### Defragment

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**Defragment**

by **E_Meags**

**Summary**

Set a few months after the game. Aiden must team up with someone from his past to help bring down his enemies.
The sky was dark, leaden with roiling clouds that threatened rain. The rumble of thunder was ominous, a downpour was imminent. Already, minute droplets fell, stinging the ground. This type of weather wasn’t unexpected. Chicago at the end of autumn produced dreary days and the threat of a long winter. The cab she sat in smelt of cigarette smoke and the stale sweat of previous occupants. Despite reaching her destination, she sat in the back of the cab, aware of the meter ticking over but unwilling to move. The cab driver gave her an impatient look, and she sighed, handing over the cash.

Stepping outside, the wind ripped around her viciously, the intensity of the cold overwhelming. The wind was whipping her coat, making her move in an amusing parody of a marionette as she struggled to get the coat under control while hair stuck to her face. The squeal of tires signalled the departure of the taxi. Coat firmly in place with buttons, hair now out of her face, she looked up at the chrome, sterile building in front of her. She read the sign on the building opposite with mixed feelings: Palin Correctional Facility. It wasn’t a place she had thought to visit anytime soon but circumstances had conspired against her.

A drop of rain fell on her face, sliding down her cheek like an escaped tear. The clouds above rumbled their animosity. She shivered, not used to the colder climate. The people of Chicago bustled around her still form, bumping her every now and again. The mass of humanity was disconcerting; she was so used to wide open spaces, gritty sand that you couldn’t wash out of your clothes, and the blistering sun which caused mirages in the distance. The threat of rain became a reality; the sky opened and let loose a torrent of rain that caused others to scurry to shelter. Having no other choice, she ran across the road, avoiding the potholes already filling up with water.

Once under cover of the building, she hesitated again, reluctance unwinding in her like a loose thread. Most people in the street had scattered, seeking shelter from the downpour. She scanned the street, mapping out the environment, assessing possible threats. She caught herself doing this before she could even process the thought; instinct and training kicking in before she was aware of it. Another sigh escaped her lips. It wasn’t paranoia, she told herself firmly. A few buildings down, she caught movement. Eyes narrowed; she saw the briefest flash of a man wearing a baseball cap before he disappeared into an alleyway. Shrugging off the slight alarm it sparked, she dismissed the feeling. No one knew she was in Chicago besides her CO. She had taken her own precautions to make sure she hadn’t been followed, despite knowing that particular action had been close to being seen as paranoia. Not that she would have operated any differently; taking precautions was so ingrained in her that she accepted it as much as I did the freckles on her back.

Turning around, she gripped the handle of her bag and finally found the courage to enter Palin Correctional Facility. She walked through the metal detector, the guards eyeing her as she glided through without triggering the alarm. The bullet-proof window she approached was grimy, the polished exterior of the building at odds with the slightly scuffed appearance of the entrance. The man behind the window frowned at her approach. He wore a blue jacket, lighter blue tie and shirt. His hair was thinning, and he hadn’t shaved in a few days.

“Name,” he asked dismissively, obviously bored with desk duty.

“Hayley Parker.”

“Visiting….?” The guard asked, barely masking is disinterest.

She took a deep breath, “Daniel Parker.”
The name was said almost in a whisper but the guard obviously heard her and typed in the information. The tapping of the keys irritated her, along with his dismissive attitude. His eyes flicked up as she handed him her ID under the slight incline provided by the screen. He took an inordinate amount of time scanning it. Somewhat reluctantly he handed it back, grunting for what she assumed passed as acceptance. He pointed to a section which she supposed was where she was supposed to go.

“Thank you, you’ve been so helpful,” Hayley stated, deadpan. The sarcasm was obvious but he either didn’t get it or chose to ignore it.

Walking towards where the guard pointed, her stomach tightening in nervousness. Another guard, this one younger, smiled at her. She returned the smile with a tight one of her own. He led her along a long corridor, white and completely devoid of any personality, just like the prison itself. Hayley was aware of the whir of cameras above, and was struck by how electronics controlled every part of this prison. The guard stopped, bringing out a key card to slide over the electronic lock. He tapped in a few numbers and led her into another room.

Grey chairs and tables were placed strategically throughout the large room. No one else occupied the space, making the sound of the guard’s shoes on the polished floor unreasonably loud. Directed to the table on the far end Hayley sat down. The chairs, cold and uncomfortable, were bolted to the floor, for obvious reasons. Hayley placed her hands in front of her on the table, waiting for the inmate to arrive.

Minutes passed, and Hayley’s nervousness grew. The door to the right shuddered open suddenly, causing Hayley to stand up, hand straying to her belt where her weapon used to sit. The young guard who had directed her into the room eyed her suspiciously after this action. Hayley ignored him, intent of the figure walking in.

The prison suit was a deplorable orange colour, never meant to flatter any body type. Hayley sat down abruptly, watching the progress of the prisoner. Hayley’s heart fluttered and she blinked back tears, her nervousness vanishing as soon as she saw him. The prisoner sat across from her, smiling brightly.

Hayley examined him closely. His sandy coloured hair was worn slightly longer than she was used to. It curled at the ends and near his ears, giving him a roguish look. He hadn’t shaved for a week, but that was at least something she was familiar with. Before prison his attention to detail with shaving was always lacking. He had lost weight, although muscle was still evident, he had rolled up his sleeved to reveal the taught line of muscle across his arms. Bruising covered his cheek; a few smaller cuts were evident on his forehead. His warm brown eyes searched her face.

Hayley took a quick breath in, her emotions running rampant; she had no idea which one to pinpoint first. The man sitting across from her was familiar, but he had changed. His brown eyes were harder; life seemed to have gotten in the way since they had last made contact. His weight loss concerned her; he had always been a big eater. But what concerned her the most was the vibe she seemed to be getting from him. It was almost like a humming presence he gave off, like suppressed rage mingled with sadness.

“Hey Sis,” Daniel Parker spoke first, sensing his sister’s disquiet. Hayley smiled at her brother, but it was tinged with sorrow.

“Hey Danny,” Hayley spoke quietly, finding speaking to her older brother in a prison slightly disconcerting.

They both stared at each other after that, at a loss for what to say. Hayley cleared her throat and shifted in the uncomfortable chair. After getting over the shock of seeing her older brother in prison
attire, she began to form coherent thoughts.

“Danny, what did you do?” Hayley burst out, voice trembling slightly from emotion. She reached out and curled her fingers with his. The handcuffs clanked obnoxiously loud as he moved them on the table to squeeze her hand.

Hayley had been aware that Daniel had been arrested, charged and imprisoned before she had a chance to return to Chicago. She knew the circumstances, although information was missing and that is what she was here to find out. She knew that he had been charged with breaking and entering, resisting arrested and theft. Another accomplice had also been identified but had yet to be apprehended, and Danny had refused to give up his partner. A stubborn look crossed Danny’s face, his jaw set into what she knew to be reticence. He shook his head, his slightly shaggy hair bouncing at the tips with the motion.

“Sis, what are you doing here?” Danny asked, ignoring her question.

Hayley gave him a steady look, which he returned, surprisingly. Although he had always been a good person, he had never had particularly strong convictions. So when his stare never wavered from her face, Hayley had room to pause. Danny had been such a sweet kid; adventurous, kind, but had made terrible choices with friends who had led him astray. Childish practical jokes had turned into petty crimes. Danny had always wanted to fit in, and in the rough neighborhood where they grew up, that meant turning to a life of crime.

“Never mind that,” Hayley said more brusquely than she intended. “Why are you here Danny? You were doing so well.”

Danny withdrew his hands from hers, but maintained eye contact. Danny had certainly had his brushes with the law. The guys that he had hung out with when he was younger weren’t into anything serious, criminally speaking. As a juvenile Danny had been arrested a few times, from being caught using graffiti to deface a shop front, to stealing candy bars from the local store. Danny unfortunately never saw the harm in it; it was all just a bit of fun.

Danny was made to finish High School by their single mother, Mary. Both children respected and loved their Mother dearly. She had worked three jobs to keep a roof over their head and food in their bellies. Danny did get his High School Diploma, mainly due to the sheer persistence of their Mother. Danny would have left school years before if it hadn’t been for Mary. Working low paid jobs, often one after the other, meant both children knew the sacrifice she was making to keep them together as a family. Their Mother knew what Danny was like; easily led and desperate for approval. This combination was a dangerous one, especially in their neighborhood where gangs, drugs and turf wars were fought almost daily, making him as an easy mark for recruitment. Mary had made Danny swear he would finish High School, and it was only his love for his Mother and younger sister which made him do it.

All these thoughts clambered for attention in Hayley’s head. Danny must have read something from her expression as he sat back slightly in his chair, possibly trying to distance himself if not physically, then mentally from her questions.

