work him if it came to that. How was I too close to

work Jeremy as his girlfriend and Tyrian is not too close to work Jonathan as his twin? I had more training than he does at the time.”

“It’s not ideal, but we don’t have a choice,” Black said. “There are a lot of things we can fake as agents. Twin speak isn’t one of them. We can’t have anyone else pretend to be Tyrian because Jonathan would figure it out before we were ready.”

“I don’t trust him.” Bailey said. “How do we know he’s not telling his brother everything we are doing?”

“Because we surprised him when we called him into the meeting. He gave us his forum password, and we all read the messages he’s been exchanging with his brother. This was *before* he passed the machine. If you don’t trust him, teach him to go undercover and work someone the way you taught Mauve and Byzantium. Let him win your trust while you teach him.”

“I’m getting benched again because this fucker managed to get on here to get closer to his brother?”

“Cadmium, no. While Mauve is doing her language modules and the rest of the team is poring through the forum, you’ll be in your office like you always are. Instead of looking into fake identities, you’ll be coaching Tyrian. After lunch, you’ll go back to fight training with Mauve and Tyrian will be with me on the forum while Crimson and Byzantium work on languages. You’ll be doing almost the same thing you did before you left for New Orleans. If you think Tyrian is going to turn on us, help him so he doesn’t.”

“I think he’s already turned and we should dump him in the same pen with Ashley.”

“I haven’t, I swear,” Tyrian said, finally trying to defend his actions. “I know I should have told Red right away when I suspected Abbaddon was my brother. I just thought if I could talk to him, I could convince him to give this life up and come home. I’ve seen what he’s capable of going through the bounty threads. He’s never going to give up hacking and live a normal

life. You're right. He's turned into a complete asshole. I don't even recognize him anymore."

"Do you know what your brother helped do to Red? To Green? To thousands of good agents?"

"I know. Boss told me. I was excited about this job. I didn't take it because I thought I'd find my twin. It was a *complete* accident. If it hadn't been my brother running the forum, we wouldn't be so close to getting Hex's IP address. Hex took the bounty money and disappeared."

Bailey agreed to teach him but told him he was starting from square one with her and he would have to earn her trust back. Crimson had not spoken a word throughout his entire confession. Her face was stone when she said he needed to come by her place for a serious conversation about what had just gone down.

"Please don't break up with me. I would have told you when I found the right time."

"I should have been the *first* person you told and you should have told Red the next day. How am I supposed to trust you now? How are any of us?"

"I'll make it up to you and everyone, I promise."

"If you think you have a tough job winning Cadmium over, it's going to be worse with me. She's not the one sleeping with you."

"Gross. Don't ever give me that visual again."

"Now that this is out of the way, Tyrian needs to go with Cadmium, Crimson and Byzantium are needed with me, and I hear Mauve is still struggling with French."

I grumbled all the way up to the module room. I thought I would at least be able to read the private messages, but I guess they thought that was above my level? Luke was pacing when I got there instead of being kicked back in my seat.

"I was watching your meeting. You trust him?"

"I don't know," I said, flopping in my seat. "I want to. How could he pass that machine they talked about and why

would he let them read the messages? What the fuck is the machine? Cadmium was teaching Jeremy to beat a lie detector test. Why would they trust it?”

“Mauve, Red warned you about using his real name here. You used it in the meeting, too, things were just too tense for him to correct you. I don’t know how he beat the machine either. No one else knows we have it or what it is.”

“Are you going to fill me in on what it is or is it above my pay grade?”

“It’s something Boss cooked up with Tangerine after the breach. In addition to being trained in cyber crimes, several forms of fighting, and law, she also has a degree in biochemistry. It’s the entire mystique of Boss. It’s a cocktail of chemicals she cooked up. It’s not any of the psychoactive drugs they normally use. No one knows what’s in it and we probably never will.

“There are other agents here, you just haven’t met them. Some are scientists and others watch the cameras. I volunteered to be a test subject when Boss said she needed them because she was working up something after the breach.

“It doesn’t make you loopy or sleepy. That’s why Tyrian was able to have a normal conversation with you after Boss gave it to him. When Boss gave it to me, I don’t know what happened. It felt like I had known her my entire life and we were best friends instead of her being my boss. I relaxed and felt like I could tell her anything. Boss asked me a series of questions I would normally lie about.

“Boss asked how I felt about getting moved to teaching. I always lie and say that’s what I’m better suited for, but really, it’s kind of a sore subject. She asked for intimate details about my relationship with the woman that got me switched to teaching. I spilled my guts to her like she was my best friend or therapist or something. I told her things I’ve never told anyone.

“We know the machine is there because I think Cadmium, Red, and I all volunteered to be her test subjects. This is the first time it’s been used for trying to find Hex. It was

developed after the breach and after the exploit was removed. I don't think Baba Yaga could have known about it unless the mole is still here."

"I haven't met anyone except you, Cadmium, Red, Black, and Blue. I thought the rest of the agents had to flee."

"Think about it, Mauve. How do Black and Blue know everything that goes on around here? Team Ultramarine was the surveillance team and there's three of them left. Team Ultramarine and Tangerine are like the secret agents of the secret agents. I didn't find out about them until after the breach. Cyan, Cobalt, and Cerulean work in the shadows. Who do you think is listening and watching all the time? Look at that light in the corner and wave."

"Oh, shit. There's a camera there?"

"Mauve, we keep telling you there are cameras and mics everywhere. Cobalt is probably sitting there shitting herself that I told you her code name. Isn't that right?" he hollered to the ceiling.

"Shut it, Green," an unseen intercom buzzed. "We want them acting naturally around the office. Quit pointing out cameras and resume training as normal. You've already wasted her entire allotted language time."

"Guess I did. You'd better go eat with your team."

"You going to join us?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah. I watched everything go down with Team Ultramarine, but I want to look him in the eye and make my own decision. And punch him in the face with my moose fists if needed."

It was a tense lunch. No one was talking and joking like normal. Crimson was sitting as far away from Tyrian as possible and Bailey was still shooting him looks like she wanted to rip his head off. I wasn't sure how Casper was so calm when we were literally *so close* to finding Hex and possibly Baba Yaga.

I knew I might make things worse, but I asked what was going on with the forum now that Jeremy had neutralized

Affirmative's program. I also asked what they had found out since that they should have access to everyone's computers.

Casper sighed and told me everyone accessed the forum from computers dedicated to hacking that had no personal information on it and used VPNs. We were no closer to finding out who Hex was than we were before, aside from what Tyrian had revealed about Abbaddon. They couldn't find where Abbaddon was keeping Hex's IP.

"We need more people for this. We were down a person on computers and we don't have Bailey looking into identities because we don't have them yet."

"You're not going to have me when I go back to Louisiana to testify."

"Those are still a way off according to their computers. They haven't located all of the girls yet."

"Don't dismiss this, dickhead. Prepare for it."

"I am. I'm up until three in the morning watching the forum and accessing the Louisiana police files. I'm running on coffee and fumes."

"You're sleeping in my room again," I said.

"And I'm cooking dinner because I like you and you need to take care of yourself, asshole," Bailey said.

Casper dismissed us from lunch to go back to training. Luke had Bailey and I shoot and throw knives for a bit. It was *amazing* how much I'd slipped in the few weeks we were gone and I didn't train at all. Luke said nothing because he was with us and he knew.

Bailey didn't even ask to spar like she always did. She went straight to the free weights. I almost wished I could join her because I had a feeling Luke was going to wail on me.

Luke took a few swings at me, then stopped and put his hands on his hips.

"This isn't working. We *all* got out of shape in New Orleans. All three of us are hitting the weights, even me.

I thought I was glad for the break, but I guess sitting at a desk for eight hours a day for that many weeks and not sparring ruined months of training. I didn't really look in the mirror that often, so I didn't know if my new muscles had totally disappeared. I was trying to check out my biceps while doing curls to see if the muscle was still there.

"Mauve, what the fuck are you doing? You're supposed to be getting back into shape."

"Be honest, Green. Have I totally lost it?"

"Mauve, I suspect you lost it years ago. You're seriously getting vain now?"

"I meant my muscles, you fuck. Did I get soft?"

"I thought you didn't care about that shit?"

"I worked my butt off learning to kick ass. That's what I'm talking about."

"You'll get it back. Once we've gotten some weightlifting under our belts, we'll all be sparring again. You should be glad to hear that, Cadmium."

"I'd hug you, but you should have done that before we left, asshole. No hugs for you."

Luke blew her a sassy kiss.

"Love you, baby."

Bailey and I huffed and puffed for what seemed like hours. I hadn't been stuck on weights in months. The squat rack felt like it weighed a million pounds and my legs felt like jelly when I met Jeremy downstairs.

I was kind of mad. I'd been busting my ass off for the past few months. I skipped a belt in Krav Maga. Couldn't they have found us a rental where Luke could have kept up with my fight training?

TWENTY-SIX



Casper

It was nice having a girlfriend that gave a shit. I was blaming myself pretty hard for what happened with Tyrian.

Boss apologized to me later, but I couldn't help it. McKinley would have berated me as soon as we got home. She was terrible every time something happened, even if it wasn't a major fuck-up. She thought I should have been higher up than I was, even though she was older than me and had been an agent longer.

Jordan snapped into action as soon as we got home. Jeremy and Bailey were in the kitchen arguing over what to cook. Luke was putting the TV on. We weren't into the same things, but he was trying.

“What should we put on? *Supernatural*?”

“That also has a sexy moose in it,” Jordan said.

“I'm your favorite moose,” Luke sulked.

“How about something Casper likes?” Jordan suggested. “We missed a few *Dr. Who* episodes in New Orleans.”

“On it.”

Jordan dove in and gave me rabid snuggles. It was *nice*. I loved snuggling. McKinley didn't like it. It was weird, and it was definitely weird I put up with that for so long. I was even mad for a while she cheated on me and told me with a shitty note and an empty apartment.

What I had with Jordan wasn't traditional, but it was *functional*. I wasn't dating Jeremy or Luke, and Bailey would beat my ass if I even suggested a romantic relationship, but they were *all* taking care of me in their own way. We were a family.

Jordan was snuggled into me rubbing my chest while we caught up on all the *Dr. Who* we missed. The only reason we even had groceries to cook with after all the shit that went down when we got back was that Boss bought them when she was bringing our cats back.

Jeremy had thrown together a homemade pizza because he knew Italian was my comfort food. Bailey did amazing things with seafood. She had this blackened shrimp salad that was a favorite of mine. Bailey made it tonight for me.

They humored me while we ate and watched my favorite TV show. Jordan and Jeremy were big fans of the show, but Luke was all about the angst and romance instead of aliens. Bailey didn't watch much TV and when she did, she went on a huge rant about the *kill your gays* trope. She wasn't wrong. Luke's shows were the *worst* about that.

We sat on the sectional with Jordan snuggling with me like she was scared I was going to run away just from geek talking about the episodes. Jordan was *clearly* my soulmate because she agreed with me that the Weeping Angels were the most terrifying villains. Jeremy must have some Italian running through his veins because no one made pizza like that without Italian DNA.

I could have gone to bed happy and satisfied, but Jordan had other ideas. I thought we were just going to snuggle again and sleep. That would have made this day perfect. Jordan had other ideas, and she was *bossy* when she was horny. She had my pants off before I barely had time to register she wanted to fool around.

Was Jeremy even okay with this? Was *I* okay with this? I'd never had sex with an audience before. I sowed some oats in college, but I never got super wild and I was never an asshole about it.

“You had a bad day and *none* of this was your fault. I'm *really* big on cheer-up blowjobs. Everyone should get one if they've had a bad day. I hope you don't *all* have a bad day on the same day because I might get lockjaw and that would suck because how would I eat? I could like, die if I went all day with no food. If you don't want a pick me up blowjob, we can just sleep, but you've got a pretty impressive boner going on, so I don't *think* I've read the room wrong again.”

She completely didn't read the room wrong. Jordan babbled when she was nervous and it was the cutest thing. I tried to avoid being a dick to women, but I always avoided women like her before because I thought they were too chaotic. It was one of the reasons I was against hiring her.

I *liked* getting swept up in her chaos. Right in the middle of it was the beginning of a highly astute agent. Maybe one of us would have eventually noticed Tyrian's messages, but it took her all of ten minutes. Tyrian couldn't lie on the cocktail Boss gave him and he would have eventually told us, but his twin could have gotten to him before that happened and we never would have gotten a lead on Hex.

“You aren't wrong. But Jeremy should join us and take care of you while you take care of me so we're all happy.”

“Look at you!” Jordan said. “I love how utterly kinky you get when I take your pants off. Go lie on the bed.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

I didn't care that she got a little bossy in the bedroom. I needed that right now. I wasn't that prolific when I got put on suspension. I wasn't even that far out of training. Bailey had been around much longer than I had. But I was in charge of all these people now and I just wanted a night off now.

Jordan crawled over me and kissed me. She smelled like strawberries and candy. I didn't let her steal the show. Jeremy and I worshipped that hot body for a bit. It wasn't weird being with her with another man. We found a rhythm. Jordan was highly responsive.

Jeremy was nibbling on her breasts, but I really wanted to taste her. I dove between her legs and gave her clit a long lick. She tasted divine. I focused my attention on licking her clit. Jordan let out this moan that went straight to my dick when I slid my fingers inside her and started massaging her G Spot. Holy fuck, she sounded sexy when I was eating her out and she was getting attention from Jeremy, too.

God, the noises she made when she came on my tongue. I was about to explode. Jordan was perfection. And she nearly crushed my head with those toned thighs. What a way to die. She wasn't even remotely done. And even post orgasmic, she was still Jordan.

"I figured out your secret ginger superpower, so there's a ninety-nine percent chance Luke has a giant moose dick. My turn."

I had no idea what any of that meant, but I wasn't going to question her when she praised my oral skills. And honestly, Luke was massive, so he probably did have a big moose dick. I didn't get the whole moose thing because if anyone else called him that, he would have punched them in the face.

But moving on.