“Danny,” Hayley spoke sharply this time. “What the fuck happened?” Danny raised his eyebrows at Hayley’s tone and choice of words. When Hayley had left Chicago, Danny had been doing well, his life of crime seemingly left behind. He had a steady job, a girlfriend and an apartment.

“It’s not what you think. An old friend needed some help.” Danny shrugged, the action more poignant by the sound of chains clanking around his hands. “We were set up. Something is happening in Chicago, missing girls, girls turning up dead. The charges are bullshit. Well sort of. I
was there, but I was not stealing, not in the way you think.” Danny finished, his eyes pleading for understanding.

Hayley watched her brother while he spoke. So far as she could tell, there was no deception in his words. She would like to believe him. His past had been firmly behind him when she left. He had settled down, age and experience finally catching up with him.

“Who was the friend?” Hayley asked, deceptively calm. She saw Danny look at her sharply, his lips pursed, unable to decide whether to tell her.

“You know him,” Danny stated slowly, wary of her reaction. “I won’t rat on him. You know why, he saved my life more times than I can count. I came to him for help.”

Hayley let out a string of expletives which had Danny blinking in surprise. Hayley knew who Danny was referring to, even without him giving a name. Danny knew as well as Hayley that their conversation was being recorded and would not risk saying a name.

Hayley also knew why Danny would not rat his partner out. Almost as soon as Danny walked out of the school gate for the last time he got into trouble. Danny started a job in a local factory, but met some unsavoury characters. They had cajoled him into being the driver for a robbery they were planning. Danny had never been forthcoming about the specifics but his ‘friends’ had used Danny and he had been left to take the fall for the crime. Hayley was never sure how, but Danny had informed her that some guy had witnessed the entire scene play out and had rescued Danny from being set up as bait for the Police. As far as Danny was concerned, that meant that he had his undying loyalty and the two had been friends ever since.

Hayley’s jaw tightened, anger evident in her posture, but when she spoke next she was surprised by how calm she sounded. “I didn’t realise you were still in contact. Why would you be involved with him after what happened?”

Danny was not fooled by her calm words; anger was practically sparking in her eyes. “We hadn’t been. In contact I mean. Look there’s more to what happened with you guys than you understand. Anyway, like I said, I needed help and he gave it. Things went south. He tried to get to me out but it was more important for him to be out there than me. He had the ability to do something, I don’t.”

Danny had never had any strong convictions, so to hear him talk this passionately was unnerving. If she didn’t know any better, Hayley would have thought her brother had been brainwashed. Danny leaned forward again, surprising Hayley when he grabbed her hand in a fierce grip.

“Why are you here? I thought you weren’t able to get back for months? I’m worried about you. You seem different. What happened over there?” Danny’s expression was filled with such concern; the emotional wall she had built to keep out stray emotions began to crumble.

Hayley pinched the inside of her cheek to keep from bursting into tears. She tasted blood, which just brought forth a whole different set of emotions. Hayley waved off his concern, putting a falsely bright smile on her face.

“I had leave. We finished up early and when I heard what happened I came back.” Hayley schooled her expression into a careful mask of brightness, she had learned long ago to hide her emotions.

Her brother eyed her carefully but she continued to look him in the eye, not showing whatever it was he had caught when her emotional armour cracked. The guard began to walk over, and consternation flickered over Danny’s face.
“Sis,” Danny grabbed her hands desperately, the handcuffs making it awkward. “I had no idea you’d come back so soon. You need to watch out for yourself.” Danny hesitated, obviously debating how much to tell her. “There’s more going on than you think. You might be in danger. Please be careful, they might know you’ve come back”.

Hayley sat back in the chair, stunned by her brother’s announcement. The guard had walked up to Danny, nodding at her, signalling their time was up. Danny was slowly being led away before Hayley found her voice.

“What danger Danny? Who are you talking about?” Hayley asked her brother’s departing back. She didn’t expect an answer, but she had to say it anyway. He sent an imploring look over his shoulder, before he was guided towards the doors. She saw him mouth ‘love you’ through the glass doors before they slid shut with a resounding swish.

Hayley stood, immobile by what her brother had just said. She had no idea what he was talking about; he seemed to be speaking in riddles. What was going on in Chicago that had him so worried? Who the hell were the missing or dead girls he was talking about? What had Danny got himself mixed up in?

Hayley was so deep in thought that she didn’t notice the guard who had escorted Danny back though the door, return to her. He seemed to appear at her side, startling Hayley. She jumped when he spoke to her, whirling around to face the threat. She was in the process of raising her arms to defend herself before reason kicked in and she stopped. The guard looked frightened at her sudden action, his hand moving to the weapon on his belt. Hayley backed off, but her limbs were bunched so tightly, that she had to dig her fingers into her palm so hard that she drew blood, to keep from reacting physically to his close proximity.

Hayley walked towards the prison exit in a daze, repeating what her brother had told her over and over in her head. None of it made sense. Well, some of it did, but she’d sort out those particular thoughts later. The rain had eased, leaving the ground wet, and the air colder than before. Hayley barely noticed. She began walking in some direction, electing not to call a cab, wanting time to figure out her conversation with her brother.

The cold air whipping around her face helped to clear her head a bit. Hayley had headed away from the prison, walking aimlessly until she heard the horn of a nearby car. She shook herself, mentally getting a grip on the tangle of emotions and thoughts running through her mind. Looking around, Hayley realised she had walked further than she intended. She cursed to herself, turning around slowly to ascertain where she was. This was so unlike her, she hadn’t paid the slightest attention to where she had been going. She had been so rattled by Danny’s cryptic conversation that she was now in an unfamiliar part of town.

Hayley looked around, noticing that since she had exited the prison, the clouds had darkened and dusk had settled around the tall buildings of Chicago. Hayley shivered, a combination of the cold and a feeling of apprehension. Hayley watched as an old man, hunched from the biting wind, limped behind a shopping cart filled with all his worldly possessions. Further down the street two teenagers lounged against a building, smoking, eyeing her insolently.

Grabbing her phone, Hayley tapped the GPS app, orientating herself with her current location. She had a vague idea of where she had walked to; Chicago had changed quite a bit in her absence. Buildings had been erected where none had existed; some of the projects had been torn down to make way for an industrial district. Even the Palin Correctional Facility had undergone drastic changes.

The night was approaching quickly, and Hayley thought it prudent not to be stuck in this area after
dark. Not that she wasn’t confident in handling herself, but she couldn’t be sure how she would react if she was exposed to a dangerous situations. The guard approaching her unawares in the prison had nearly caused her to attack him. Hayley knew her emotions weren’t exactly stable, but she reasoned that after what she had been though, frayed nerves were the least of her worries.

Hayley checked her GPS, and began walking back towards a main street, tucking her phone back in her pocket. A premonition of danger slithered up her spine. Hayley stopped on the edge of a street, slowly got her phone out, pretended to fiddle with it, but this gave her the opportunity to scan the street. She couldn’t see anyone, but she was alert, the feeling of being watched unmistakable. Fuck, she wasn’t even carrying. In feigned indifference, she looked both ways before she crossed the street. Again, she didn’t see anyone but the feeling of danger persisted. After crossing the street Hayley walked down the path without meeting any resistance. She cursed her suspicious mind, seeing shadows and threats where none existed.

Hayley breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that she was almost at the end of the street. In fact, she had almost made it when four men converged from the dark alleyway next to the dilapidated building she was passing. What worried her the most was the fact that these men weren’t the usual street thugs or Bangers which frequented this neighborhood. They were well dressed, all in suit and tie, bulky with muscle and hard, cruel faces.

Hired muscle, she thought immediately. They were also not out on a nightly stroll, as they expertly maneuvered themselves in a loose circle around her. Hayley felt her heartbeat increase, the sound of it thundering in her ears uncomfortable. Hayley dropped her bag, put a leg forward and softened her knees, ready for an attack. One man spoke, obviously the leader.

“Hayley Parker, this is your only warning. Leave Chicago tonight. We know about your brother. He’s stuck his nose in where it doesn’t belong.”

Hayley blinked; surprised that he knew her name. How the hell did they know she was even here? She hadn’t been in the prison for long; even Danny didn’t know she was coming, so they couldn’t have called ahead. Even more frightening was Danny’s warning. His voice echoed in her head ...

“You might be in danger. Please be careful, they might know you’ve come back.”

The man who spoke to her was directly in front of her. Strangely his accent marked him as being from New Jersey rather than Chicago. Hayley didn’t say anything but stared at him. He wasn’t young, probably in his mid-40’s. He packed a lot of muscle, but the area around his stomach was paunchy, he was starting to let himself go. His eyes were a pale blue and held the threat of violence. Hayley showed the man no fear and this seemed to anger him. He shrugged his shoulders, smirking at her.

“Fine. You won’t take me seriously; we’ll show you how serious we are.”

Hayley didn’t give him a chance to signal his buddies, she darted in quicker than the man gave her credit for, and punched him squarely in the nose. Hayley heard the crack of cartilage as her fist slammed into his nose; his head snapping back, blood already seeping out of his nose. She turned abruptly, using her foot to kick the knee of the guy behind her. He let out a shout of pain as he crumpled to the ground; his knee was useless now, she’d knocked his kneecap out.

Hayley felt movement behind her and swung around anticipating an attack. The fist slammed into her mouth before she could react. Blood filled her mouth as she rolled with the punch. Huge arms wrapped themselves around her; some brute was holding her in a bear hug. She struggled ruefully for a second before going limp. The stupid bastard fell for the trick and loosened his hold slightly, giving her enough room to smash her head back into his face. The guy who had been holding her howled and let go.
The first guy she attacked, the leader, recovered from her original punch and was stalking her. The other guy, who she had yet to tangle with, was shadowing his movements behind her. Hayley had a difficult time keeping an eye on both, as one would dart in while the other attempted to get a hold of her. She was quicker and younger than the two of them and managed to escape most attempts. They were also breathing heavily, so make that fitter too. Both seemed to wise up to her tactics and moved in simultaneously. One of them managed to get in a grueling punch to her mid-section which dropped her to the floor. She felt like her stomach had gone up through her rib-cage to her esophagus. She tasted bile in the back of her throat as she looked up from the position on her hands and knees, the wet seeping into her jeans where she bent over on the cold concrete.

She stared up into the man’s cold, pale blue eyes as he grinned at her, the blood from his broken nose flowing freely down his face. His eyes flickered behind her before they widened in shock. Hayley heard the sound of a groan behind her before a whirl of activity in front of her startled her. Hayley looked behind her; the man who had been behind her was now on sprawled on his back, unconscious. Hayley’s head swiveled forward in time to see a stranger dispatch the man with the cold blue eyes with determined efficiency. The stranger turned around, and their eyes locked. Hayley’s heart, already beating fast from adrenaline, seemed to ratchet up a notch as she discovered the stranger’s identity. She sat back on the sidewalk, not bothered by the damp concrete anymore.

He stared at her for what seemed like an age. Slowly, she brought her hand up, using her thumb to wipe away the blood from her split lip. He watched the action but didn’t say a word. Hayley sighed loudly.

“Aiden Pearce, always a pleasure.” She couldn’t help the sarcasm, and he probably expected no less.

He said nothing however, just watched her. He slowly came over, extending his hand to help her up. She eyed it wary, but resignedly she took his hand, surprised at how warm it felt when he pulled her up. She clamped down on that thought quickly. It was going to be a long fucking night.
Chapter 2

As soon as Hayley was upright, she dropped his hand like it was a hot object, and moved a few steps away from him. He still hadn’t said anything to her and his silence was beginning to grate on her. She folded her arms, unaware that she was trying to distance herself from him. She looked him over, taking in the changes she saw.

He was older, obviously. She hadn’t seen him in years, but the years had been kind to him, she grudgingly admitted. His eyes were still the same amazing luminescent green she remembered. No matter where she went in the world, no one else came close to mimicking Aiden’s eye colour. His hair was brown, seemingly devoid of grey, from what she could see. He wore a baseball cap, a dark green/blue colour with an odd symbol on the front. He had a light smattering of facial hair, a new addition which just added to his allure. Hayley frowned, unimpressed with that particular errant thought.

Her eyes roamed over his attire. He wore a long brown leather coat which hung to his knees and fitted him perfectly. Underneath he wore a grey jumper complete with a collar, and a type of black scarf hung around his neck. In his hand he held a phone, in the other a baton. The baton was extended, but as she watched Aiden quickly slid it back so that he could fit it into his coat pocket.

He tilted his head slightly, the side of his mouth curved in a mocking grin. She wanted to slap that grin off his face but resisted, just, mainly on account of his very timely help in dispatching the idiots who attacked her.

“It’s nice to see you again Hayley.” Aiden’s voice was just as gravelly as she remembered.

“I can’t say the same,” she responded bluntly, unconcerned by how rude she sounded. “How did you know I was here?” Her meaning was twofold. Here meant right at this spot, but it also meant here in Chicago.

Aiden shrugged, seemingly unwilling to answer her. “We have to go,” he said instead, ignoring her question, splitting his attention between his phone and her.

She made a displeased noise in the back of her throat. “No, we don’t”. She knew she was being childish and stubborn but his sudden appearance had rattled her already frazzled nerves. He gave her a long steady look which she returned.

“We need to get out of here, and then we can talk. This isn’t the safest of neighborhoods and we’ll have company soon.” Aiden looked down at his phone again, the screen highlighting his features as he used his thumb to swipe across the screen.

Hayley deliberated, unsure whether to follow him or not. She needed answers, about her brother, these men, the warning. He would have them, of course. She was honest enough with herself to realise it was her shock at seeing him again, the rush of old feelings, which played into her reluctance to go with him.

“Fine,” she relented, waving a hand in acceptance. He nodded absently, which annoyed her further; he knew she’d go with him anyway.

Hayley grabbed her discarded bag and stalked behind Aiden as he made his way down the street. He didn’t talk to her again; all his concentration was on his damn phone. What the hell was wrong with him? His fascination with his phone irked her enormously.
“Can’t wait to update your Twitter account?” She asked sarcastically to his back. He stopped and turned around to face her, his face a mix of astonishment and wariness.

His green eyes roamed her face, looking for god knows what. “You don’t know?” Aiden asked instead.

Hayley blew out a breath, impatience and anger warring within her for the dominant emotion. “Know what?” She asked, exasperated with his behaviour. “You’re acting like a 15 year old girl who can’t wait to get home to update her Facebook status.”

The look he shot her was incredulous. “It’s a little more complicated than that.” Impatience seeped into his features. “I said I’d explain, but we do need to move”. With that he turned his back, not stopping to see if she’d follow. Hayley stared at his back for a second before following.

Hayley was fuming; she was again blindly following Aiden Pearce. She was older and wiser but here she was, stepping back into the role she had played years ago. However, despite his lack of answers, she didn’t have anywhere else to go. What had happened with Danny, the warning attack by those men and Aiden’s appearance meant that these events were not a random coincidence.

Aiden stopped by a car, and Hayley trailed behind, eventually stopping with him. Concentrating on his phone Aiden pressed a button and Hayley was astonished to hear the beep of the car next to her signalling it was open.

Hayley saw that Aiden was obviously amused by her expression, going by his smirk. “Is this your car?” she asked. Aiden looked at Hayley sharply, as if wondering if she was playing him. She stared guilelessly back at him.

In response to her question Aiden snorted, “Yeah, for the moment.” Amusement danced in his normally expressionless eyes, but it was his tone which alerted Hayley that this may not be the complete truth. She hesitated, but Aiden’s hard stare made her uncomfortable so she got in the passenger seat.

He drove in silence, alternating between looking at his phone and driving. Hayley remained silent as well; her earlier anger abruptly vanished, as did her adrenaline. She began to shake; aware it was a delayed reaction to the attack. She crossed her arms and placed her hands under her armpits, not wanting Aiden to see her shaking. A particularly strong shiver she was unable to hide racked her body. Hayley could tell Aiden was shooting glances at her, but refused to look at him. So much had happened within such a short period that she needed time to sort it out in her head. She was glad Aiden didn’t say anything, but when he turned the heater on and turned the vents towards her, tears pricked at her eyes. It took an enormous effort to hold back the emotion, the tears, but she did. It was such a simple gesture but it spoke volumes.

Hayley lost track of where they were going, the winding streets and bright lights blurred together. Aiden obviously had a location in mind, so she relaxed against the seat. The heater warmed her, calming her nerves; she had stopped shaking at least. After a while they pulled up in a vacant lot and Aiden cut the lights and turned off the car. Hayley looked around, wondering why they were stopping in the middle of nowhere. Aiden got out of the car and Hayley followed.

She looked at him expectantly. His hat obscured his expression, “I needed to dump the car. We’ll walk to my place from here.”

What he said wasn’t unexpected, but it still angered her. Now she was an accessory to grand theft auto. Hayley sighed again, loud enough for him to hear, but followed him when he departed. Only a few street lights worked so their destination was mostly shrouded in darkness.
A sound ahead of them stilled them both; Hayley saw Aiden’s hand wandering into his coat. There was enough light for Hayley to see the glint of a gun, before he withdrew his hand as a cat screeched its way past them.

Hayley watched Aiden with increasing interest. He hadn’t panicked at the sound, but had calmly reached into his coat, prepared to shoot if necessary. His posture was hunched, his eyes darting around, alert for possible threats. That’s when it struck her; he was acting like she did when out on patrol. Her mind wandered back to the efficient way he had dealt with her attackers. He knew how to defend himself and was obviously confident in his ability to do so. This wasn’t exactly new information to her, she knew he hadn’t been on the correct side of the law when he was younger, but seeing him in action was quite different.