Jordan pounced on my dick while Jeremy positioned himself behind her. Oh, holy shit. Why hadn't I even fantasized about this before? This was sexy as fuck. New kink unlocked. Jordan was moaning all over my dick and every time Jeremy thrust into her, she took me down her throat a little deeper.

I wasn't a prude. I experimented, but this was easily the hottest thing I'd ever done. And we could do it again. I had so many ideas, even if Luke ended up having a giant moose dick. Jeremy was, apparently, pierced and covered in tattoos. Nothing would shock me at this point.

I could barely contain myself. I was waiting on Jordan. Jeremy reached around and started flicking her clit as he pounded into her. She started screaming around my dick, which just set me off further.

I couldn't hold it in any longer. I came harder than I probably ever had in my entire life. I didn't jerk off the entire time we were in New Orleans because Luke shared a room with me and we didn't have a tankless water heater at that house like we did at the penthouse.

I was pent-up to all fuck, and I just exploded. The aftershocks were insane, Jordan wasn't that far behind me and Jeremy finished shortly after. Jeremy and I snuggled in either side of Jordan. I buried my face in her neck and squeezed her. I was a *big* fan of her cheer up methods. I definitely felt better.

Jeremy hit the light because we were all exhausted and we'd have to be up early in the morning.

"Guys? Do I make donkey noises when I fuck?" Jordan asked.

What the hell?

TWENTY-SEVEN



Jordan

I was a big fan of threesomes. I'd never had one before last night, but massive fan. My stupid ex kept bringing groupies home for threesomes, but I hadn't been into it then and I wasn't a fan of groupies. I hadn't figured out I was also attracted to women yet. I hadn't met a mysterious former criminal with a bunch of different identities who got adopted by Boss, became a spy, and was kinda mean to me sometimes.

And Jeremy and Casper both assured me that my sex noises were *superb* and didn't sound anything like a donkey. I would have believed Jeremy, but now it had been peer-reviewed and confirmed by an entire team of people who'd had sex with me. It wouldn't hurt to *also* get input from Luke and Bailey, but that was just me being horny.

I don't know if Boss said something or Casper just realized we would work better as a team if we all knew what was going on. Betty grabbed Jeremy on the way in and said we were both needed in a meeting. I was trying to get better at listening to her calling us and wasn't halfway to the elevator before I realized she was trying to get my attention. She still rolled her

eyes at me and only talked to Jeremy. I had no idea what I did to piss her off, but I really didn't think she liked me.

Bailey was officially on the streets of New York without her wig and contacts. She downplayed her looks with both and makeup, but she couldn't really hide that she was gorgeous. With her unusual hair and eye color and now that she was dressing how *she* wanted to dress instead of blending in, she was stunning.

"Damn, you look sexy today," I said. "*This* is all totally working."

"Now that I don't have to hide, I'm thinking of dyeing my hair."

"No green hair, Cadmium," Casper fussed.

"Don't piss in my cornflakes, Red. I would rock the *shit* out of purple hair."

"She really would," I said.

"No way. Now that the two of you are also dating, no going all lesbian double-teaming on me. We need to get this meeting out of the way so you can all go back to training or work. Crimson and Tyrian are working Jonathan. Jeremy and I will be digging through his team's computers to see if we can pin them down."

I eyed Crimson and Tyrian. Whatever they talked about last night, she didn't dump him. They were holding hands, and he gave her an encouraging smile when she stood up to talk.

"So, Ashley had everything uploaded to a cloud server, and that was how you busted him, right? That's really fucking stupid and Jonathan is not that careless. Jonathan and the rest of them have dedicated computers devoted to hacking. The email addresses they use on those computers are their aliases. I've gone into their email settings while they are sleeping and checked the rescue email. It's also under the same alias. Pretty much all of them have two factor on their emails, but when I checked their numbers, they are burner phones under ridiculous names. Pretty much all of their phones are under

eighties singers. Tyrian's brother appears to be a Phil Collins fan."

"The Tarzan cartoon had a profound effect on him. He must have watched it a million times."

"Thanks for that tidbit. Anyway, it's like they are spitting in anyone's face who is trying to catch them. They are hiding behind a VPN, so I haven't been able to trace their IPs yet. I've managed to gather from their emails that they are careful. They aren't going to make this easy.

"I looked for anything related to Hex and Baba Yaga. Every Friday, they move anything incriminating and all their emails to external hard drives. I'm guessing that's where Hex's IP is and anything on Baba Yaga.

"I did grab one tidbit. There's a loose link on their chain. One of them goes by Asmodeus and they are the most careless. From what I gather, if Asmodeus needed a reminder and forgot to delete that email, they are our weak link. Asmodeus' phone is under Alice Cooper. I saw an email in Asmodeus's account from Apple so I'm wondering if all of them have iPhones. Apple security is almost impossible to crack if they have two factor on. Worse if they have two step. But we have an advantage, I think."

"I know where you are going with this," Jeremy said. "If they've never logged into an Apple site on that laptop before, they are going to get a notification on their phone. It's going to tip them off."

Crimson had this evil giggle, and she went off for several minutes.

"Asmodeus forgot the passcode on his phone. I was in his computer and watched him log into the cloud to remote wipe it. He wasn't there long enough for me to get his location from the site, but I watched him login to the cloud on Chrome from his computer and I watched him remember the browser and password."

"Crimson, good work. When Asmodeus isn't on the computer, see if you can remote in and ping a location on the

phone from the cloud website. Tyrian, any news from your brother?"

"Nothing we can use. Jonathan is furious no one is getting any information from the Affirmative program anymore and thinks it's his team's fault. The team is scrambling. They don't *think* the company had a good enough IT person on hand that would have caught anything. They think someone on the forum quietly betrayed them. I can use that to our advantage because my brother has gotten seriously paranoid since he had to go into hiding."

"Keep working him. Byzantium, what have you learned?"

"Remember, I haven't been back long and have only just gotten into their computers, but they are scrambling for something big. I didn't need Tyrian to tell me that Jonathan is flipping out that he lost access to the program and is blaming someone on the forum. I don't know his brother, but I can tell he's sending out feelers. He can't publicly gloat he won the bounty, but it also looks bad because he was bragging earlier that he thought he won. Tyrian is right. He can use this."

"Give everything you've gathered with the burner phones to Cadmium. She's a fucking genius at finding real identities from nothing, even if she's thinking of dyeing her hair purple."

"Not all of us were blessed to be born with fabulous ginger hair, you twat."

"No, you were born with platinum-blonde hair. My girlfriend in college *destroyed* her hair trying to get that color in her dorm bathroom. I'm not going to control your body, but if you want purple hair, clear it with Boss."

"Do they ever leave the external drive plugged in when they aren't using the computer?" I asked.

"So far, no. We may be able to catch them moving things from the failed bounty over. Asmodeus is our weak link. They may leave it plugged in long enough to access it."

"What about webcams?"

"They are covered. If they have meetings via webcam, they haven't so far."

Casper dismissed us. The rest of my day was just like the day before, but instead of learning French from the computer, Luke came to sit with me and helped me. French was getting somewhat easier, but it was still much harder than Spanish and Mandarin, even with the extra help I was getting.

Knife throwing was a bitch because my entire body was sore. Luke seemed to be taking it easy on me and spent the afternoon showing Bailey and me how to stretch out our sore muscles. Bailey was much more limber than I was and gracefully stretched her leg over her head like a dancer. I laid on the floor struggling to grab my foot and grunting like a pig. Maybe I'd be more like Bailey when I grew up.

Luke was gentle and ended up introducing me to yoga. I dug it. I never wanted to try it before because I thought I didn't like working out and I thought I'd be bored. I adored every minute of it and wanted to do it more.

"Baby steps or the both of you will be benched and I'll have my ass handed to me for not listening to your bodies. You need to be stretching anyway because your flexibility is miserable. I'm adding stretching to your training now from watching you. I want you moving like a rhythmic gymnast and right now, your hamstrings are more like a Golem."

"Gollum was pretty agile in the movies and books."

"Not the Lord of the Rings, Jordan. A Golem is a creature from Jewish mythology that's formed from clay. Your muscles are like this mass of clay that has been stuck in a kiln and baked so they don't want to move."

"Yeah, but you can't unbake clay."

"No, you just need to work it. I'm going to forget what you just said to me about *Lord of the Rings*. Now both of you go to Casper. I've just quit life for the rest of the day with what you just said."

I filed into the conference room with Bailey. Stretching made me way less sore than I was this morning. Crimson and Tyrian looked cranky but were still holding hands. Jeremy and

Casper had shit-eating grins on their faces like they might actually have good news.

Crimson complained that she had been stalking Asmodeus all day to see if he would get off the computer so she could ping his location on the cloud. Asmodeus spent all day either making fun of everyone on the forum or playing Minecraft. I didn't know Crimson was a gamer when she complained out of all the good games there were out there to play, he was so fascinated with Minecraft. She could see his Facebook account, but it was under Alice Cooper, like the phone. The entire profile was on lockdown, there were no actual photos, and there were only ten friends that she suspected were people on the forum. She was still looking into it.

Bailey asked her to email her the link to the Facebook profile and she'll start researching the profile and all the friends. Bailey finally reported that she looked into all the numbers they were using. They were all pay as you go plans with Net 10. For some reason, they accepted the fake names because they used real socials. The socials belong to real, living people with good credit.

"Give me time to look into them to find out if this was random identity theft, or they used the socials of people they knew."

"They're careful. It was probably random identity theft," Crimson grumbled.

"We have good news on our front," Casper finally announced. I guess he was done teasing us. "Jonathan has asked everyone on his team for a webcam meeting so they can all talk at once. It's after hours. The meeting is at midnight our time. It's Saturday, so Byzantium and I worked it out that we'll watch it from the penthouse, take screenshots, and give them to Cadmium to run through facial recognition."

"I know you don't expect me to be sitting there watching a bunch of hackers who probably smell like unwashed asshole bitch and moan that they couldn't steal from my home state

"No. You know Boss doesn't like us working after hours. I had to get permission for the two of us. Cadmium, Green, and

Mauve are going to need to be somewhere away from the penthouse while we work.”

“I can plan a date,” Bailey said. “I want to take my girlfriend out and honestly, the lesbians would love Luke, so he can tag along.”

“Good. Then it’s set. If you come home before midnight, take it to your room or Green’s so we can’t hear you.”

Bailey just winked at me. Did I mention I was horny?

TWENTY-EIGHT



Jordan

The week leading up to the webcam session Jeremy and Casper were going to ninja watch was *tense*. This was the closest anyone had gotten to Hex. It might be the closest anyone would ever get because they disappeared with their money after the breach. And probably because if they were smart enough to give Baba Yaga something to steal data from a bunch of agencies over two years without getting caught they were probably smart enough to *not* make a big deal about it after with a bunch of spies out there that wanted to kill them.

Baba Yaga was another story. Black and Boss had the personal and mission records to rule out Baba Yaga being one of us. Now, I wasn't my boyfriends, and I hadn't even finished training. Fuck, I was barely managing French right now, but Casper made a secret call to Boss in the backyard of the New Orleans house right when we got there, but I *thought* Boss would have that information by now.

If she did, she wasn't telling us. We rarely saw Boss or Black anymore. I didn't see her at all and she usually came

down every once in a while to check on my progress. Casper wasn't all that happy about it either. He only ever talked to Boss over a company chat program I didn't have access to. She wanted updates on locating Hex, but if she knew who Baba Yaga was, she hadn't told Casper. He agreed with me. She had enough time and a ton of motivation to put together a list and so did the rest of the agencies that were hit.

So, we did our thing finding Hex, and didn't question Boss. She was *much* better at this secret agent thing than any of us.

Luke was slowly easing me back into fight training. I didn't take my moose for this at all, but an hour out of my lesson was teaching me yoga. Bai had taught me meditation when she was teaching me Mandarin when I ate at her restaurant. I should have signed up for yoga classes as soon as I realized meditation helped me focus in my training. I loved yoga. I hoped he would keep doing it during our training sessions once he decided I was ready to spar again.

Turned out Bailey was a yoga enthusiast. Boss got her hooked on it after she adopted her and Bailey kept cursing Black out in French and kicking Luke in the nuts. Bailey and I loved yoga for different reasons. So did Luke. Luke got into it when he got out of the service because it calmed his mind.

Luke had just wrapped up an hour-long yoga session. I asked if I was ever going to punch something again.

“Mauve, if you want to punch something after doing yoga, you aren't doing it right. You're lifting weights and doing yoga to get stronger and more flexible. You won't be throwing any punches until I think you're ready. I thought you were enjoying the yoga?”

“I was, but I thought I was supposed to be preparing for my green belt?”

“It's not a race and you aren't really on a set schedule. Black isn't going to get someone in here for your French test until you're fluent. That fabulous body is my domain. It's my job to make you the strongest fighter I can so you can get out of a dangerous situation with minimal damage. It's *not* my job

to push you into belt exams before you are ready and injure you. Baby steps, Mauve.”

I believed him. Sometimes, I thought Luke knew my body better than I did when it came to all this fighting shit. Like, I *clearly* needed to be as flexible as Bailey if I was going to kick a bad guy in the face. I didn't enjoy stretching. It hurt, and I got bored. So, Luke whipped out yoga and I was almost able to put my palms flat on the floor now.

We still had our morning and afternoon meetings. Crimson was finally able to get into Asmodeus' Apple account when he took a two-hour break from playing Minecraft and posting on the forum. No one had any idea where he went, but his computer was free. When Crimson got into the account, the browser was saved and didn't ask for the two-factor code. Asmodeus wouldn't have gotten a notification on his phone his account was being accessed.

We had Asmoedeus's location, but the rest of them were too careful. They seemed kind of antisocial and didn't seem to meet in person. Like, Crimson pinged Asmodeus to an affluent area in Alabama similar to what Jonathan told Tyrian he lived in, so clearly they lived in the same area, but they were having this meeting over webcam.

Tyrian still wasn't any closer to getting any information from his brother. Jonathan was in a paranoid froth about everything. He now thought it was someone on his team who'd betrayed him, so the webcam session was probably going to be more dramatic than me in a room with a groupie that wanted to fuck my ex.