They walked for about 10 minutes, both quiet but alert. Small sounds reached their ears as they passed by houses; a baby crying, a couple arguing, and the dull monotones of a television. Shadows loomed overhead, making the darkness seem more menacing. It was also bitterly cold, but at least the rain held off.

Eventually they reached a dilapidated apartment complex which seemed to be inhabited. Despite the darkness, Aiden confidently maneuvered them through the potholes and items scattered around the front of the building. He used his phone to gain entrance to the apartment building. Hayley was surprised to see such high tech security on an apartment such as this. They took the stairs to the top, which was about 8 stories up. When they came to the top a metal door barred their entrance. Once again Aiden used his phone to allow them entrance.

When Hayley entered the top floor she was surprised to see how well maintained it was. Aiden spoke for the first time since they entered the building. “This is my floor; no one else occupies this level, so we’re alone.” He spoke over his shoulder as he moved down the hallway. Hayley frowned at this announcement; he had a whole floor to himself? Aiden honestly never ceased to amaze her.

He stopped about halfway down and opened the door to an apartment. When Hayley entered she looked around with interest. It was furnished sparsely, with the basics, a fridge, dining table and chairs. What held her interest was the row of computers and assorted tech which adorned the lounge room. Most lounge rooms had a couch, TV etc. Not this one, it was set up like a computer lab.

Aiden headed straight to his computer port, setting his phone on a cradle near his nest of monitors. He proceeded to tap away at the keyboard, while Hayley hovered near the computers, peeking a glance at the information that scrolled across the screen. One monitor was full of code, scrolling across the screen so fast she couldn’t even begin to imagine what was encoded within. The other screen was obviously used for the security of the building, as the screens flickered between camera feed on the outside and the inside hallways. The other screen, which Aiden was obviously using, seemed to be downloading data.

Aiden must have felt her watching him as he turned around, his face blank as he stared at her. His emerald gaze turned slightly challenging, but Hayley returned his stare, unwilling to back down. Some unidentifiable emotion passed over his eyes, gone as quickly as it came. He grunted, turned around, tapped a few more times on the keyboard, which turned off all the screens baring the one showing the exterior security footage.

“Have a seat,” Aiden gestured towards the dining table. “Did you want something to drink?”

Hayley couldn’t help an amused snort from escaping. They were being civil now? Chatting like old friends over a beverage? Okay, she could play civil.

“Thanks, and yes, a drink would be nice. Anything is fine.” Hayley sat down at the dining table,
watching as Aiden bustled around the kitchen. “Did you want something for your lip?” he asked.

Hayley was startled out of her musings. To be honest, the slight sting from her busted lip had been forgotten. “Nah, I’ve had worse,” she said offhandedly. Aiden stopped what he was doing to give her an unfathomable look. Hayley shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Damn she should have kept her mouth shut; she didn’t want to tell him any more than he need to know. As it was the stare he was giving her made her feel like he knew exactly what she was thinking. Eventually, he went back to whatever he was doing in the kitchen and Hayley sighed in relief. He finally brought two cups over to set them down on the table.

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As Aiden sat down opposite Hayley he took some time to get a bearing on her. She had changed from the young, naïve girl he knew years ago. When she left her face still carried the essence of her youth, but he could see no traces of that anymore. Whatever she had experienced during her time away had toughened her. He saw it in her eyes; they were harder, cynical, resigned. There was also a kind of suppressed energy around her; he couldn’t quite put his finger on, it was like a mix of anxiety and watchfulness. She had obviously experienced something traumatic, the memory of which still lingered. Her gaze seemed to roam everywhere, taking in everything, missing nothing. It reminded him of how he saw the world and he wondered what she had experienced to make her react that way.

He also couldn’t help but notice the physical changes she had undergone. Hayley had filled out; he couldn’t help but notice it was all in the right places. Her hair was a warm chestnut colour, medium length with a hint of reddish tones. She was also leaner than he remembered. Her time in the Army had toned her body well. Her eyes were green but darker than his own, more a mossy green, with flecks of yellow near her pupils. Those eyes were looking at him now, with a mixture of curiosity and wariness. Their history was long and complicated. It had been made even more complicated by her brother contacting him recently. He did owe her answers, but he was wary of her reaction to what he had to tell her.

“You haven’t seen much of the news lately have you?” Aiden asked. Out of all the things he could have started with, he knew this seemed like the least likely opening.

Hayley blinked at him slowly, possibly trying to process what this had to do with her current situation, but she answered him patiently.

“Uh, some. Where I was, I couldn’t really watch local news. Why?” Hayley asked, confusion written on her face.

“Do you recall hearing about the Vigilante?” Aiden asked. He needed to see how much of his actions reached her via media.

Hayley frowned, worrying her lip, most likely in an attempt to recall the news stories. “I guess. Only bits and pieces. It was a mixed bag. Some say he helps the people of Chicago, others that he’s a danger, a murderer and a menace.”

“Why?” Hayley asked.

Aiden paused, his eyes flicked over to his computers before coming back to settle on her face. Aiden deliberated again whether it was wise to clue her in on his activities. True, he was involved with her brother, but that was different. Her brother had contacted him, asked for his help. Their friendship went back a long way, so Aiden didn’t refuse. Danny was also no stranger to life on the streets, so Aiden was far less reluctant to involve him than he was with his sister. Turned out, in the end, Danny
had stumbled onto something far bigger than he realized. Aiden was sure unsure whether involving Hayley was his smartest move. He remembered the last woman he had worked with. That hadn’t turned out so well. Aiden adjusted his cap; the memory of Clara was still too uncomfortable to dwell on.

True, Hayley was not the same woman he used to know and he would never have thought to involve her back then. Now, was a different story. She was battle hardened; he could see that for himself. She knew how to handle herself; he had witnessed that with the men who had attacked her. Aiden doubted that his interference would have stopped her from getting the same outcome he had.

Hayley had left Chicago, and Aiden, not on the best of terms. Despite that he’d kept tabs on her while she was away. It hadn’t been hard to gain access to her records while she was undergoing basic training. He knew where she trained, that she had graduated in the top five percent of her class, and by tracing her bank details, all her expenses. Not once did Aiden feel like this was an invasion of her privacy. Aiden followed his own set of rules. He rationalized that he was keeping an eye on her, making sure she was okay.

Aiden knew that Hayley had excelled in basic training and had been recruited by Special Ops. That’s where his access was severely limited. The Army had some pretty advanced encryption software he wasn’t willing to hack into lest he set off alarms. Over the years he’d still checked in on her. He was aware that she had been sent to Iraq not long ago, but was unable to pry further. Something had happened in Iraq which had sent her home, which was why she was sitting here now, in his living room.

Aiden made his choice, “Because I’m the Vigilante.”

To others, those who knew Aiden, or thought they did, his revelation to what looked like a stranger would have seemed odd, or downright senseless. Never prone to rash decisions, Aiden’s actions were carefully thought out. He was usually four steps ahead of most people. His real identity had been revealed to the public anyway, and he would have rather she heard his explanation than some random newscaster portraying him in a less than appealing manner. Only Hayley wasn’t a stranger, they had a history, however convoluted it was.

Hayley’s expression went from polite attentiveness to comically blank. She stared at him, dumbfounded. Hayley opened her mouth, but shut it again quickly. Hayley’s thoughts played across her face as she processed his declaration. Aiden had no trouble reading them; disbelief, suspicion, anger.

“Why did you involve Danny?” Hayley asked, deceptively calm despite what he had told her. If Aiden was surprised this was her first question he didn’t show it. He wasn’t fooled though; she was concealing her anger from him.

“I didn’t,” he stated simply. Hayley gave him a disbelieving look.

“He came to me Hayley. His girlfriend’s cousin had gone missing. She was 24, responsible, in college, still living at home. One night she never came home, vanished it seemed. The Police were called, they made their inquiries but as usual their clumsy investigations turned up nothing. Their version? She ran away. They closed the case. Danny’s girlfriend didn’t believe this, neither did her parents. They were convinced something had happened to her. So Danny took matters into his own hands, making some inquiries of his own. Danny managed to contact me. I hadn’t spoken to him in years, but he said he needed my help.”

Aiden paused, shaking his head at the extraordinary set of coincidences which had allowed Danny to discover a human trafficking ring in Chicago. Aiden had been unaware of its existence, having taken down a similar operation months ago. He had not heard a whisper since then, making whoever had
set up the operation highly proficient in the trafficking of human cargo if no rumor had reached his ears. They were obviously keeping a tight lid on the setup.

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“Danny and I worked together for a time. We found out that the cousin had been snatched to use in a human trafficking operation. It turned out; he had access where I didn’t. Coincidentally, the factory he was working in was actually one of a dozen places being used to help fund the trafficking. We had infiltrated the factory after it closed for the day, attempting to get some evidence when we were ambushed. Someone had been tipped off and was waiting for us. We were effectively trapped but Danny was in a different section of the factory and ran straight to the Police who were outside. He took the blame for everything and never even pointed a finger in my direction. He allowed me to escape, I didn’t abandon him.”

Aiden wasn’t looking for forgiveness from Hayley, despite his last sentence. He was outlining what had happened. It was only Aiden’s innate skill which had allowed him to escape the ambush. Hayley had been listening closely to his recounting of the events, her eyes never leaving his face. When he had finished he watched her expression, finding it difficult to get a read on her feelings, which frustrated the hell out of him, he was usually able to read people without much difficulty.

“Why did you continue to help him?” Hayley asked.

Aiden narrowed his eyes, knowing where the question was heading. “He would have continued to look for his girlfriend’s cousin regardless. He’d dug too deep, saw too much to just walk away.”

“Why did you become the Vigilante,” Hayley asked suddenly, changing tack. This question did surprise Aiden, he was so sure she’d been about to explode at him for his role in her brother’s imprisonment.

“It’s a long story,” Aiden replied tersely. There were certain things he was willing to discuss with her, this wasn’t one of them.

“Why are you telling me this?” Hayley asked, confusion edging its way into her voice.

Aiden felt relieved, concerned Hayley was going to probe deeper into his reasons for becoming the Vigilante. He paused again, wondering how much he should reveal. Considering what he had just told her, she had reacted quite calmly. Most people having been given this information would be reacting quite differently. He would have expected fear, anger, even hysterics. Hayley’s calm acceptance was something he hadn’t expected.

“Well, what your brother said to you in prison was right, you are in danger.” Hayley’s mouth actually hung open for a few seconds before she closed it.

“How the hell do you know what my brother said to me? We were in the prison visitor room,” Hayley asked in disbelief.

Aiden smirked. “You really have been out of touch. I have access to ctOS through my phone. I’m able to hack into their network and use my own black-market apps to access their systems. I can hack cars, shut down traffic lights, open security doors, just to name a few. I hacked into the prison system and used the camera to listen in on your conversation.”
Aiden shrugged, it amused him greatly that Blume and the Police were still chasing their tails when it came to capturing him. Hayley’s shocked expression amused him even more. He lost part of the smile when she spoke next.

“But how? From my understanding access into a center's computers is only possible with the use of an access code. You’d have to enter the premises to install a backdoor virus to access all of the information.”

Aiden narrowed his eyes, wondering how she knew so much information about ctOS. “I thought you weren’t keeping up with the news,” he said, unable to keep the suspicion out of his voice.

Hayley rolled her eyes at him. “Just because I haven’t had access lately doesn’t mean I didn’t research what was going on in my home town. And quit looking at me like I’ve run over your dog and not told you,” Hayley ended rather acerbically, obviously not appreciating Aiden’s suspicions.

Hayley sighed, “Despite not being up-to-date on local news, I did take the time to research ctOS. My understanding goes a little bit further than just a basic grasp most people have about the system. Let’s just say I’m not unfamiliar with certain aspects of computer science. It was required for some of my missions.”

Something had changed in Hayley’s expression, her eyes had become unfocused. Abruptly her genial expression changed, replaced with what looked like anger; although Aiden’s couldn’t work out if it was at him or whatever she had been thinking about.

“So why tell me this? You want something, that’s obvious, that’s how you operate.”

Aiden felt anger rise at Hayley’s comment, but immediately quelled any biting comment he was about to make. Aiden could see how Hayley would think that, considering their history. Too much had happened between them for their relationship to be an easy one. When he responded to her question his voice was steady.

“I want you to leave Chicago.”

Hayley merely stared at him for a few seconds before laughing. Aiden blinked at her, not expecting that particular reaction.

“Oh, you’re serious?” Hayley asked, her light tone belied the anger he saw just beneath the surface.

“Why would I do that Aiden? Especially after everything you’ve just told me. My brother has been falsely imprisoned because of some conspiracy, and you want me to just leave?” Hayley asked incredulously, shaking her head at him like he was simple.

Aiden shrugged. In all honesty he didn’t believe that if he merely asked her that Hayley would leave, but he had to give it a shot. If he didn’t involve her in what he was doing she’d go off blindly blundering around in the dark, most likely unaware of the danger she was in, and in all likelihood, get herself killed. As much as he hated the idea of involving her he had no other choice. Hayley was stubborn, a quality he usually admired, just not in this instance.

He had told her about his Vigilante status so she could decide for herself whether she wanted to work with him or not. In fact, her involvement might prove fortuitous; she could go places he couldn’t. His face was well known in this city and he had to be careful about where he went and who saw him. Hayley would also investigate Danny’s imprisonment whether he wanted her to or not. He had also worked very hard gathering the evidence he had. He didn’t think whoever was involved with this trafficking embargo knew of his involvement. Yet. If Hayley started asking
questions she could tip off whoever was involved, could spook them and they could shut down their operation.

He sighed, he didn’t have the energy to try and argue with her. “Fine. But you work with me and we do things my way.”

Hayley appeared to bristle at that. “Why your way?”

“Because I’ve been working on finding out who is involved for a long time. They don’t know I’m involved. They know your brother was because he had a personal connection. I think they suspect he had a partner but I’m not sure. If you go around asking questions and the wrong people hear about it, they will either silence you or you’ll spook them and they’ll take their activities elsewhere.”

Hayley tapped her fingers on the table in front of her, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “So why didn’t they just silence Danny? Wouldn’t that have been easier?”

Aiden rubbed the back of his neck, tiredness suddenly sweeping over him. When he had looked in the mirror this morning he had noticed that the skin around his eyes showed a redness that indicated lack of sleep.

“I don’t know. That’s puzzled me too. I think it was to draw out his partner. They knew he wasn’t working alone. I think cops are involved too. But that’s a different story.” Aiden paused, looking at Hayley warily before continuing.

“You’re involved now whether you like it or not. That attack earlier tonight? That was just the beginning if you don’t stop looking into the reason Danny was imprisoned. These people will protect what they’re doing at all costs. They obviously have ctOS access as well to get to you so quickly. That presents another problem. You only arrived in Chicago a few hours earlier and you were attacked as you left the prison. I wasn’t the only one who knew where you were, and that’s worrying. They would no doubt have been privy to your conversation with Danny in the prison as well.”

Hayley sat across from Aiden, tapping her lip with her finger thoughtfully, trying to process everything he had just told her. His admission that he was the Vigilante was…unexpected. She had heard of the Vigilante, running amok in Chicago, taking the law into his own hands, but never had she dreamed that Aiden would be behind it. It made a sick sort of sense in a way. Despite his penchant for criminal activities, he’d always had his own code of honor.

Hayley had struck a nerve asking Aiden why he had become the Vigilante. She saw the way he seemed to shut down, withdraw into himself. Whatever had caused Aiden to follow that path was as raw as her own wounds. And her wounds were exceptionally raw. The Army trained her well, not just in the use of firearms, marksmanship, leadership, and tactical advantage, but had allowed her to complete more specialized training in computer software and trauma medicine. Despite all of her training one mission, the cause of said raw wounds, had changed the rest of her life.

Thoughts about her last mission had soured her mood and made her speak more harshly than she had intended. She’d also gotten to the end of her patience with Aiden. True, she believed him about not involving her brother. Aiden was many things but a liar wasn’t one of them. Her frustration stemmed from being on the back foot with him again. She didn’t know what he wanted, and he definitely wanted something, Aiden wasn’t one for idle chit chat.

Something occurred to her which made her frown at Aiden in suspicion. She gave him a measured
stare, “So how did you know I was back in Chicago?”

“The ctOS programmes have facial recognition software. Since I’m connected within their systems I’m able to make use of that software. Once you were identified I had an alert sent to my phone to track your movements.”

Hayley didn’t immediately react, although his admission irritated her. She honestly didn’t know how to react to what he said. On one hand she was peeved that her privacy had been invaded. On the other hand she was confused as to why Aiden would expend effort in tracking her. She didn’t know if it was his usual control issues that made him do it, or a genuine need to protect her. Not wanting an argument, mainly because she was conflicted about how she felt, Hayley merely nodded.

He raised an eyebrow but otherwise didn’t comment at her lack of argument. Aiden eyed her warily, which confused Hayley, but as soon as he spoke she understood why.

“You can’t go back to your apartment. If you really want in on what I’m doing you need to stay with me. Once we get into this they will be able to track you through ctOS. I’m the only person in Chicago who can move around undetected.”