I knew why I couldn't be there to watch it go down. Jeremy and Casper needed to concentrate and Bailey and I would probably be doing running commentary.

Bailey wouldn't tell us *what* she had planned, but I learned enough about my new girlfriend in New Orleans that I knew I was going to have a blast.

TWENTY-NINE



Jeremy

Before I knew it, it was Saturday and Casper and I were stretched out on the sectional with snacks trying to catch some hackers. Bailey had kidnapped my girlfriend and Luke. I knew Jordan was going to have a great time and she might not be sleeping in our room tonight.

Casper might give off vibes that he was a little uptight, but he was anything but. He was turning this into a party. I mean, yeah, we needed to concentrate, but we didn't need to be miserable the whole time.

Casper cooked an assload of Italian snacks and we routed our laptops to the big flat screen. When I say Casper probably had the spirit of an old Italian woman somewhere inside him when he was in the kitchen, I wasn't lying. That boy could cook.

“Webcams are starting to come on. That is...totally not what I pictured in my head,” Casper said.

For a team that used a lot of eighties female singers for their cell phones, the team appeared to be made of big, burly men with big beards. Almost every single one of them had a Confederate flag hanging behind them. When they finally started talking, they had southern accents, but different from what I heard while I was in New Orleans.

I could pick out Tyrian's twin. Bailey found his photo, and they were identical. Jonathan had changed a lot. I wasn't even in the same state as him, but I could smell him from here. All of them really. I was pretty sure that was pizza or jarred spaghetti sauce stains on some of their shirts and probably food remnants in those beards.

"Oh, man," Casper said. "Many people think we all look like that."

"Can you smell the TV? Because I can smell the TV," I said.

"Crimson and Tyrian *way* overshare. Not only do we know about the weird nipple thing with the spatula, we know Tyrian showers more in one day than his twin probably has the week leading up to this webcam session."

The nipple thing was weird, and I wasn't one to kink shame. Most of the time, if I heard something new, I wanted to try it with Jordan. The nipple thing just sounded painful and that it would be unsanitary to make eggs with that spatula again. Did Crimson and Tyrian have one spatula for cooking and the other for sex? Did they sell special nipple spatulas at the dildo store? This was the kind of conversation I'd have with Jordan, not Casper. The meeting was starting.

"*Someone* fucked us over," Jonathan said. "No one else on the forum right now is smart enough to double cross us. Ashley was a backstabbing motherfucker who blackmailed everyone he could. It wouldn't shock me if this was all a ruse to get us to do the heavy lifting while one of his people have something going to steal the money. Unless one of you bastards decided to get greedy and betray the team."

A pot-bellied man with a bushy beard and an even thicker accent appeared to be the only one brave enough to respond.

“Forget Ashley. The entire thing was a mistake, and it blew up in our face. We saw the shitstorm that went down when most of his company got busted here in Mountain Brook. They probably heard about it in Louisiana, too. They probably had someone good going through that program who caught us.”

A rail-thin man with rotten teeth finally spoke. “Whoever busted Affirmative had to be good hackers to find out what he was doing. The guy was a billionaire from blackmailing people and I watched them lead him out on the telly. He had no idea it was coming.”

A huge, muscular guy with a tan who was kind of cute if you were into the farmer thing spoke up. “You just gave me an idea. What if whoever busted Ashley is an even better hacker than us? What if they gave the police information on Ashley because he was getting in on their territory? What if we put a bounty on them? Whoever finds them wins.”

This seemed to set Jonathan off. “I’m gonna pray for you, because your momma must have dropped you on your head too many times. We’ll lose everyone on the forum if we start going after our own. You know I don’t believe in that ‘safe space snowflake communist’ bullshit, but we’re *all* breaking the law together. We can’t have anyone thinking we’re turning on anyone because they could expose *us*. You’re a fucking idiot.”

“What if the bounty is to just find them and bring them to the forum to see what they can do?” he pressed.

“You’re as dumb as a stump. Don’t you reckon if this group turned Affirmative over, they are going to end up being snakes in the grass and bust all of us once they are in?”

“Well, I don’t see the rest of you coming up with anything.”

“I think we can all agree this bounty was a bad idea,” the skinny man said. “Ashley stabbed *everyone* in the back. We need something new. A sure thing. Mountain Brook is expensive and we all have certain tastes. We need something big.”

“I say we find someone even Ashley couldn’t touch. Find something on them and make them our puppet. We’re not dumb enough to get caught like he was.”

“Who do we go after?”

“Think about it, asshole. There’s an election coming up. We’re voting on governor and a few seats. Get some dirt and we can have whatever we want,” Jonathan said.

“What if there’s no dirt?”

“Think about the politicians where we live, fuckhole. There’s always dirt.”

“So, what’s the plan of attack?”

Casper and I watched as they laid out their plan to try to rig an election through disinformation and trying to get the candidate they thought had the most skeletons in his closet elected to blackmail them.

We’d have them long before that and it was easier than we thought. They dropped the area they were living, so we knew *where* to look. Casper got some good screenshots of their faces. I was guessing Boss had some amazing facial recognition software.

We’d get their real names if we got a hit and not the aliases they were living under now, but the good thing about them living in a wealthy area was that there was probably a ton of cameras everywhere for us to narrow their location down further.

We watched as the webcams started disappearing from our screens. Jonathan hadn’t covered up his webcam yet, so we were able to see more of the room he worked in when he got up. Underneath the big confederate flag we saw behind him, there appeared to be this macabre display of bones. They appeared to be pieced together like he was trying to make a skeleton.

“Okay, what the fuck is that?” I asked. “Is he a serial killer or a grave robber? A necrophiliac?”

“There’s actually a black market for people who collect real human bones. I guess Jonathan is a fan,” Casper said.

“Please tell me you know that because of work and not because you have crusty-ass bones under your bed. We’ve both had sex with my girlfriend. I feel like that’s something we should know about. If you do, we’re not having sex in your bedroom.”

Casper just chuckled.

“You sound just like Jordan sometimes. Ask Bailey about the black market dealer she took down.”

“Does it involve a giant dildo?”

“Not that time. This one involves a chicken leg and a bottle of hot sauce that’s banned in two states called something like *Prolapsed Asshole* that she picked up for two dollars at a hardware store.”

I didn’t know where Bailey had kidnapped my girlfriend, but I knew Jordan was probably having the time of her life.

THIRTY



Jordan

I loved going to concerts at packed clubs when I wasn't dating a mediocre bass player who had stupid groupies throwing themselves at him even though he *had* a girlfriend. But I'd seriously wasted years of my life thinking I was completely straight and not walking my fabulous ass into a gay club.

I adored everything about the club Bailey brought us to in New Orleans and the one she brought Luke and me to tonight. Many people there knew Bailey, so they were just so fucking *nice* to me.

Bailey could finally tell people the truth since they asked about the drastic change to her appearance. Luke ended up in a tiara and a pink-feather boa with the title *Protector of Lesbians* after they found out he went to jail for knocking Carl the fuck out. That part was sexy as fuck.

I had a blast. After Bailey told her story to her friends, we just danced all night. I got to unleash my trademarked ass-shaking moves, and that *always* made me happy. Bailey and

Luke had moves, too. We smashed all of our moves together and got sexy as fuck on the dance floor. I didn't like it when people I didn't know got up in my dance space to grind on me, but I was a big fan of it when it was people I cared about.

Jeremy and Casper were still up when we stumbled home. The webcam session was over. It looked like Casper had cooked an entire feast of Italian food they'd eaten and they were now playing video games. I was glad my boyfriends were bonding while I was gone.

"Did you get anything?" Luke asked.

"Oh, yeah. We got a location and tons of pictures of their faces," Casper said. "Now we're off the clock and I'm slaying Orcs with Jeremy as a sexy elf girl with very illogical armor, so you're going to have to wait until we get back to the office for details."

"The Orcs are serious business," I said. "I get that we fight real bad guys, but sometimes you have to kill big green things that are kind of sexy in a weird way in totally illogical armor."

"I have a book for that if you think Orcs are sexy," Luke said.

"So, big guy, are we going to brawl for the honor of bedding the fair maiden tonight?" Bailey asked.

Luke just scoffed.

"I'd win. I taught you everything you know."

"I doubt you wore dick protection to the gay club. Men are like the Death Star. You have this big gaping vulnerability at your center."

"I didn't take you for a Star Wars fan," Jeremy said.

"Frederick is more into Star Trek than Star Wars," Casper said.

"You can all celebrate I also have a geek side underneath all this fucking fabulousness later. I'm not going to make Jordan pick, so I need to know if I need to slay the giant."

“I know you love to wake up and choose violence, Frederick, but I can wait my turn.”

“Tomorrow, yeah?”

“I’m a patient man,” Luke said.

And that was what I loved about him. That and he probably had a giant moose dick. I followed Bailey to her room. I’d been in here before and I loved it. Her bedroom was red and reminded me of a really expensive hotel suite in Bali. She had this massive bed, but I was nervous, even after the shower.

“Relax. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do. I just wanted you to myself for the night. Casper and Jeremy have been hogging you. We can just sleep if you want. I’m being greedy.”

Bailey looked vulnerable. Luke was right. She seemed like she was worried I was going to run away to be with Jeremy. I wasn’t. I was nervous, but I very much wanted to be here. I walked over and stood in front of her. She was so much shorter than I was. Bailey wore her hair short. It was longer on the top and shorter on the sides, but it was in her eyes. I tucked it behind her ear.

“I’m the greedy one because I want all of you. Be greedy back. If you want me to yourself, tell me. I had a blast tonight. And I didn’t want to stop in the shower. I’d also like to kiss you now.”

Bailey’s eyes got hooded.

“I’m not a stone top.”

“So, I got on lesbian social media and I know what that means. I don’t want you to be. I have no idea what I’m doing, but I *want* to touch you back. Just be patient with me because I’ve never done this before.”

Bailey started tugging at my shirt.

“It’s not that hard. I was where you were once and probably a lot more clueless. Carl wasn’t exactly great in bed, so I didn’t know what I liked.”

I nodded. I got it.

“It’s probably really hard to fuck and eat pussy with no neck.”

Bailey cackled and tackled me so we fell on her bed. She started nibbling on my collarbone.

“Never change, Jordan.”

I was about to say I wouldn’t, but she slipped her hand down the front of my panties and did something with her fingers that she should probably trademark. I moaned and kissed her back.

Bailey started stripping my clothes off, so I pulled her’s off, too. This was only the second time I’d seen her naked, but *damn*. The only reason Casper didn’t lie and say she was a dancer, too, was because she tended to wear a lot of layers to hide in when she was trying to avoid being noticed.

Bailey’s body was firm and soft in all the right ways and I loved touching her. I lowered my head to nibble and suck on her nipples. I already knew they were pierced from the shower. She wore titanium barbells with green gems on the end and two little dangly chains across the bottom.

I *also* knew from the shower that she really liked it when you pulled on the chains with your teeth. Bailey gasped, arched her back, and pulled my hair a bit. I was really into the hair pulling.

Bailey was mostly a gentle lover, and she took her time with me. We kissed and touched each other for what seemed like ages until I was completely comfortable enough to try to dive between her thighs. I was confused when she stopped me.

“Are you worried I’m going to be bad at it?”

“Fuck no. You’re already amazing. We’re going to do what an amazing lesbian did for me the first time I did this. It’ll benefit us both. Honestly, it’s great for figuring out what your partner likes. We’ll go down on each other at the same time. I start out doing what I like and you start out trying to recreate what you like. We’ll both pick up some new tricks while

learning to pleasure each other. It's one of those cool things you can only do with another woman."

"Show me."

The best oral sex in my life came from Jeremy and now Casper. They both had different tricks, and I was fairly certain I could recreate them. I knew what *I* liked when I was playing with my toys. I couldn't wait to experiment on Bailey.

We settled ourselves. I started making slow circles on her clit with my tongue. Bailey just hovered above me and gently blew on me. Holy shit. I was about to come undone over just her breath on me. She was teasing me. I loved being teased, too, so I backed off.

I'd only ever tasted myself on a man's mouth before, but I liked the way Bailey tasted. I liked things hard and rough sometimes, but sometimes, I wanted to take things slow and build them up. That seemed to be how Bailey liked things.

We licked each other slowly until we couldn't stand it anymore. It was at the point now that Bailey was flicking her tongue on my clit and I was just trying to keep up. I liked fingers, but I didn't know if she did. I wasn't going to finger her if she wasn't into that.

She answered that question for me when she slid two fingers inside me and started to massage my G spot. This was one of those situations where neither of us had to speak or give directions like if we were with a man. We could just show each other what we liked and watch how the other responded. It was pretty fucking amazing.

Whoever invented the G spot was amazing. I mean like, whoever stuck one up there in the first place. I knew some people said it didn't exist, but those people also thought the female orgasm was a myth and couldn't take directions to prove them wrong. Sometimes, they played the bass and cheated on you with groupies.

I technically knew *how* to find it, but had only ever located mine with toys because I didn't have cryptid arms to fist myself with. I fumbled a bit. Bailey was moaning and

groaning, but I really didn't want her to feel like she was getting a pelvic exam at a gynecologist who had been sued for malpractice several times.

It was also *super* hard to concentrate because Bailey was massaging mine and flicking my clit with her tongue and my soul might actually leave my body in five minutes. I resisted the urge to yell *score* when I finally found Bailey's G spot because it wasn't even remotely appropriate and she had more black belts than I did.

"I'm getting close," Bailey gasped. "Keep doing that."

"Girl, same," I whimpered.

Bailey did this little twist with her tongue that she should *definitely* trademark and I came undone. I tried to replicate the move and Bailey came all over my tongue. She yanked me up to snuggle with her.

"Damn, you are utterly divine considering that was your first time. How was it for you?"

"Sorry it took me a while to find your G spot and made it like some kind of pelvic exam, but I'm a *massive* fan of the gay sex."

Bailey started giggling.

"That's not a lesbian superpower. I only lucked out that I found yours right away. We should probably get some sleep. It's the weekend and Boss is all about work-life balance, but she might call us all in after the webcam meeting. We only have theories why Baba Yaga fucked over so many agents. It could be a *lot* more nefarious than someone sticking it to their boss.

"In fact, it probably is. If she personally got all the names with something Hex gave her, that was extremely dangerous. I'm pretty sure the room she would have needed to get into was just like ours. Not everyone has access. No one in this apartment had access before the breach. I can't say I know who did. Baba Yaga probably had a bigger agenda than just releasing those names. She paid Hex, but I'm guessing someone paid her a lot more than that for those names."

“I want to catch them and they didn’t even fuck me over. I *benefitted* from those shenanigans, but they ruined a lot of lives. If Boss needs me to come in tomorrow, I’ll drag my ass out of bed.”

“Same. Are you a snuggler? Because it’s one of my things.”

I rolled over and kissed Bailey.

“I am *all* about the cuddles.”

I think Bailey intended to be big spoon, but she was so tiny, it only made sense for her to be little spoon. I pressed myself against her back and wrapped my arms around her waist. Bailey let out a contented sigh, and we both drifted off to sleep.

Tomorrow, we might be even closer to catching Hex and Baba Yaga.

THIRTY-ONE



Jordan

Boss didn't call us in on a Sunday, but she did call Casper for an update. I had this feeling even though Boss wasn't making *us* work on the weekend, she definitely was. When I got to work Monday, I didn't know if I'd be heading to Alabama to work Jonathan and steal his external drive or if we had enough to send a team to bust them.

I liked Tyrian, even if he was into weird things with his nipples and a spatula, but I didn't want to go anywhere near his twin after Casper and Jeremy showed me the screen grabs they took and told me what he was like talking to his teammates.

I didn't particularly want my girlfriend near him either, even though she seemed pretty handy with giant dildos and hardware store hot sauce in a pinch. I knew about the dildo, but Jeremy made her tell him the hot sauce story. Something told me Bailey had a *lot* of crazy stories with even stranger items and Boss didn't give a shit because Bailey got what she needed first.

We were called straight into a meeting as soon as we got into the office. Boss was waiting.

“I apologize again for asking both of you to work on the weekend. Great work on the information you gathered. Cobalt is monitoring traffic cam footage in the area to see if we can nail down their location or routine.

“Am I ever going to get to meet the mysterious Cobalt?”

“Focus, Mauve. You need to get to your language module. I want Cadmium running facial recognition on the webcam photos to see if any of them have records. The more information we have, the more I can give Deepthroat. Red, Crimson, and Byzantium, I want you sowing doubt among their team. Make Jonathan think his team turned on him so he hopefully turns to Tyrian and gives him an address.”

I didn't question anything for once and went to take my French modules. I wondered if it would ever make sense like Mandarin and Spanish. Going undercover in Louisiana was a blast. It well made up for Clarence. I didn't want to ruin my streak with these guys. They just seemed gross and would want more than my feet.

Luke came in as soon as I put my headphones on. He took them right off and sat next to me. He told me he knew what my modules were today and thought he would just teach me I seemed to get things *much* better when Luke was helping me. Luke came with me when we went to lunch because we were probably talking Hex and he definitely had an agenda.

Bailey had already done her thing with trying to run the webcam photos through facial recognition. She found mug shots for most of them. We found out why Jonathan had to run. He hacked a company, stole a ton of money, and bought a bunch of black market shit on the dark web. That explained the gross bones.

Chris Guidry had a record from ten years ago for pirating movies and music. I guess he wasn't as good a hacker then. Dennis Melancon did time for dog fighting. I already hated him. The one that looked like a sexy farmer that Jonathan kept calling an idiot didn't seem to have a record. I didn't watch the

webcam call, but he appeared to be smarter than all of them if he hadn't been caught yet.

“Find anything on addresses for them?”

“Give me longer than four fucking hours. I already have names. It's going to take a little longer to find any social media profiles. I might not get a hit at all if they aren't using their real photos on it. Can I enjoy my lunch now?”

“Sorry, Cadmium. I'm just ready to bust these people and get that information off Jonathan's external drive.”

“Please tell me I'm not going to Alabama and pretending to be into one of these dudes?” I finally asked.

“You're not. Cadmium might. We didn't keep up on your training while you were in New Orleans and these guys are going to be *much* worse than Clarence was.”

“I'll bet they have epic hot sauce at hardware stores in Alabama,” Bailey cackled. “You know it can't be me either. My face has been plastered all over the news and they may recognize me and blow everything. Don't take away my chance to have my say after everything. Trust me, I know those guys and I didn't have to watch the webcam meeting. They are *just* like Carl. You're going to have to work your computer mojo because I can't go out again until after the trial. Boss will back me on this.”

“Sorry, Cadmium. I get it. After what I saw on that video, I don't want you or Mauve anywhere near them. Sorry, Tyrian, but your brother is a huge asshole now. I'm guessing those people were supposed to be his friends, and he was awful to them.”

“You don't have to tell me that. I've been messaging him.”

“Keep working him. Make him paranoid and see if he gives you an address. The rest of you, go do your thing. Cadmium, I'd love to have you back in your office, but you need to be in training. Eventually, the trial is going to happen and you'll have to go out again.”

After I changed, Luke had yoga mats out. I was totally fine with that because I was really coming to love yoga. Luke took

us through several Asanas and finally called it quits. He even did guided meditation at the end.

I thought he was going to send us to weights, but he threw me gloves and told me to go punch the bag and work on my kicks. He even let Bailey hit something this time instead of hitting the weights.

“You’re letting us hit again?” I asked.

“It’s about fucking time,” Bailey said.

“Yes. You’re both ready. Mauve, your flexibility is coming along nicely since we started doing yoga. And put the fucking gloves on because last time I told you to go punch something, you were in a bad mood and you bled. I’m not risking you getting benched until your hand heals while we are getting you back in shape. Run along now and don’t hurt something.”

I happily punched and kicked the bag for several hours until Luke came and got me to stretch again. He told me it would cut down on the soreness. I didn’t argue because this was his domain. I trusted Luke with my body. Hopefully, I could trust my body with him carnally tonight. He brought me my own set of bands and told me to set a few hours aside at night for stretching before sending us home for the night.

THIRTY-TWO



Luke

Jordan was *mine* when we got home. The only time I'd dare tell a woman what to do with her body was when I was training her to beat a man's ass with it. I wasn't upset I was the last one to be with her and I'd never demand that of her, but she made a promise last night and I was holding her to it.

Casper needed her first. He blamed himself because his mind didn't work like Jordan's picking up on twin speak. Honestly, I didn't know a single person whose mind worked like my girlfriend. Like, I never knew what was going to come out of her mouth. If *anyone* else did the whole moose thing, I'd beat their face in. It was just fucking adorable that she accidentally did it once and ran with it.

I could have made a big deal about it last night, but I didn't. I knew how Bailey got with her girlfriends and it all boiled down to what Carl did to her. Bailey had trust issues. Then when she got comfortable with them, it was never

comfortable enough to tell them the truth. The relationship would always implode because they would press her about the secrets they knew she was keeping, and she'd react badly.

I was shipping Bailey and Jordan long before Jordan admitted she had a crush. I wouldn't have even been angry if she ended up in a throuple with Jeremy and Bailey and I wasn't included. Bailey *needed* this. She was one of my best friends and Casper and I were the ones who dealt with it when her girlfriend broke up with her because of her secrets.

But Bailey'd had her night and now it was my turn. I wasn't a horny eighteen-year-old who couldn't control himself. I waited until after dinner. And I was pretty sure my girlfriend and her other boyfriend had a second stomach because dinner was always a big affair with seconds and sometimes thirds. I didn't *think* sex was like swimming where we had to wait an hour or weird cramps would happen.

Now I was feeling awkward. Was I supposed to invite Jeremy? I wanted to make all my kinky books come to life with all the orgies, but I wanted our first time to be just us. I wanted to learn every single detail of that fine body and how to make her scream. I just didn't want to offend anyone. Jeremy was being extremely understanding with all of this.

"Is it okay if I steal Jordan tonight?"

"Dude, yeah. She told you that last night. I'm all about the love. I'm not cockblocking anyone in this apartment. If she's right about the giant moose dick, you'd better prep her right."

"I'm betting I'm right," Jordan said. "Casper had secret ginger superpowers and Bailey has some top-notch lesbian skills she should trademark. It was just like I told Jeremy. So, it just makes sense you have a giant moose dick."

I was a *fucking gentleman* but I could also be a caveman when I wanted to be. I scooped Jordan up and started marching to my bedroom.

"Oh, sweetie. I have the *biggest* moose dick and I know how to use it."

"I knew it," she whispered.

I didn't go around comparing my junk to other men. Back when we had a full roster of agents, I didn't stare in the shower and feel inadequate. I knew some of them did. Some of these guys were trained secret agents who spoke a ton of languages and knew several fighting styles.

They couldn't be happy with being James Bond. Some of these bros turned into complete turds after not keeping their eyes to themselves in the locker room. Those swaggering little rodents would try to prove something when they were sparring with me and I'd knock them out cold. I wasn't fucking around with that.

Besides, it wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Guys wanted a giant baseball bat dick and all the heroes in my smutty books had giant cocks, but with great power came great responsibility. You had *responsibilities* if you ended up with a giant moose dick or you could seriously hurt someone. I learned that the hard way when I lost my virginity.

"Just so you know, a big, sexy moose with the matching dick who has a thing for filthy smut books means my expectations are going to be *super* high."

"Well, I don't have tentacles like the monsters or knots or barbs like the shifters. It's just a regular, human dick."

"Well, the suspense is now killing me and I have to see it. I saw your moves at the lesbian club, big boy. You could trademark those ass-shaking moves like I did. You should take your pants off and let me see the moose dick with a little strip tease."

It wasn't a weird request. And Jordan wasn't the first woman who made assumptions about what I was packing because of how insanely tall and muscular I was. I hadn't disappointed anyone yet, but I also hadn't met anyone with an imagination like Jordan. Moose dick to Jordan could mean something *completely* unreasonable, even by porn star standards. Was she expecting a baby arm? Was I about to feel inadequate for the first time in my life when I whipped my dick out and it wasn't moose enough for her? I didn't know I was supposed to be researching moose cock.

Jordan whipped out her phone and started playing music. Fuck it. I gave her a strip tease. I was facing away from her in my boxer briefs shaking my ass in her face when I felt something slide down my ass crack. Did she just slip me a dollar? I pulled it out as sexily as I could. Jordan gave me a ten.

I was keeping this. I was going to frame it as a memory of the first time I made love to Jordan. When I turned around, she was naked, too. She flung her thong at me and it hit me in the chest. I caught it before it hit the floor.

I was keeping these, too.

And two could play at that game. I whipped my boxers off and tossed them at her. She shrieked when they hit her in the face. I jumped in bed and tackled her.

“I taught you how to block better than that.”

“That wasn’t a fist, Luke. Those were your *manties*.”

I buried my face in her neck and groaned.

“I adore you, Jordan, but *never* call my boxers that again.”

“You’d look really hot in one of those stripper thongs.”

“Those are cruel and unusual punishment. I don’t even get why women wear them. Why are we talking about thongs?”

“Because your moose dick is bigger than I thought it was going to be and now, I’m worried about it punching a hole in my lung and killing me.”

I propped myself up on my elbows so I wouldn’t crush her and brushed her hair off of her forehead. I looked down at those beautiful blue eyes and kissed her.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yeah. Implicitly. I was completely out of shape when I met you and you turned me into a total badass. I skipped a belt because of you. You saw I wasn’t flexible *at all* and I hated stretching, so you whipped out yoga. I thought I’d hate yoga, and I never had enough money to try it, but I actually love it. I honestly think you know my body better than I do.”

That was *the best* compliment she ever could have given me as her trainer. That's what I tried to do for all of my students. She was the first I had all to myself that I could go full hands-on and actually skip a belt. Jordan needed yoga to stretch out her muscles and her Mandarin tutor already laid the groundwork for the focus and breathing.

“Good. What we're doing now? This is teamwork. I'd never hurt you and I'm going to prepare you. But you have to help me. I'll be watching and listening like I do in the training room, but I'm not a mind reader. If something is uncomfortable, I need you to tell me. If you like something, make all the noises.”

“I can do that now because Jeremy and Casper *assured* me that I don't make donkey noises during sex.”

I should probably ask. I was the kind of boyfriend that asked all the questions and reassured his girlfriend until she had no doubts and was absolutely happy. But I had boyfriends-in-law now and it sounded like they put her mind at ease for *whatever* was going through her head about donkey noises. We were naked, I was on top of her, and my cock was so hard, it hurt.

Jordan dramatically put her hand on her forehead like one of those fainting women in an old movie.

“Do the growling alpha thing and take me like an omega in one of your smut books.”

This was my moment. I wasn't going to ravage her, but I had that growl down perfect. I'd been practicing it for just the right woman. I ran my nose up her neck while letting out a rumbling growl in my chest and then bit her ear. She broke into goosebumps and shivered.

“New kink officially unlocked,” she moaned.

This was why I was so utterly crazy for this girl. I could get weird with her. And now it was time to show her. Some of the idiots that used to work with us gave me shit about the books I read and called them mommy porn. I *enjoyed* reading about strong women getting everything they wanted and since

most of it was written by women, I had a *lot* better tips about what women actually liked than they did watching porn made for men.

I was versatile. Jordan told me how she wanted it. So, I pinned her down and licked and bit every inch of her body. I was one of those guys who had to shave every day and started getting stubble by the end of the night. It seemed to drive Jordan wild when it dragged against the tender flesh of her breast or inner thigh.

I had no idea what she was talking about with the whole donkey noises thing. The little noises she was making while I was nipping at her inner thighs were going straight to my cock. Jordan was squirming as much as I would let her trying to thrust her pussy toward my tongue.

I finally gave her what she wanted because I was dying to taste her. She was dripping wet and waiting for me. Fuck, she tasted good. I used my fingers to prepare her for my cock, which was throbbing so hard it was almost painful. Jordan was responsive as hell and it was an enormous turn on.

I was fucking her with my fingers and lapping at her clit. Jordan was making those sexy little noises and trying to take my fingers a little deeper. I gave her what she wanted. I licked her harder until she came on my fingers and tongue.