Hayley’s first reaction was to say no, she would not be staying with him. However, the other thoughts she had in her head made her consider Aiden’s statement. She had no doubt that he wasn’t boasting about his skills as a hacker. She had seen his proficiency with that phone of his. The nest of computers behind him also attested to his skill with computers. She also knew that what he said made sense; the people involved in a human trafficking ring would not take kindly to someone poking around in their business. If, as Aiden said, she unintentionally asked questions and the wrong people found out she could be in a world of danger. Aiden had also been tracking these people for longer than she had and obviously had leads. It would take her far longer to gain this information if she were to pursue it herself. It was the close proximity to Aiden that she would have to endure that she had difficulty with. In the end, her desire to get her brother out of prison overrode any residual feelings she had about working with Aiden.

Hayley made a decision. “Okay,” she said simply, and couldn’t help but smile at Aiden’s reaction.

Aiden whipped his head up to stare at her in shock when she agreed to his stipulations. He had clearly braced himself for arguments from her, so she let out a small grin, knowing she had surprised him by not arguing. Hayley felt her smile falter; it was so easy to fall back into the familiar rapport they had years ago. She didn’t want that, and neither did he. She couldn’t afford to get emotionally attached, in her experience that always ended in pain, especially where Aiden was concerned.

Aiden’s smile also disappeared and Hayley was surprised to see genuine pain in his normally impassive expression. Hayley shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Aiden had surprised her on more than one occasion today, and the raw emotion she saw was yet another example of that. What disturbed her the most was her own reaction to Aiden’s distress. Hayley had convinced herself after she left Chicago that she didn’t care about Aiden at all. Now, she was so close to reaching out and asking if he was okay. She didn’t, though. In an attempt to change an uncomfortable moment, she asked the first question that came to mind.

“So are we going to stay here?” Hayley asked, waving her hand around to encompass the room.

A short intake of breath and Aiden was back to his normal imperturbable self. He nodded, “For a while. This is one of my safe houses. We’ll relocate a few times depending on circumstances.”

Hayley raised her eyebrows in surprise, “I’d have thought this apartment building would have been too exposed for you?”
Aiden shrugged, “Who would have thought to look for me here? I own the building under an alias that’s untraceable. I rent the apartments out to low income families at a low rate so that they can survive. It’s a win-win situation”.

Aiden’s admission surprised Hayley, although it really shouldn’t have, it was so like Aiden to be resourceful. Having a safe-house in an apartment building was ingenious; the cops would never think to look for Aiden in such a mundane setting. The fact that he lowered rents in consideration of struggling families served as a reminder to Hayley that Aiden was far more complex than even she gave him credit for.

Hayley stifled a yawn suddenly, the turmoil of the day catching up with her. Aiden caught the action nevertheless, and stood up.

“There’s a bed and a shower in the room on the right. There are fresh sheets and towels so go ahead and use them.”

Hayley also stood up when Aiden did, but hesitated before walking away. “Aiden,” Hayley said suddenly.

He stopped and looked around at her. “Thank you….For helping me. Not just with the men who attacked me. For helping me with Danny.”

The side of his mouth curved in his usual smirk and he inclined his head in acknowledgment before moving towards the opposite hallway.

Hayley blew out a breath as she watched Aiden’s broad back walk away. She clenched her fists in agitation, annoyed at the way her heart sped up when he smiled at her. Damn it. She would have sworn that Aiden Pearce had no hold over her anymore. Her traitorous body obviously felt otherwise. The first few months after she left Chicago, thoughts of Aiden had been constant, like honey stuck to a hive. As the weeks, months and eventually years passed thoughts of him had faded to the background, no long bitter but still causing a slight pang. The time she had spent away had been beneficial, not just in forgetting her entanglement with Aiden, but for developing who she was today.

Worrying her lip, Hayley walked into the bedroom Aiden had indicated, still thinking about her reaction to him. The bedroom was sparsely furnished, with a bed, side drawers, mirror and built in wardrobe. Quietly undressing, she placed her clothes on the bed as she walked into the shower. Turning on the water, Hayley waited patiently for the steam to rise, signalling it was hot enough for her to enter. She emitted as gasp of satisfaction as the hot water cascaded over her tired body.

Massaging the shampoo that had been sitting on the shelf into her hair Hayley resolved to keep her relationship with Aiden strictly professional. If she felt a twinge before at his smile, it was only because of their history. She was determined to quash any future inclinations. He was the best, no, the only way, to get her brother out of prison, so she would keep any lingering feelings to herself.
Chapter 3

The next morning Hayley awoke early, momentarily confused by her surroundings. As she attempted to get up a sharp pain in her stomach caused her to remember the events of the day before. Laying back down, Hayley wasn’t sure of the time but judging by the light slanting through the curtains it wasn’t long past dawn. Dust motes whirled in the sharp ray of sunshine between the gaps in the curtains. Getting up more slowly this time, Hayley sat on the edge of the bed and lifted her shirt.

Hayley made a face as she spotted the ugly purple bruise colouring her stomach where one of the brutes hit her. Pressing lightly on the bruise she winced. It wasn’t bad and would heal in a few days. Hayley’s fingers absently trailed slowly over the healing scars that the bruise half covered. Clenching her teeth, Hayley fought off a wave of dizziness as the familiar feelings of dread, fear and grief assaulted her memory.

Gripping the edge of the bed, trying to anchor herself, Hayley breathed deeply, using the exercises the Psychiatrist taught her. It wasn’t easy but she managed to fight off the anxiety attack. The Psychiatrist had told her to anchor herself in her current place. Find an object to hold on to and push past the physical reaction. It was hard, her mind tried to convince her that she needed to go into fight or flight mode.

Hearing Aiden in the other room strangely helped her relax. It helped her anchor herself, know she was here and not back in the place where chaos reigned and her semblance of control was lost. Hayley opened her eyes slowly, taking stock of her body. With a calming breath she pushed off the bed, grabbed her pants and put them on. She needed more clothes and other supplies, which is what she needed to discuss with Aiden now.

Hayley exited the bedroom, gave Aiden a tight smile and said good morning. Sitting down at the table, Hayley watched as Aiden put on a pot of coffee. His back was turned and he spoke before Hayley had the chance.

“I’m going out for a while but you can stay here. I need to get some supplies. What do you need?” he asked, still with his back to her fiddling with the coffee machine. Hayley arched an eyebrow at his back, annoyance bubbling to the surface. “Just a bowl of water. And maybe leave the window open a crack for me,” she retorted sarcastically, not liking his dismissive attitude.

Hayley watched as Aiden seemed to tense briefly before he turned, folded his arms across his chest and stared at her. Hayley merely stared back at him, already having misgiving about their ‘partnership’. If Aiden thought he could leave her home like a Labrador and go out investigating he was sorely mistaken. Ignoring her jibe, Aiden responded, “I’m just getting a few things I need. Weapons, ammo, and some clothes for you. I’m not doing anything in regards to Danny so I didn’t think you needed to come with me.”

Hayley took a deep breath in an attempt to calm herself. She didn’t know why but talking with Aiden made her feel agitated, like she was on the back foot with him. Aiden’s need for control over every aspect of his life was borderline narcissistic. His need to micromanage people was infuriating. But Hayley knew where that need stemmed from. Aiden’s Father had been a drunk and abusive. Aiden as a young boy bore the brunt of his Father’s alcoholic stupors in an attempt to divert attention away from his younger sister Nicole. Hayley knew enough about people and psychology to know that the need to control people was
typically a reaction to the fear of losing control. Soldiers in Hayley’s elite Special Ops unit came from a broad array of backgrounds and were required to develop an adaptable and eclectic skills base. Hayley chose to excel in trauma medicine and psychology, and to a lesser extent, computer sciences. It was a demanding and rigorous training course that, on top of active duty, required assignments, practical application and field work. As such, Hayley’s skills were honed and she now had a firm grasp on trauma medicine and psychology. As a qualified Nurse before she enrolled in the armed forces, transitioning between her understanding of physiology and furthering her training was a natural progression.

As a result of that training, Hayley saw Aiden’s need for control as what is really was. People who struggle with the need to be in control often feared being at the mercy of others, and this fear usually stemmed from traumatic events that left them feeling helpless and vulnerable. As a result, they often craved control in disproportionate and unhealthy ways. The experience of abuse could make people look for ways to regain control of their lives, which is what Aiden was doing now.

Knowing that, Hayley made an effort to be calm. “Aiden, if we’re to work together we must be equals. You can’t just think or do for me. I agreed to doing things your way, but I meant when we were in the field. I won’t be micromanaged.”

Aiden continued to stare at her from his position in the kitchen, his eyes defiant. Hayley stifled a laugh; this was Aiden’s ‘Stormy Look’ as Nicole would have said. Nicole knew her brother and despite, or maybe because of, his faults, she loved him anyway. Hayley jerked out of her musings, suddenly thinking about Nicole, guilt gnawing at her for not thinking of Nicki sooner.

“How is Nicole?” Hayley asked suddenly, putting aside her earlier disagreement with Aiden. “I’m sorry I haven’t asked about her sooner. How are the kids?”