Jordan was perfect when she came. I sat back on my heels and she was lying there with a beautiful blush on her breasts and her hair mussed.

“Holy shit,” she gasped.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Like I want all of you now.”

Not going to lie. I was jealous of women and their refractory period. I crawled on top of her and she wrapped those gorgeous long legs around my waist. We both groaned as I guided myself into her slowly. Jordan was so fucking tight. I eased myself into her gently until I was buried to the hilt and then stopped. She was still pinned beneath me, but I wasn't crushing her.

“You good?”

“Oh, my god, I’ve never been more perfect in my life.”

Excellent. Because I could barely contain myself. She kept her nails short, but they were digging into my arm. I started thrusting and she let out one of her little noises. I brought my lips down in a punishing kiss. Jordan bit me. Minx.

She begged for it harder and faster, so I gave her what she wanted. Jordan was grinding against me as much as she could. When she came, she jerked her head up and bit my chest.

I totally lost it. I let go and came so hard, I saw stars. I thrust out my orgasm as I was wracked with aftershocks. I finally collapsed and pulled her on top of me.

“Holy shit. You are amazing,” I moaned.

“Me? You have a magic moose dick.”

I chuckled.

“I adore you. You know that, right?”

It was honestly more like love. I was in love with this girl. Was is too soon to tell her that?

THIRTY-THREE



Jordan

Luke had been teaching me instead of doing the modules in the mornings. I was starting to understand French the way I did Mandarin. I understood most of what he tried to teach me today. I was relieved it was finally starting to make sense because I didn't know if my verbal exam was going to be with someone like Jiao, who gave me a hard time.

"Tu es la merde, Mauve."

"What the fuck did you just call me?"

I knew *merde* meant shit because Bailey used it sometimes. She used it when she wanted to curse and get away with it.

"I gave you a compliment. I said you're the shit. *Ferme ta gueule et apprendre.*"

"You just said I should learn, but I have no idea what you said before that."

"I told you to shut the fuck up," he said, grinning at me. I socked him in the arm and he reminded me my punches

weren't as strong as they used to be and I'd be spending my afternoon on the punching bag again. I didn't mind since he was finally teaching me saucy French words like Bai did when she was teaching me Mandarin. He warned me not to repeat any of that in front of anyone and sent me to lunch with my team.

I had a lot more questions, and I wanted ten minutes alone with Bailey, but I was sent back to Luke.

“Go work the punching bags. Based on that punch you gave me this morning, you're not ready for sparring yet. *Je vais te casser la gueule si fort que tu vas cracher toutes les dents.*”

“What did you just say to me?”

“I'm teaching you French insults you may need in the field if you're in a bind. That's how you threaten to punch someone in the face so hard they'll be spitting out their teeth.”

“Fucker, you'd better not break my teeth. I'm paranoid about flossing and I'm not getting dentures because you need to make a point.”

“I'm not going to break your teeth, *connasse*, but if you don't get back into shape, someone might. My boxers hit you right in the face. And I just called you an asshole. Go punch until I think you're ready for sparring again.”

He was still bringing up that I didn't block his boxers when he threw them at me, but I was a little distracted by that strip tease and his *massive* dick swinging in my face. Seriously, it was bigger than I thought it was going to be and he knew how to use it.

And if I got distracted by his cock in the training room, my big, sexy moose was going to think up something epic to get me to focus. He wasn't *really* going to hit me in the face and he'd never do anything that would get me benched, but he could step up my training or dial it back like he did with Bailey.

So, I forgot about his moose dick and how amazing he was in bed and focused on punching the bag. Luke came to get me

when I was dripping with sweat and my muscles were screaming.

“You’re getting faster. Your flexibility is coming along nicely, too. They really need to have Cadmium in here with you instead of in her office trying to catch hackers all day. I’ll have you both sparring again when she’s back. She’s been working out in the home gym to make up for being behind a desk again.”

We weren’t having a meeting today. I wasn’t demanding answers like before. Casper told me what he could when we got home. I still hadn’t met Cobalt and her team, but I knew they were working their asses off poring through street cam footage.

Bailey was doing her thing in her office all day. She loved sparring and fighting, but she wasn’t complaining about not being able to train like she was before.

We all wanted to catch these people. I *benefitted* from everything Hex and Baba Yaga did. I’d still be broke working my insurance job. I never would have met any of these people I cared about. Jeremy may have eventually applied and worked on the business side at Stantech or Damien would have found something to keep him at Affirmative. Jeremy could have gotten arrested with everyone there.

I still wanted to catch Hex and Baba Yaga just as much as everyone they fucked over. I didn’t care for Casper’s ex-girlfriend, but I would have just preferred he dump her rather than her having to go into hiding. Luke’s sister didn’t deserve that either. None of these people did.

So, I was doing everything they told me and not making a fuss about anything. They would tell me if they needed me.

THIRTY-FOUR



Jordan

All I really knew was that Cobalt and her team were getting hits on traffic cam and was starting to piece together routines for all of them. They were careful. They were all wanted men except the sexy farmer. We didn't have addresses because they lived past traffic cams. We knew they'd have cameras where they lived because they weren't stupid. Cobalt was still trying to get access.

They all had places in town they frequented, whether it be a diner or a bar. Problem was, these places were open carry. They were armed and so were most of the patrons. We could send teams to all of those places to hit them all at once so we didn't tip them off, but it would be dangerous to the team.

So, we were still working on it and I was focusing on my training until they told me otherwise. I was *finally* starting to get French with Luke's help. Maybe it was just making sense because Luke and Bailey were teaching me all the good insults.

Luke led me through the usual yoga, which I enjoyed, then I had to stretch with the bands. He slapped me on the ass when I got up and told me I wasn't gymnast quality yet, but my flexibility was coming along just fine. Luke always had this way of making me feel powerful, even if I wasn't quite perfect yet.

My punching session with the bag got cut short when Blue came and got me. If it was Blue and Casper hadn't told me ahead of time about a meeting, something serious was going on. When I got to the conference room, Black was waiting with Boss sitting on the table dressed in couture like a queen.

"This team is excellent considering most of you weren't hired the traditional way. One of you was hired instead of arrested, two of you were recruited from a cesspool, one of you barged into this office dressed like I'll never forget and then shook their ass in Black's face, and the other should have always been here, but we somehow missed you until your girlfriend demanded we hire you.

"You've done a fantastic job. Not every agency was hit. There are still some out there that didn't lose a single agent and are still secret. They have a vested interest in figuring this out because at one point, we didn't know if someone was going to contact them and want money not to out them.

"They have a full roster of seasoned agents and they've been working on this just as long as we have. It was *my* ragtag team of baby agents along with Red and Cadmium who got this close. You're all brilliant. Cobalt and her team have enough that we can send teams to arrest them," Boss said.

"Make sure you warn them they'll be armed. This is the south, not New York and we aren't dealing with a botanist this time," Bailey warned.

"Thank you, Cadmium. I think you're forgetting the Russian and the few others you worked that were armed when we took them down."

Bailey didn't even blink when Black fussed at her. They kind of had this antagonistic father-daughter relationship. Bailey gave him shit all the time, but I knew she adored him.

Black could be scary, but he was like our daddy if Boss was our momma bear. And I meant that even if Boss had several boyfriends and Black wasn't one of them.

I wasn't sure if we were going to see a bust this week or not until Black told Bailey to tell Green if he was attending that maybe they should eat a burger before they came if they intended on drinking the way the normally did. I thought we might get a night off from work, but Black warned everyone to keep an eye on these jokers to make sure they weren't tipped off before the bust.

THIRTY-FIVE



Jordan

Maybe I got a little religious when we were in the bible belt. I was dating four people, and I had to pick which room I slept in unless someone came to sleep with Jeremy and me. I was doing the Lord's work here because sometimes, one of them needed me more than the others.

Luke was a hot mess. In the morning, we may or may not find a hard drive with Hex's IP on it. Jonathan could have been talking out his ass to impress his brother. We wouldn't know until we got that hard drive.

I could have invited Luke to my bed. Bailey didn't want to snuggle with Jeremy and me, but she was Luke's best friend and they were platonic snuggle buddies. Bailey and I dragged Luke to his room and make him snuggle with us. Bailey tried to big spoon him. If she was too small to big spoon me, she was definitely too small to big spoon a giant. We made it work anyway.

Jeremy beat me awake like usual. He didn't have our shakes. Jeremy had made a giant English breakfast because we

were all going to be drinking today.

“Ooh,” Casper said. “I was wondering why you were late getting home. I love blood pudding.”

“Thanks, Jeremy,” Bailey said. “Because I’m definitely going to be drinking and this giant motherfucker is like snuggling with melatonin. It’s like he releases something in your brain and you pass the fuck out.”

“Oh, my god, you’re right!” I said. “It’s like that even when you don’t have sex with him.”

“Let me enjoy my breakfast without picturing Luke having sex,” Bailey groaned.

“I’ll bet I make her scream more than you do,” Luke grinned.

“Oh, fuck you, moose. A lesbian *always* knows better. And don’t even mention the dick thing because we have toys. I have a strap on she could peg you with if you sass me again.”

“I enjoy a pinky, but I don’t think Jordan *wants* to peg me.”

“I don’t even know if I’m into that.”

“No kink talk over breakfast when we have to go to work,” Casper said. “We *can’t* be late for this.”

We left and went straight to the movie room. Boss went out. There was a bigger spread than last time and I had a feeling it had everything to do with what could be on those hard drives. Even Tyrian said his brother was a complete asshole now, but he didn’t *think* he was lying about having Hex’s IP.

When Crimson and Tyrian found the right room, they looked around with the same surprise I did the first time I was here. I called to them that this was totally normal, and they took a part of the sectional.

“Children!” Black called. “Since they live outside the range of traffic cams, we used what Cobalt gathered about their habits and the teams that are there to arrest them followed them home and gathered surveillance. They know where to

grab them and the best time to get them away from their arsenals.”

“So, what now? It’s six in the morning their time, isn’t it?” Crimson asked.

“Now, we eat, drink, and wait. It’s a party, celebrate,” Luke said, grabbing a beer.

Crimson seemed shocked Luke was drinking at seven in the morning. I forgot this was their first bust, and she didn’t really know Luke all that well because he wasn’t training her. I wasn’t even all that sure she knew about his sister, even though we *all* knew about her nipple thing now.

Bailey’s phone went off, and she jumped up to take it. I knew it had to be important because Bailey lived for this shit. She was celebrating hard when it was Clarence because she was in my ear the same time I was with him. She hated Kathleen because of Jeremy, but she enjoyed every bit of Damien getting busted and interrogated because he was a shitty person.

“That was my mom. They’ve completed the search of Carl’s property. The judge set his bail really high. Probably for optics and not wanting to get dragged into the federal investigation. His parents are keeping their distance because this looks insanely bad for them. They aren’t paying his bail and anyone else who could afford to isn’t stepping up because if it doesn’t make the federal government look at them twice, the locals are pretty pissed.

“My mom said Carl isn’t cooperating because he still thinks he’s going to get off. Right now, they are in the process of identifying the bodies they found and matching them to missing girls. Once they know what all to charge him with, they will.”

“I’ll go with you if you want,” I said squeezing her hand.

“Talk about something else. This is a party,” Bailey said.

I knew Black used to teach languages here before he got promoted and they moved to the modules, but I had no idea what Blue did before. Curiosity got the best of me and like

usual, my mouth spoke before I could think and I asked. I regretted it as soon as I opened my mouth because I was sure I was going to get fussed at again and I wasn't supposed to know.

Blue gave me a small smile. "You just can't help it, can you, Mauve? I was recruited because of my background in PR and recognizing talent. I was the one who got your resume when you sent it in. To be honest, I had no idea what to do with it at first. I almost threw it away, but you made me curious. I didn't know if you had a set of brass balls sending *us* that application with the classes you took. The only reason I brought I brought it to Black was because I was shocked at your *audacity* and thought it warranted a second set of eyes."

"Then why am I here now?"

"You didn't notice Black doesn't normally wear glasses? Boss and I were watching. You didn't have the background we normally recruit, and you had no special skills. What you did trying to train yourself outside your online classes was completely *insane*, but we thought that level of creativity coming up with them is not something we see often among recruits.

"You were hired because your brain works in ways I haven't quite figured out yet and I'm not sure I want to, but it's paid off several times. You're a weird little gremlin, Mauve, but taking a chance on you has paid off several times over."

"Has anyone else from the classes I took applied?"

"So far, you've been the only one smart enough to find not only us, but the correct job posting that your resume got to me. It's going to be interesting to see what you do once you're fully trained."

Luke saw the look on my face. "I think you'll be ready to go back to sparring and working on your green belt next week. You and Bailey will both be sparring after this. It's time."

I tackled him and tried to put him in the same headlock he used to put me in. He easily stopped me because he was a

giant. We were all getting pretty drunk. Crimson and Tyrian were furiously making out and if there was a spatula in here, someone needed to hide it. I was pretty open to new kinks, but I *really* didn't want to see that go down in real time.

Black finally yelled loud enough for them to notice that if they didn't eat something to sober up enough to keep their hands off each other, he would send them home and they wouldn't get to watch their first bust. Crimson slid off his lap and they both sheepishly started plating food. I didn't think they had eaten since they got here and hit the wine as soon as they sat down.

Things had gotten awkward, and I hadn't drunk enough beer for me to be remotely comfortable with the sexual tension in the room. It was finally defused when Black asked if we were ready to watch. Jonathan lived far enough away from the others and away from other people in general that no one would notice the SWAT team circling his house, nor that he got arrested.

Like before, Black fired up the movie screen, and we watched from one of the SWAT team's helmet cameras. Crimson and Tyrian were finally eating and seemed to forget they wanted to eat each other's faces five minutes ago and were watching the screen with rapt attention. These weren't the same team members I watched before and I was starting to wonder if they existed all over the country, just watching for us to call for them to move in. I didn't ask because I didn't want to interrupt what we were watching.

They had the house surrounded and were all heavily armed. The team around the man with the camera were debating if he was going to be armed or not. Jonathan's house was nondescript from the outside. It could have been a nice house, but he wasn't maintaining it at all.

The house and windows were filthy. It looked like whoever he bought it from spent a lot of time and care with landscaping. They'd completely dug up the grass and planted native garden beds everywhere. It could have been really pretty, but he hadn't done a thing with them and they were now overgrown with weeds.

That was literally a crime. My grandmother was into gardening and had these beautiful flowerbeds. She had given me a cutting of one of her houseplants when I was sixteen. I didn't take a lot with me when I moved to New York with the bass player, but I took that plant. I kept it alive during my tumultuous relationship with the bass player and moving into my own apartment.

That plant spawned several baby plants that were now living in the penthouse with everyone I cared about.

"I hope they knock him around a bit for his crime against plants," I growled.

They were debating if he had noticed when something flew out the window and started spewing smoke everywhere. One of the bigger guys called that it was going to be a fight to take him as they retreated. When the smoke cleared, I could hear Jonathan call out the broken window that he hadn't done shit and they had better have a warrant and a good reason for being on his property.

The man with the camera asked him to lay down his arms and come out. They would show him the warrant and explain why they were there. Jonathan laughed and said there was no way in hell he was coming out unarmed with that many people out there with guns. They tried to talk him into letting them inside and promising not to shoot. That didn't go over either and I really had no idea what was going to happen.

"Don't be a fucking moron," Tyrian said. "I swear to shit, my brother hated guns before he got mixed up in all this shit."

"The teams we use are highly trained," Boss said. "They can get him without killing him. Just watch."

"I should have grabbed a Xanax before this. Maybe it would be fun, but that's my twin brother, even if he's turned into someone I don't recognize."

I was having a little anxiety, too, and I wasn't even related to Jonathan. It was a blast watching Clarence and Affirmative go down but there was also zero chance of anyone dying. I'd probably eventually see death on this job and I'd probably

never be ready for it, but this target was closely related to a member of my team, so it was going to hit different.

“How many guns do you have in there?” a tall man called.

“Enough to take several of you down with me!”

“You really want to die without finding out why we are here? How you got caught?”

“Got caught doing what? I haven’t done anything.”

“We wouldn’t be here if someone didn’t catch you doing something. Wouldn’t you rather live and find out how someone bested you?”

“I’m not going to jail, man.”

“You’d rather die painfully from gunshot wounds than go to jail?”

I could see the man in the camera watching Jonathan from the window in the back, but I couldn’t see what was going on behind him. Everyone was lined up behind him and I had no idea what was going on. Someone must have had a silencer or something because I didn’t hear the shot when something shattered the window further and I watched Jonathan go down. I thought they had killed him, but Luke started laughing.

“Is that the tranq dart Tangerine whipped up? He probably had no idea what hit him and is going to have a wicked headache when he wakes up.”

I was alternating between watching the swat team spill into the house to collect Jonathan while trying to find out about this Tangerine.

“Tangerine is like this mad scientist on Team Orange,” Bailey said. “She comes up with all these wild compounds to use in the field. Tangerine worked with Boss to make the formula we used to question Tyrion. She made the dart you just saw. She’s got this lipstick combination if you’re in a bind where you put this sealer on your lips, put the lipstick on, and whoever you kiss goes straight to sleep so you can leave. She —”

“No one thought to slip me that with Clarence?”

“Would you rather have kissed him long enough to get the drug in his system or used your feet to keep him occupied?”

I sat there pouting because I really didn't know the answer. I didn't want to go anywhere near him, but sometimes, I just wanted him to stop talking so I could leave. Bailey pointed out to me we could only use it if things were getting too extreme when we were deep undercover with someone of the opposite sex and they were going too far.

Jeremy was complaining the girls had options, and he had to complain I gave him a disease to keep Kathleen out of his pants when he was working her. Bailey just winked at him.

“She's got a lip balm for the guys. It's mint flavored. Tangerine is more of a mad scientist than an agent. Her name didn't get released with everyone else's.”

“That drug you used on me to question me about my brother was something else. It didn't fuck me up, and I wasn't hungover the next day. But I would have told you anything you asked, even if I always lied about it.”

“Can I borrow Tangerine and her drug to find out if my boyfriend is keeping other secrets from me?” Crimson asked.

“The other teams are moving in,” Black said. “They love the toys we give them, but I think they are hoping for a bit of a fight..”

I wanted to know what else they had besides those darts. I had a feeling they wouldn't be kissing the rednecks with that knock-out lipstick. I didn't get a chance to ask because the movie screen lit up again with a split screen of all the other houses.

“I've already texted them and warned them to look for cameras this time,” Boss announced. “They *should* have picked them up when they were doing their surveillance. They are getting sloppy.

They, apparently, missed one hidden in the large tree some of them were using for cover. Unlike Jonathan, who threw a smoke bomb out and hid, two of them came charging out with gigantic guns. The biggest crime I'd ever committed was my

rampant jaywalking, and I still wasn't convinced Deepthroat wasn't looking into that because I barfed on him, but I'd rather get arrested and take my chances with a jury than my chances with a highly-trained, heavily-armed SWAT team.

And I had a *lot* more fight training than these dudes. They looked like they got sweaty walking outside to check the mail.

The SWAT team all dove behind what they could. It looked like these two had a hobby of restoring classic cars. They were all over the yard on blocks in various states of tear down.

"Man, don't make me shoot up that sixty-seven Mustang. All it needs is an engine," one of them called.

"Why don't you put the guns down and we'll talk?"

"Why don't you take your guns and leave?"

"There's more of us than there are of you and you have no cover. This won't last long if you start shooting. Why don't you just come quietly?"

"Why would we come with you when you show up here armed to the teeth when we ain't do anything?"

"If you think really hard about it, I'm sure you'll figure out why we're here."

"Even if we did do something, there's no way you would have caught us."

The man trying to talk the guns out of their hands was not the person with the camera on his helmet. I couldn't see his face at all. I could see the camera trained on the two men on the porch. I could see sweat starting to drip off their noses. If the heat in Alabama was anything like what it was when I was in Louisiana, it was probably a combination of the heat and them wondering if they somehow managed to get caught.

I could see the camera sneak around to the other end of the car they were hiding behind. He whispered to a woman on the SWAT team who looked like she was twelve and too young to be there holding a gun. Apparently, she was their best shot out of the group. He grabbed her and another guy who didn't appear to be tolerating the heat well either.

“Can you get them in the neck with the tranqs from here? Dana, you’re the best sniper here. Paul, you’ve never missed a shot. Can the two of you get them around this car?”

“Are you shitting me?” baby-faced Dana said. “They aren’t even watching what the rest of us are doing because all his attention is on Derrick. I could probably cartwheel out from behind this car and get him.”

“I know you like showing off that you used to be a gymnast, but no stunts. Get the dart in him so they can get him into the van. We still have to get in and collect hard drives and computers and I have no idea if these two yahoos set booby traps.”

I could see in the camera while Dana and Paul tried to line up their shots and not get seen. Like with Jonathan, the gun didn’t even make a sound. Jonathan went down like a brick as soon as the dart hit him. The darts hit both men at almost the same time. Thankfully, their hands left the trigger to clasp their necks. It was like watching someone try to move underwater as they struggled against whatever was in the dart.

I hadn’t met Tangerine, but I definitely didn’t want to piss her off. I didn’t want her truth serum used on me. I had an awful habit of my brain-to-mouth filter breaking at terrible times, but some things were *sacred* even when that wasn’t working. I *did not* need to be spilling some of my dirty secrets at work. What if I told them about that time in high school where we all got drunk and *savagely* attacked by some backyard chickens? I could not admit to the people who hired me to spy for them than I ran from chickens and ended up bleeding.

The man with the camera finally came out from behind the car to kick their guns away and tell someone to go collect them and get them in the van. I didn’t get to see the search of Jonathan’s house, but I got to see this one.

There were coaxial cables and splitters run all across the walls. There was no decoration on the walls, just wires taped up everywhere. I saw more fish tanks like I saw on the webcam photos and like before, the fish were frightening

looking. The computer rooms were dead bolted from the outside and needed a key. I thought they would go get the key off one of the sleeping hackers, but they just shot the lock.

Black clicked his mouse, and I was now looking at a split screen of both houses. The computer setups in both rooms were nearly as high tech as what they were here. It was even better than Jeremy's setup at home, but I would never tell him that. There were at least five monitors set up hooked to two desktops and a laptop that we watched the webcam meetings on. The external drives we needed were locked in a safe in both trailers.

I thought they were going to shoot their way through the safes like they did with the locks, but they just grabbed them. It took two people to carry them out to the van. The movie screen went silent again.

Crimson asked what I was thinking. Neither of us thought anyone on that team would give the code to the safe and we didn't know how else to get in.

"Cerulean doesn't just sit behind a computer all day watching you and street cameras. Encrypted hard drives and safes are also her forte. Cracking those safe codes and if those hard drives happen to be encrypted will probably take an hour out of her day," Boss said.

"Why is she watching us all day if that is what she's good at?"

"Because hacking into surveillance cameras can also be difficult."

"Wouldn't she have known about the cameras all these hackers had?"

"Great idea, Mauve!" Black yelled. I must have jumped off the couch because he scared the shit out of me and I had just refilled my wine. I nearly spilled it all over Jeremy. Black started furiously texting on his phone. "We suspect the last one might be difficult because of his hunting background. If he hides, he may be impossible to find. He's also never been caught and doesn't have a record. I have Cerulean seeing if she

can get into his security network so he doesn't get tipped off to hide."

"We'll have her put it on a loop," Boss said

We ended up having to wait for Cerulean to do her thing with the cameras before the SWAT team could move in. I had mowed my way through the entire breakfast spread and was getting hungry again. I didn't want more eggs and was relieved when there was a knock on the door and it was more food. I could smell it was Greek from the couch and my stomach turned in knots because I hoped it was my favorites. I hoped they had enough hummus to take a bath in.

I had just started in on the hummus and Baba Ganoush when Black asked if we were ready. I was so into my food, I hadn't paid attention to my coworkers. Luke was flushed and looking like he wanted to start giggling again. Apparently, Luke and Bailey thought it was hilarious to watch Tangerine's toys in the wild.

Crimson and Tyrian were wrapped up again and looked like they were about to start sucking faces again. She had already slipped into his lap and had her arms wrapped around his neck. Jeremy knew better than to come between me and food and he liked Greek, too, so we were both pigging out while the rest of them snuggled.

When the screen finally lit up again, I was looking at a huge, sprawling, ranch-style house. It was in a much better state than the other houses we had busts in today. Since Cerulean did her thing with the camera, no one was tipped off this time. It was around lunch our time and they were able to sneak into his house. They found him in his computer room. Unlike the other three, there were no guns in there with him and he immediately threw up his hands and didn't put up a fight.

I noticed we weren't as rowdy as we were with the bust with Affirmative and Clarence. Bailey and Luke weren't dancing and singing this time, even though they both appeared quite drunk. Crimson and Tyrian were still wrapped up together, but were both looking at the black movie screen like

they had no idea what they were supposed to do next. I had no idea if we would be staying, or watching the interrogation. Black and Blue were both furiously messaging on their phones and checking their tablets. Boss stood to leave.

“We’ll have to watch the interrogations tomorrow and we won’t get those hard drives and the safes until tomorrow. They are sending them overnight to us. If you want to eat and drink for the rest of the afternoon, you can stay here. Otherwise, I think Mauve and Byzantium are the only ones sober enough to walk home, though I’m not quite sure how that is humanly possible.”

“I got them drunk in New Orleans. It’s totally possible,” Cadmium slurred.

“What the hell did you give them, moonshine?” Blue asked.

She didn’t get to answer because Crimson and Tyrian were desperate to leave and finish what they had started on the couch. Black already had a taxi waiting, and we watched them leave. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to leave or find out what was going on with the investigation.

We were assured there was nothing left to learn today. These were bad guys. They needed to be stopped.

But did they have the information we needed to stop two even bigger bad guys in their safes and external drives?

THIRTY-SIX



Casper

Boss threw these catered shindigs for every bust with a full roster of agents. This wasn't just something she did because she was low on people and she was worried about the newbies burning out and leaving. We got to go to glamorous locations and play pretend. It was fun a lot of times.

Even if you didn't get made and have to wade through a six-mile shit tunnel, it could be stressful. Boss got that and let us celebrate when it was over. We usually had at least two days to goof off and another to recover before we had to go back to being grownups again.

I wasn't complaining about an extra few hours in bed with Jordan and Jeremy. Since she was with Bailey and Luke last night, she decided it was our turn. That was the beautiful thing about our untraditional family. Jordan was my girlfriend. She was the only one I wanted to have sex with.

But the rest of my roommates? I had my things with them, too. If Jordan was with someone else, I wasn't lonely or bitter about it. I vibed with all of my roommates.

I didn't even think about those hard drives or how hard they might be to get into when I woke up. I didn't care. I snuggled into Jordan and smelled her amazing shampoo. I had training on how to crack a safe if I was out of the country and needed to get into one before a team took it. I was also pretty good at encrypted hard drives.

I wasn't *anywhere* near as good as Cerulean. She trained all of us on that. She'd eventually get her hands on Jordan, but not yet. I knew Jordan wanted to meet agents she hadn't seen yet, but there was time for that. Those two teams didn't go out. They were happy in their little caves working in the shadows. If Tangerine left her lab, it was because Boss dragged her out of there or she was using her serum on someone.

We did eventually have to get out of bed and go to work. We were the last ones there. This bust was a pretty enormous risk because of Jonathan and Tyrian. Tyrian wanted his brother in jail. If Jonathan was in jail, then he and his parents knew where he was and he wasn't hurting anyone.

Boss *always* wanted the SWAT teams to use the tranqs. She specifically had Tangerine engineer them because in the past, the SWAT team had to shoot people who didn't want to be arrested. If they were dead, the information they had died with them. Bullet wounds meant the police were notified and sometimes they got up in our business.

We definitely didn't want Tyrian to watch his brother get shot and thankfully, we didn't have to. Tyrian and Crimson seemed content when we got to the office. He was *much* less tense than he was yesterday, though I didn't know if he'd taken a Xanax like he thought he needed.