Aiden flinched visibly and his shoulders tensed, almost like he was trying to curl into himself to protect himself from physical damage. Aiden didn’t answer her, but his reaction warned her that all was not right. He wasn’t looking at her anymore, but the desolation she saw in his expression alarmed her.

“Aiden,” Hayley called sharply, worry making her voice sharp. A shudder seemed to ripple through his body when she said his name. His head slowly turned towards her.

“Lena died.”

Hayley heard the words but a roaring began in her ears and she realized her hands were shaking. Her heart was hammering, a result of shock and adrenaline.

“How … How?” Hayley couldn’t even complete a full sentence, her tongue felt glued to the roof of her mouth.

“Car accident,” Aiden said shortly, avoiding eye contact. His body language was almost defensive, if that was even possible.

Aiden’s stiff posture seemed to be radiating with a type of festering anger, while his lack of eye contact had Hayley wondering if he was hiding something. Brushing that thought aside, Hayley got up off her chair, and began walking towards Aiden.

Grief welled up within her, threatening to choke her. Hayley and Nicole had been best friends ever since Aiden had introduced Danny and Hayley to his family. Nicole and Hayley were of a similar age, so while Aiden and Danny were off doing ‘boy’s stuff’ as Nicole would say, they were at home cooking, dancing and gossiping. Nicole and Hayley became as close as sisters, Nicole instinctively
picking up on the crush Hayley had for her brother. From time to time she used to gently tease her about it, but mostly she respected Hayley’s feelings. Hayley was there when Nicole began dating Lena and Jackson’s Father, and she was there through Nicole’s pregnancy with Jackson and her subsequent split with their Father.

While Hayley was at school getting her Nursing Qualification, Nicole was busy being a single Mother but they still kept in touch. After enrolling in the Army, Hayley didn’t contact as often, not because she didn’t care but because she was so busy. After she was sent overseas, and especially in the last 18 months, Hayley hadn’t maintained many social contacts for her own reasons. Now those reasons made her feel shameful. Hayley had not had contact with Nicole for some time, and now she knew why.

It hurt that Nicole had not told her, but Hayley brushed those feelings aside. Lena’s death must have devastated the Pearce family. Aiden loved his niece and nephew more than his own life. Hayley attempted to get close to Aiden, her need to comfort him overriding her vow to stay away from him.

“Don’t.” Aiden voice was like a whip, the hand he held in front of him warned her that physical contact would not be tolerated. Hayley deliberated before backing off, knowing when she wasn’t wanted. Only once had she heard Aiden speak to her in such a cold, harsh way and it stilled her.

“I’m sorry,” she said quietly, anguish at Lena’s death making her voice crack.

He didn’t acknowledge her, but instead walked over to his hub of computers and grabbed his phone. Another phone was sitting next to his and he grabbed it as well, then walked over and held his hand out with the other phone in it. Hayley stared at it, shock still coursing through her system, unable to do much beyond stare numbly at him. He made in impatient sound in the back of his throat, grabbed her hand and placed the phone in it.

“This is your new phone. Don’t use your old one, it could have a trace. I’ve put a few apps on there that aren’t available on iTunes. Don’t go outside without it. The phone has a scrambler, which means it messes with ctOS’s ability to run facial recognition. You’ll just appear like a pixilation on their screens. You can also access the Internet, but only access it from this phone. Another app is one I designed last night for you.”

Aiden stopped and grabbed the phone back from her, swiping the screen and pointed. “Here, it’s called Alert. If you tap it my phone will be able to hone in on your position if you’re in danger. You’ll need to get used to it if we’re to work together as a lot of what I do could be considered electronic espionage.”

With that he handed the phone back to her and with a curt, “I won’t be long” he disappeared out the door. Hayley stood for a few moments, phone in her hand, staring at the door Aiden had recently shut. She just barely followed what he told her about the phone, her mind still spinning over Lena’s death. Shaking her head, Hayley made her way to the coffee pot Aiden had put on. In a kind of daze she poured the coffee into the cup and sat down at the table.

Hands wrapped around the warming mug, Hayley began to sort out her thoughts. The discovery that her long-time friend had lost a child was beyond distressing. Hayley felt like her own trauma paled in comparison to what Nicole had been through. On the contrary, Hayley knew her own reasons for lack of contact weren’t trivial; she had almost lost her life, and the resounding impact it had on her affected her even today.

Something about the way Aiden reacted to her asking about Lena’s death set off alarms. Hayley knew that human communication was 20% verbal and 80% non-verbal so if you were saying something to a person but your body language says the opposite then you’re not getting your
message across. This is what she had picked up on with Aiden, what he was saying just wasn’t meshing.

Grabbing the phone that she had placed on the table, Hayley began to swipe through it, getting used to the operating system. It was a smart phone, but unlike any she had encountered. Hayley wondered whether Aiden had created his own operating system. It reminded her vaguely of what her iPod looked like after she’d used a jailbreak on it to access apps for free. Hayley realized that this was most likely what Aiden would have done. By jail-breaking the phone, Aiden was able to get past the device’s limitations so that he could change the default programs and run his own applications.

Some of the apps that he had installed were what she was used to; calendar, contacts with only Aiden’s number programmed into it, and navigation. The Internet symbol was different, the Safari app she was used to with the compass had a red tip with a blue rounded background. This Internet browser had the colours the other way around, with a blue tip and a red background. Hayley assumed that meant that she was able to access the Internet through a backdoor he had created so that she would be untraceable. Hayley activated the Internet app and began a search for information about Lena’s death. What she found allowed her to understand Aiden’s reaction. Hayley read the short article about what had happened.

*Police and emergency services were called to the crash site, in the Pawnee underpass about 7.30pm on Wednesday after a car veered off the road.*

*The driver (Aiden Pearce, 38) and another occupant of the car (Jackson Pearce, 9) were injured and transported to Chicago Med. The other occupant of the car, Lena Pearce (6) sadly died at the scene.*

*Major Crash investigators attended the scene overnight and are investigating.*

*One lane was closed to traffic near the crash site overnight while officers investigated but it has since reopened.*

*The state’s road toll is 24, compared with 25 at this time last year.*

*Anyone who witnessed the crash and has not yet spoken to police are asked to contact Chicago Police Department.*

Hayley read and re-read the article, which provided a pitiful amount of information but did enlighten her about one particular fact; Aiden was driving the car that killed his niece. No wonder he practically ran out the door after he told her. Aiden would no doubt have been wracked with guilt. Hayley wondered if Nicole and Aiden were still in contact, this was the type of tragedy which could tear a family apart.

Taking a sip of the coffee, Hayley made a face; it was bitter and rather terrible. Placing the cup back down, Hayley’s mind wandered back to her argument before Aiden left. She could feel a tick start up in her cheek, seemingly twitching in time with her rising anger. Aiden had left so abruptly that she hadn’t had a chance to set him straight about leaving her at home while he went off by himself. He had taken advantage of her shock over learning about Lena’s death and escaped out the door.

Hayley felt herself tense up as she remembered the way he spoke to her, warning her not to come any closer. There was only one other time he had spoken to her in such a cold and harsh tone. Memories came hurtling back to her completely unbidden….

1999 – Aiden’s Mother’s residence
“Danny, I really don’t want to meet you criminal friend,” Hayley whined, following behind her brother.

Danny chuckled. “Too bad Sis. Mom needs the rest and she ordered me to take you out of the house for the day. Bad luck kid.” Hayley scowled at his back when Danny continued, “Besides, Mom met Aiden and she likes him.”

Hayley rolled her eyes, knowing that the main reason her Mom approved was because Aiden had brought flowers. She wasn’t there when her Mom met Danny’s new friend but she knew that her Mom was a sucker for flowers and would like anyone who buttered her up with them.

“Besides Hayles, Aiden has a sister your age; she’s a year younger, so that’d make her….13? Anyway, you guys go off and play, Aiden and I have stuff to do.” Hayley stiffened at the ‘go off and play’ comment. “We’re not five Danny; we won’t go off and play.”

Danny shrugged, not listening as he climbed the stairs to his friend’s house, knocking on the wooden front door. Hayley relaxed against wall next to the front door, but soon stood up when the door was opened.

Danny began talking to the guy who opened the door but Hayley’s eyes were fixed on the face of the guy standing just inside the house. Her heart quickened at the sight of him. At 14 she had been aware of boys for a while and thought the man standing in front of her was very attractive. Suddenly nervous, she pulled at a thread on the sleeve of her jumper, darting furtive looks at him while Danny was droning on. The guy flicked his gaze over at her, and she felt herself blush furiously as she realized he had to most amazing green eyes she’d ever seen.

“Oh,” Danny began, waving a hand at Hayley, “This is my sister, Hayley. Hayley this is my criminal friend Aiden.” Danny’s smirk showed just how much he enjoyed teasing his little sister about her earlier remark.