If I knew my business, Cerulean already had what she needed and was doing her thing. As much as I *didn't* want Tyrian to see something horrible happen to his brother, these busts were nice. McKinley never wanted to come if it was one of mine and she didn't want me there if it was one of hers. We

were all snuggled on the sectional as a family as Black brought the screen up.

They always questioned who they thought would break first. I thought they were going to go straight for the baby-faced guy who had the nicer house and didn't fight when they arrested him. Bailey couldn't find a record on him. He was either an evil genius who was playing Jonathan and letting him abuse him or he got caught up in something over his head.

I thought we'd see him first, but the first guy they brought in was Jonathan. That wasn't standard at all. What were they doing? Jonathan was the ringleader. They always went for the grunts first to get them to turn on who was in charge, and only *then* did they bring out the top dog.

Boss was up to something.

The massive detective just sat across from Jonathan and said nothing. He pulled a candy bar out of his pocket and started slowly eating it. The *only* time I'd ever seen anyone eat a candy bar like that was when they were trying to get someone to take them home for sex.

"That's obscene," Bailey said.

"Wow, he's just like, *going* for it," Jordan said.

"What is he doing?" Tyrian asked. "Jonathan was at least bisexual before he ran, but now he's acting like a total homophobe."

"Why is he deep throating a Butterfinger when you have that shit you used on my boyfriend?" Crimson asked.

"We haven't released that to the public and even though it's been rigorously tested and *shouldn't* cause any negative effects, even penicillin can be harmful if you're allergic to it. It needs to be administered by a doctor who also understands chemistry at a certain level. If various law enforcement agencies can prove to me that they have someone as smart as Tangerine to use it on the off chance something does go wrong, then they can have it. Trust me, this is all going to plan," Boss said.

Like Jordan, Boss's mind worked in mysterious ways that always ended up working in the end. Boss and Jordan might as well be from two different planets, but if Boss's big plan was to have a man that was only slightly smaller than Luke get sexual with a candy bar in front of Tyrian's brother, who, apparently, regressed so far back in the closet when he ran that he was actively being cruel to people like him, who was I to question?

Jonathan just sat there glowering. The giant across the table appeared to have a bag under there. After he finished the candy bar, he pulled out a takeout order and seemed more focused on his food than Jonathan. Jonathan was getting increasingly irritated.

"This isn't going to work. I'm not telling you shit for a burger. I didn't *do* anything."

"That's not what I heard. I heard you pissed off some pretty powerful people. In the past *and* pretty recently."

"The past was just a misunderstanding, and I didn't do anything wrong. I haven't done *shit* recently."

"So, you don't run a forum on the dark web that does bounties for hackers and you *didn't* host a bounty on there recently that pissed off a bunch of secret agencies that aren't necessarily bound to the same laws as regular law enforcement and got super motivated to find anyone and everyone related to their breach?"

"You can't *prove* that."

"Do you know what amazing hackers with moral codes and social skills do? They get snatched up by agencies that work in the shadows. You didn't put them out of business, nor did you expose all of them. They infiltrated your forum. They made sure you couldn't fuck over a business and countless people who got into accidents who needed that money. And they can totally prove it."

Jonathan's eyes flashed because he found out who fucked him over. I could tell he wanted to make a giant show about being a better hacker than us because I just *knew* his type. I

also knew he was smart because Tyrian was smart and if we hadn't been looking for Hex, we probably wouldn't have found his forum for a while.

“They can prove I ran a forum. I'm not responsible for what people post there the same way social media isn't responsible when people plan stupid shit on their site. I'd be happy to share all the details about that bounty. Never let it be said that I don't support law enforcement. I'll happily cooperate,” Jonathan said with a smug smile.

He really thought he did a thing and was untouchable. Technically, he didn't post *that* bounty or complete it. He just hosted the site it went down on. He didn't steal any money in Louisiana because we stopped him. Jonathan really thought we wouldn't find the things he posted and profited off of because he didn't think anyone would crack his safe or encryption.

I'd seen this particular detective before. I didn't know his name, but Boss used him when she wasn't fucking around. He was the only other person I'd ever seen that was even close to Luke's size, but he never used his fists. He never even lost his cool. And he *always* got answers.

“Don't bullshit me. The only reason you came quietly without shooting at my team is because you got hit with a highly-potent tranquillizer. Anyway, I'm guessing you're still sitting there thinking you're the king of hackers and I'm going to believe you're just an honest businessman who hosts a forum for criminals, but you never participated.

“A team of highly-trained hackers that are frankly smarter than you have been through every inch of your forum and got into the computers you use for hacking. My girlfriend is also a *lot* smarter than you are and one of her specialties is cracking safes and encrypted hard drives. If she's not already in, I give her until lunch,” he said, sitting back with his arms crossed.

This was Cerulean's boyfriend? She was smaller than Bailey and twice as awkward as Jordan. I was pretty sure the only reason we didn't lose Tangerine or Cerulean during the breach was because of their age when they were recruited.

They both had insanely smart parents. Cerulean's parents worked for the NSA and Tangerine's were bioengineers.

When they were born, one of their parents briefly retired long enough to homeschool their kids. Cerulean graduated college at sixteen and Tangerine was in medical school at seventeen. They were both insanely brilliant and pushing boundaries in their fields. They pushed a little too far and nearly got into trouble, but Boss swooped in and gave them a chance to be brilliant for good where normal rules didn't apply and there would be people to check them.

Jonathan looked like he didn't believe he was going to be bested by a woman, but he really had no idea. Cerulean was still kind of young, but her boyfriend was right. She'd probably already gleefully ripped through his encryption. And if Jordan had trademarked her ass shaking moves, she really needed to compare them to Cerulean's.

"Do you know who Baba Yaga is?" he asked.

"No. No one does. I looked into her, but she's a ghost. My forum isn't the only one out there. We talk, though. She rarely *spends* money like she did on mine. She seems to know where all the hackers for hire congregate and rarely hits the same one twice. Even if she wants them to get her money, everyone ends up with a ton of money. Tons of people *want* to hack for her, but no one can find her. I've never done a job for her. All I did was host the forum she connected with someone who did. If you set me up somewhere nice and paid my expenses, I could totally find her for you."

Boss's phone went off. She checked it and fired off a message. She was clearly messaging our detective because he checked his smartwatch. He calmly stood and walked toward the door.

"Remember when I said you pissed off some powerful people? I wouldn't say where you are going will be comfortable, but your meals will be paid for. If you want extras, you'll have to find a way to fund your commissary.

"Those powerful people employ my girlfriend, who is pretty much the smartest person I know. Smarter than you

because she ripped through all your security. She loves boba, anime, and dancing so when I get home, I'm going to show her how much of a genius I think she is. You have nothing to bargain with. Take him away," he said, leaving.

Jonathan was arguing that he had *something* to bargain with and that he could totally find Baba Yaga, but if she really was one of us, I highly doubted it. It was going to be hard for us.

"That beast is dating Cerulean?" Bailey asked.

"Reilly is good for her," Boss said. "He's a consultant, and he met her in the lobby when she was going down to her woman cave. Reilly took one look at her pink ponytails, Sailor Moon shirt, and the giant bubble tea in her hand and was smitten. He keeps her in check when she's not working and worships the ground she walks on. I hate separating them, but he's the best at questioning tough people. That could have gone down *very* differently."

It really could have. I didn't know how deep throating a candy bar changed all that, but I'd learned not to question Boss. Black turned the cameras off. We didn't need to watch drawn-out interrogations where they all blamed each other and tried to bargain for no jail time.

We didn't need it. Cerulean had those answers in her woman cave.

THIRTY-SEVEN



Jeremy

We weren't super drunk and honestly, I think we were all more curious about the hard drives than watching the rest of this team bluster about being the smartest men alive and thinking they had something to trade. The only one I was mildly curious about was the cute farmer with the nice house who wasn't hiding from the law. What was his deal?

I was also wildly curious about the agents we hadn't met. I knew Jordan was, too. Casper and I were good at encryption, but, apparently, Cerulean was top-notch and taught Casper some tricks.

Boss led us to a wall that I thought was just a wall. She pressed a knot on a painting and a false wall slid open. Wild. Everyone called this Cerulean's woman cave, and I saw why. There were screens everywhere and a whole-ass wall of tech toys. The safes were sitting on the table wide open and Team Ultramarine had put little bows on the hard drives.

They were pretty wild. Team Ultramarine was all tiny hacker girls with colorful hair and tattoos. Cerulean had pink ponytails and was decked out in pink Sailor Moon gear. Cyan had bright-orange hair and a massive ring through her nose. Cobalt wore her hair short and turquoise and I really needed to know who did her tattoos.

Tyrian threw back his head and laughed.

“After talking to my brother these past few weeks and watching him on camera, I love that you guys are the ones who caught him. He *used* to be a feminist, but now he’s a dick.”

“I eat dick for breakfast!” Cerulean said.

She had this high voice, and she had to be the youngest person here by a few years. Cobalt patted her arm.

“No, sweetie.”

“That’s not right, is it?”

“Depends on who you ask,” Jordan said.

“Anyway, Jonathan has files on a few people. We found Hex right away. Jonathan couldn’t get a location with it, but we could. They are in Camden, New Jersey and we have an address,” Cerulean said.

“That’s where I was living when Boss arrested me,” Bailey said. “If they took all the money Baba Yaga paid, they might not be there anymore. It’s one of the poorest cities in the United States. Some areas aren’t bad, but the area I was living in definitely was.”

“That’s where this doesn’t make sense,” Cobalt said. “They didn’t move. That house is owned by a single mom and she has two kids. She never put the house up for sale and from what I can tell from her social media, she’s a middle school teacher. She teaches English. She’s never even gotten so much as a speeding ticket and based on the social media posts, her students love her.”

“There were no huge displays of wealth when the bounty came out either,” Cyan said. “Like, I am not responsible with

money at all. If I got paid that bounty, I'd still stay here because I love this job, but you'd totally know because I bought something crazy like a pet tiger that I walked on a leash through Times Square."

"No tigers in the woman cave," Boss said.

Cyan stuck her tongue out at Boss.

"She's right, though," Bailey said. "Even if they don't get crazy with the money, most people would buy a better house. Boyfriend? Maybe she started dating someone who moved in and he's been hacking from her living room. Maybe he's a turd who didn't share the money."

It made sense. If it was the boyfriend, he was probably long gone. I wouldn't presume to think that a single mom couldn't be Hex, but she'd probably move her kids somewhere else. She had no reason to think anyone had her IP unless Jonathan threatened her.

"Unless she didn't want the money for herself," Jordan said. "What if she did it for college money for her kids?"

"We looked into that," Cobalt said. "If Baba Yaga is wealthy and connected, she could have set up a college fund for both kids and made it look like it was never connected to any of this. We don't see any."

"Look, if it's the boyfriend, then this family has nothing to do with it. They clearly didn't profit off of it," Cerulean said. "Send Reilly to question them about the boyfriend. He's the best. Have them gather intel if he's still living there, then have Reilly knock on the door and find out if there even is a boyfriend. It *could* be the mom and she's lying low because of who she pissed off."

The boyfriend theory was excellent. Her lying low was also decent. Hex pissed off a *lot* of people. I was expecting some hacker compound like what we just busted up.

I really hoped Reilly could handle this delicately.

THIRTY-EIGHT



Luke

We were back in the TV room the next day with more catered food. Team Ultramarine was highly effective and had an address. I was probably the one person here who knew Reilly's name because he trained with me sometimes. Reilly didn't work for us. He worked for Deep Throat, but Boss borrowed him a lot.

And it wasn't just because he was dating Cerulean. He could kick ass because I sparred with him, but he never got angry during interrogations. He was almost as big as I was and looked a lot more threatening. Reilly was a giant softie, and I knew exactly why he thought the sun shone out of Cerulean's ass.

He was already in New Jersey with Boss. They, apparently, decided to knock on the Poole's door and just ask. Boss was pretty sure if it was an ex, he was long gone and if it was Abony, she'd react better to just Reilly and Boss. Plus, she had

two young kids. Boss *rarely* went out to question people, but she'd done it before.

We were tense. I was tense. Of all the scenarios I pictured with Hex, this wasn't one of them. I thought Hex was some bad boogeyman who hacked people from a dark room and was just sheer evil.

Jordan and Bailey snuggled into me on the sectional. This was it. I'd find out who made it so I couldn't see my sister anymore. Baba Yaga was the big bad, but Hex helped. I had my girls next to me. Jordan was my girlfriend and Bailey was one of my best friends. I knew they'd always be here for me and support me whatever happened.

The cameras fired up. Boss and Reilly were on the front porch of a tiny, run-down house. Honestly, if Hex was dating this woman and didn't buy her a better house, he was a terrible person. Now that I saw where they were living, I doubted Abony Poole was Hex. They really needed to pay teachers better.

When the door opened, an absolutely precious little boy with giant, brown eyes looked out. His eyes got even bigger when he took in Reilly. Boss immediately sprung into action.

"Hi! I'm Boss. Is your mommy home?"

"Are you momma's boss?" he said, shyly. "Is she in trouble?"

"Oh, no. Boss is my name. When I was your age, I didn't like my name. So, when I was an adult, I changed it to Boss, so now that's what everyone calls me."

"So, I could change my name to Wolverine when I get big and everyone would have to call me that?"

"Oman, why is the door open?" a voice said.

A beautiful black woman with natural hair and a kind face came to the door. She was a little on the thin side with circles under her eyes like she had been sick and was recovering.

"Can I help you?"

"Can we come in? We just have a few questions."

“I know who you are. You’re practically an icon and I know you do things for our community and teachers. I can’t imagine what you’re doing in New Jersey on my front porch though.”

Boss was an icon to *multiple* communities. Boss was a black trans woman and a CEO and philanthropist. She had just as many admirers as she did haters, sometimes in the same community. Abony didn’t look like a hater. She looked like she was actually shocked Boss was standing outside her front door and wanted to make sure she wasn’t hallucinating.

“We had some questions about something we pinged from an IP address at this house.”

Abony’s eye darkened, and she motioned for them to come in.

“Kendasha? Get your ass out here and bring your laptop. Your part-time job *had better* not be anything illegal. I swear to Jesus, child, you’re going to put me in an early grave.”

Child was right. A girl came wandering into the living room holding a laptop and she was barely through puberty. Her legs hadn’t caught up with the rest of her body and she had braces on her teeth. She had her hair in two French braids and she had giant eyes like her brother.

“Did we all get hacked by an infant?” Bailey asked.

“Look at her laptop,” Casper said. “It’s really old, but it looks like she’s been making modifications to it so she was able to pull it off.”

“You aren’t in any trouble,” Boss said. “But I need to know if you are Hex so I can protect you.”

Kendasha looked afraid for all of about five minutes, but then she got just as angry as her mom was.

“Yeah, I’m Hex. And I wouldn’t have to break the law if people would pay teachers better and the judges would have sided with my mom instead of the corporation that killed my dad.”

“Kendasha, you—”

“No. You were rationing your insulin so Oman could have his. My mom and my brother both have type-one diabetes. They *have* to have insulin or they’ll die. I was watching my mom slowly die. Do you know how much insulin costs? They *raised* the price again. You can get mad at me later. I saved your life.”

“You *lied* to me. You said you got a part-time job as a virtual assistant to help out and it wouldn’t interfere with school!”

“It didn’t!”

“Do you know who this is on my couch?”

“She’s not in trouble,” Boss said. “Many people are angry with her, but they aren’t even close to knowing who she is. I know you’re angry, but I don’t think you realize how brilliant your daughter is. She pulled off something not many *adults* could do.”

“And broke the fucking law! Don’t tell me how to parent my kid. I don’t want dangerous people on my doorstep!”

“We’re more interested in the woman who paid her to do it than we are your daughter. Kendasha, do you know who Baba Yaga is?”

“She’s some rich, white lady. She didn’t tell me what she was going to *do* with what I did for her. When I pressed, she said she needed it to take back what was stolen from her. She lied and didn’t say she was going to take it to all those places and steal people’s names. All she originally posted was that she was offering a lot of money for a way to quietly download secure information without alerting anyone.

“She told me it was *her* data she was taking back. Baba Yaga got me the money to build what I needed and program it. She didn’t say what it really was until it was done and then she blasted my handle everywhere claiming responsibility like I acted alone.

“She paid me to a secret, untraceable account like she said she would, but my momma would kill me if she found out, so I had to pretend like I got a part-time job and could pick up the

insulin. I *wanted* to buy us a new house, but I can't explain where I got the money and thanks to that stupid bitch, I've got a bunch of super spies looking for me."

"Kendasha! You hacked the CIA?"

"These are people a lot more secret than the CIA, but they often work hand in hand with them and various other agencies in different governments across the world," Boss said.

Abony slumped.

"I'll deal with you later, Kendasha. What do I do? How can I keep my family safe?"

"Well, first of all, I was quite angry with Hex when the news hit. I used every single resource in my arsenal to find them. Now that I've met her? How old are you, Kendasha?"

"Fourteen," she grumbled.

We got hacked by a fourteen-year-old. Yeah, Baba Yaga was the only that orchestrated everything, but she couldn't have pulled it off without this *child*. I was furious at Hex this whole time, but now? She was a kid who got manipulated.

"Amazing. I don't want to see Kendasha hurt or in jail, even though what she directly affected my business. The fact that she pulled this off at fourteen and has had nearly every secret agency in the world scrambling to find her speaks loads about how intelligent she is. I want to nurture that and help all of you. You knew who I was. Do you know about my scholarships?"

"You want to give one of those to my Kendasha after what she did?"

"What she did pissed me off. If she had a fully developed pre-frontal cortex, we'd be having a totally different conversation right now. But she's only fourteen and if you look at it from outside the anger, she did something not a lot of adults could do. With the right help and *your* guidance, I think she could do amazing things. She could probably teach some of my people a few tricks."

"What do we need to do?"

“I can make it work two ways. You can stay here and I’ll send you a stipend that will cover both of your children’s education, your insulin, and better housing. Or you can come to New York and stay in property I own that is rent controlled and probably less than your mortgage. I’ll help you get a teaching job and schooling for the two kids. Kendasha will be brought on at my company after school to be mentored in using her computer skills for *legal* means.

“You can say no, but I’d also love to bring her in as a consultant to help catch the woman who paid her to do this. Most everyone is more worried about her now than they are about Hex. I can say I’ve caught Hex and I’m giving no further information on that, but all of this is going to be put to bed *much* faster if I can give them Baba Yaga.”

“Is my girl in danger from this woman?”

She probably was. Boss did exactly what I expected her to do. This was a fucking *child*. If Baba Yaga was one of us and she had resources, she would be watching Kendasha if they met in person. Especially if Kendasha saw her face. She probably publicly outed her because she knew Kendasha’s story and wanted to threaten her into silence.

Baba Yaga also probably thought if Hex went into hiding like the scared teenager that she was, the chances of anyone finding her were slim. She would have a backup plan. I didn’t even make it as an agent past a few missions and it’s what I would have done.

“Did you see her face, Kendasha?” Boss asked.

“We talked over video call, but she always pixelated her face. We never met in person. She gave me a place to drop the tech I made. I *did* write a program to unpixelate her and I do know what she looks like, but I don’t know if *she* knows that.”

“Let’s just operate under the assumption that she does,” Reilly said. “If you wanted to stay in New Jersey, I can make calls so that you have someone watching you at all times, but you’re going to have to cooperate with them. No getting annoyed that you have shadows and trying to ditch them. If our suspicions about this woman are correct, she’s dangerous.

Kendasha tugged her mom's shirt sleeve.

"Momma, let's go to New York. You've been unhappy here since Daddy died. I can help find her. I know you always said I was too smart for my own good and I know this is my fault, but I was just trying to help. I can do this. I can help them find her and this is a great opportunity for us. Oman can finally get those music lessons he's been asking for."

There was an ancient, beat-up piano up against the wall. Oman and Abony turned to look at it wistfully.

"I have a property near Central Park that just opened up that has a baby grand piano in the living room that's just waiting for someone to play it," Boss said.

"His daddy was a talented jazz pianist. The piano was his. Oman has been tinkering since he could climb on the bench. He's just started asking for lessons."

Boss was about to close this deal. When she had her eye on raw talent, nothing got in her way. And Kendasha? This kid was already *legendary*, even though no one knew who she was, or that she was only fourteen. Boss was going to adopt her and make sure everyone knew who she was for legal reasons.

"If you come to New York, you can make those piano lessons happen. The stipend you'll get is enough for all three of you and would easily cover piano lessons. I also don't believe in unpaid work. When Kendasha is being mentored at Stantech, it'll be like an internship, but she'll be paid for it. She'll also get a pretty hefty consulting fee if she can help us catch Baba Yaga. I can also have my people take the money Baba Yaga gave her, clean it, and put it in a trust until she turns eighteen so that it's earning interest when she's old enough to use it."

Abony looked utterly shocked. I wasn't. This was *so* Boss. I knew how this was going to go down as soon as we realized Hex was a fourteen-year-old girl.

"I hope you realize this could have gone down *very* differently if you weren't a kid and anyone other than fucking

Boss showed up here asking questions about what you did.”

Kendasha just gave her this huge grin that was all braces.

“Momma, you always said I was smart and lucky because I was born Gemini with Sagittarius Rising.”

“I also said not to break the law, Kendasha. How long do we have?”

“You should call the school and give notice now. Reilly and I will wait while you pack bags and make a list of things you want the moving company to bring. The apartment is furnished and has most of what you’ll need, but if you don’t like the bedding or towels, the stipend will cover buying more. There’s also a grocery store one block from the apartment and my office is a quick subway ride away. It’s also in a good school district. Pick a school and I’ll make sure you teach there. On the way to the airport, I’ll get everything I need to get the stipend and Kendasha’s mentorship.”

Abyony thanked Boss and looked utterly stunned as she went to pack a bag. The camera went dark and I think the rest of us were pretty stunned, too.

“I didn’t have Hex being a fucking kid on my spy bingo card,” Jordan said.

“I don’t think any of us did. Team Ultramarine has a higher combined IQ than this entire room. They’ve been trying to figure out what Hex did since the breach. She didn’t just figure out how to access the information and download it without alerting anyone. She did something to the cameras and lock on the door so Baba Yaga got in without them knowing. This kid is like, a next-level genius.”

“When Boss is done with her, we want her on our team,” Cerulean said over the speaker.

I would imagine they did. We all saw a brilliant kid who got exploited by a bad person and could do amazing things with the right guidance. Some of my coworkers, who were *much* smarter with computers than I was, could have been pissed she outsmarted them, but they weren’t.

That was why I loved my coworkers. They were all going to be lining up to mentor her. And if she wanted to learn to throw a punch, I'd happily teach her to kick ass.

THIRTY-NINE



Bailey

None of us were expecting Hex to be a really brilliant kid trying to save her mom because insulin costs more than it should. In a way, I was glad it ended up this way. Not for me, but for Luke.

Luke went to a dark place when his sister had to go on the run. And Elizabeth didn't really follow the breach in the news. She saw it and she thought it was a conspiracy theory that was meant to distract us from something else going on, like aliens. And honestly, if I wasn't a secret agent, I might have thought that, too. It started out really far-fetched and then the actual conspiracy theories started.

Luke couldn't even tell the truth to Elizabeth. She thought their other sister was just off being irresponsible on some island. Casper and I were the only people he could speak to. Our gentle, easygoing giant wanted ten minutes alone with

Hex when we found them and Casper and I both knew Luke was angry enough to kill them with his bare hands.

Luke was in a better place now, especially after Jordan came into our lives. But Hex was still his blind spot, even with everything we knew about Baba Yaga. Baba Yaga was who he was mad at. Hex was just a hacker for hire. If they hadn't done it, someone else would have. People would do *anything* if you offered enough money.

Luke would have done something stupid that Boss couldn't save him from if Hex had been *anyone* else. Luke had total daddy vibes and now he wanted to protect that girl from Baba Yaga. I had daddy vibes, too, and so did I.

Today, we were meeting above ground on the business side. Abony and Boss were still transferring the kids' school records, so Kendasha and Oman weren't in school yet. We were all meeting in a conference room upstairs.

My team was all there and Team Ultramarine was there. I was a little surprised to see Tangerine out of her lab, but not really. Tangerine was also a child genius. She probably heard about Kendasha and wanted to meet her.

Tangerine was just over three feet tall and just as ginger as Casper was. I only met her after the breach. Tangerine had a razor-sharp wit and was just fascinating to talk to. We didn't get to chat often, and I wasn't even remotely good at science, but I could have shot the shit with her for hours.

Abony looked shocked to see all of us when she walked in, but Kendasha looked completely at home here. That girl was going to run the country one day. Boss had a daycare on the third floor that was free, so I was guessing that was where Oman was.

“Is all this for Kendasha?” Abony asked.

Boss introduced all of us and what our skills were without outright saying we were secret agents. She had a lot of skill with insanely-smart teenagers because two she adopted were currently in this room and she nurtured countless more. Boss

didn't insult Kendasha by talking down to her and pretending like she wasn't just as smart as the adults.

Kendasha started out by explaining *how* Baba Yaga got where she needed to go without alerting anyone and downloading the information undetected. All of that went totally over my head, but I swear to shit, every tech geek in the room looked like they were about to explode because some of them designed the security features this fourteen-year-old just breezed right through.

The geeks were a *lot* different than I was. When Boss arrested me, I was *furious* that the nerds who were supposed to be handling security didn't do their job well enough. I was still mad about it, even if my life was *so* much better now. They thought it was cool that Kendasha took months or years' worth of work and just totally fucked it up.

"Do you think you could take what we wrote and work with us to make what you did impossible for someone else to do?" Cerulean asked.

"She's just a kid," Abony reminded her.

"So was I. I was Kendasha once. I graduated college when I was sixteen. Your daughter is brilliant enough to get through security I wrote. Trust me. When you're a teenager with a brain like that, you need an outlet."

"I want to do it. This is next-level stuff, Momma."

Abony sighed and her eyes rolled to the ceiling.

"No one told me having smart kids was going to be this hard."

"Did you want to see Baba Yaga? She always pixelated herself over video chat, but I wrote a program to get her face in case I needed it later. I kept it after she used my handle to claim sole responsibility for that leak. The only reason I haven't done anything with it is that she has a lot more money than me and she could fuck my family up if I retaliated."

"Language," Abony warned.

"It was the appropriate use of that word."

“Once we have her face, you don’t have to worry about her,” Boss said.

Kendasha pulled out her laptop. Casper was right. It was an older model that had been modified piecemeal. She pulled a pixelated video up. It seemed to take forever for the image to come through.

I nearly lost it when I saw who Baba Yaga was. We were all deathly silent. You could hear a pin drop until Jordan spoke.

“Who is she?”

“McKinley. My ex-girlfriend,” Casper growled.

I *never* liked her, even before I got close to Casper. She had a massive ego, and she always treated Luke like shit. McKinley also didn’t have a gay or bisexual bone in her body, but she thought I was legally obligated to flirt with her and stroke her ego because I was gay.

I didn’t know where McKinley was right now, but she hurt my friend and fucked over countless people.

I didn’t want Luke to do something stupid with Hex, but I was *totally* going to go there when we found McKinley

AFTERWORD

Thanks for reading. The first two books of this series were a series I wrote back in 2016-2017 that wasn't romance or why choose and have extensively rewritten *a lot*. Several years ago, I was working insurance claims in Louisiana like in this book and I guess I needed to work some issues out.

A lot of people in Louisiana misunderstand what constitutes an act of god claim and think those are automatically paid out and they are not at fault. So, everyone in my office took a Jesus claim like in this book. Mine involved Jesus, PCP, and a wheelchair. But yeah, Jesus was talking to people on their car radio shortly before they rear-ended someone or appeared in visions with messages for local politicians that ended with our insureds trying to deliver it by crashing their car in this person's house.

And I'm actually being completely serious about that. Also, the Rally Possum story really happened here and people lost their shit about it.