A smile tugged at Aiden’s lips but he ignored the comment. “Nice to meet you Hayley. Come inside, my sister is excited to meet you.”

Hayley mumbled something and brushed past Aiden to get inside, feeling like she would die from embarrassment.

**2002 – Renley’s Diner**

“Nic, you going to eat the rest of those fries?” Hayley asked, already reaching towards her plate. Nicole Pearce smiled and waved her acceptance.

Hayley grinned and grabbed her plate, finishing off Nicole’s left over fries. “If I didn’t know better I’d warn you that those fries would go straight to your hips,” Nicole stated ruefully, secretly a little jealous that Hayley could eat seemingly whatever she wanted and never put on weight.

Hayley waved away her concern but grinned at her friend’s expression. “I know, most of my friend’s say they just look at food and put on weight. I believe I’m the only 17 year old who can eat what she wants. I think it’s all the long distance running I do for track at school.”

The girls ate in silence for a while before Hayley asked in a deceptively even voice, “Is Aiden picking us up tonight?”

Nicole narrowed her eyes at her friend, knowing exactly why she was asking. Hayley had a crush on Aiden since the first time she saw him. It started out as an innocent young girl crush, which Nicole
became aware of pretty quickly. As the years went on and Hayley spent more time at the Pearce household, that crush had developed into deeper feelings.

Nicole sympathized with her friend, Aiden was in his 20’s and didn’t seem to even notice Hayley beyond thinking of her as Danny’s little sister. Hayley was going away soon to College and Nicole would miss her, but she thought it might be best for her. Nicole knew that Aiden’s activities with Danny were not exactly above board, and she was worried her friend may be pulled into their world if she stayed here.

“Yup,” Nicole responded in answer to Hayley’s question, and couldn’t help but notice the broad smile on Hayley’s face.

Almost on cue Aiden sauntered into the restaurant, Hayley pushing the plate away immediately and straightening in her chair.

Aiden tilted his head at them, indicating he was ready to go. Never one for many words was Aiden. It was what Hayley found alluring. Aiden wasn’t like any guy she had ever met. He was self-assured, talked very little and seemed to scream danger. Even at her age Hayley recognized that it was the danger aspect which was most enticing. Aiden was a bad boy and that was hugely attractive to a 17 year old girl.

As both girls trailed outside after Aiden, Hayley stopped short besides a car when she saw a pretty blonde woman leaning against it. Hayley watched, dejected, as Aiden went up to the girl and kissed her, long and hard. A crushing sensation vibrated in her chest, watching as Aiden’s hands grabbed her hips.

Nicole came up and put her arm around Hayley, knowing how devastated she would feel. Nicole knew Aiden was seeing one of a few girls, and tried to shield Hayley from that knowledge. Hayley straightened her shoulders, fighting off tears, realizing that to Aiden, she would never be anyone but Danny’s little sister. At that moment, feeling like her heart was in pieces, she vowed to move on. She was off to College in a matter of weeks, where there were plenty of other guys. She would forget about Aiden Pearce.

2007 May – Danny’s Apartment

Staring at the front door, where white paint had peeled and she could see the chips flaking off, Hayley had to wonder if her brother could have chosen a less appealing place to live. Freshly out of prison, Danny was now settled into his new apartment. Being away at College for 5 years had changed Hayley; she just wondered whether a stint in prison had changed her brother. She knocked on the door, and heard the faint dulled footsteps of someone approaching. As the door swung open Hayley glimpsed her brother for a split second before he engulfed in a huge bear hug.

“I missed you Hayles,” Danny whispered into her shoulder. Hayley’s heart contracted when he said that, not realizing how much she had missed him.

Eventually he released her and ushered her into the apartment. Hayley looked around at the sparse furnishings before turning to face Danny. He looked thinner, and his eyes darted around the room, restless and nervous. He’d spent a year in prison for aggravated armed robbery and the time in prison had obviously had an impact on him.

“Take a seat,” Danny gestured towards a lounge. As Hayley approached it she couldn’t help but raise her eyebrows at the state of it.

Danny must have seen her expression as he rubbed his forehead in an embarrassed kind of way. “I
know, I found it on the curb. I couldn’t afford anything else.”

“It’s fine,” she assured him, and sat down.

Conversation between them was awkward and went in fits and starts. Hayley had been away for years, only returning to Chicago for a few weeks each Christmas period. She had also returned when their Mother had passed away, although both didn’t mention her, the wound was still too raw. Their conversation had begun to flow easier when a knock sounded on the door. Danny sprung up to get it while Hayley took a better look around the apartment. It was small, run-down, and had so little furniture, but Danny seemed happy, so in return so was she.

Hayley had ignored the voices at the door until they came closer. Hayley turned around, assuming it was Danny’s probation officer coming to check on him. Who she actually saw made her heart beat faster. Aiden Pearce stopped at the end of the hallway and stared at her.

Danny fidgeted nervously next to Aiden. “Uh, you remember Hayley right?”

The question was directed towards Aiden, and he nodded, but he hadn’t taken his eyes off of her since he entered the room. Hayley was completely unprepared for the flash of attraction that she saw in his unwavering gaze. Having seen that look on his face before albeit directed towards other women, it surprised her that it was now directed towards her.

In actual fact, Hayley was mostly unaware that in the 5 years, she had changed quite a bit. Her changes were not just physical. Hayley had been slightly awkward and shy as a teenager. Now, on the cusp of true adulthood, she held herself with more confidence and poise. Her face had matured; it no longer had a childlike quality to it. While no longer competing in long distance running events, she still kept up a routine that meant her body was fit and toned, and suited her more now than when she was a teenager. In fact, she had seemed to grow into her adult body quite well.

Hayley remembered the last time she had seen Aiden, kissing that girl against the car. While the memory no longer caused her grief, it served to remind her what an awkward crush she had on Aiden. Hayley had moved on with her life, thinking of Aiden only occasionally. Seeing him again, while Hayley no longer felt the insane longing of a school girl crush, she was surprised that she felt some pull of attraction as an adult.

Aiden nodded at her, eyes lingering on her a fraction too long. Danny began talking with Aiden, while Hayley sat on the couch, needing some time to compose herself. She wasn’t unaware of the looks Aiden was shooting her but she ignored him, unwilling to let herself be caught up in him again.

Aiden left, and after a few minutes so did Hayley. When she exited the apartment Aiden was waiting for her, lounging against her car. She hesitated briefly before walking up to him, wondering what he wanted. She didn’t have to wait long to find out when he asked her if she wanted to get a cup of coffee. She resisted at first, knowing deep down that getting involved with Aiden Pearce was not a good idea. The problem was he was so charming she found him difficult to resist, and had thus agreed.

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When he took her out to coffee he was polite, attentive and unbelievably charming. Hayley remained wary, if not aloof at times, confused and more than a little overwhelmed by his sudden attention. When Aiden asked if he could see her again, she agreed, albeit reluctantly, wondering why her lips formed the word yes.
After that evening, Aiden took her out a number of times, remaining the perfect gentleman, never making a move besides a polite kiss on the cheek when he dropped her home. Hayley found herself growing to like him; his personality was very different from what she remembered before she went to College. Although that wasn’t a complete surprise, as a teenager she saw Aiden through rose coloured glasses and never really paid much attention to his core personality traits. In the all the years she had known Aiden, it seemed like she was always on the periphery, she was involved in his life but she never really knew him.

Spending time with Aiden, Hayley was amazed to find that beyond that silent, stoic exterior was a person with a keen intellect, who was very perceptive and had a biting wit when it suited him. Aiden’s personality was complex and Hayley found herself increasingly intrigued with all the layers that melded together. Hayley saw Aiden as a confident and at times cocky person, who seemed to prefer his own company and was fiercely loyal to those he considered loved ones. Aiden was charming but never sleazy, seemingly sensing Hayley’s reticence about him.

However, Hayley certainly wasn’t blind to Aiden’s faults. Despite enjoying her time with Aiden, Hayley realized that she could never truly know every facet of who he was. If she were to liken it to anything, it would be that Aiden reminded her of a chameleon, taking on different personality traits depending on who he was with. This made her uneasy; was the man before her the real Aiden Pearce, or just some projection of who he thought she may like? He could also be broody at times, and liked control. Hayley didn’t have a lot of life experiences so chalked it up to one of Aiden’s idiosyncrasies. He was evasive about his activities during the day, but Hayley knew he was involved in criminal activity. It was this more than anything else which had Hayley holding back. She planned on joining the Army and didn’t want his criminal activities to taint this, even indirectly.

When Hayley and Danny’s Mother had passed away in a sudden car accident both of them were distraught. She had been such a constant presence in their lives, their rock. To have her taken away so suddenly had been a brutal blow to both of them. Hayley dealt with the loss and grief by working harder at school, taking on an extra part-time job and jogging. Danny, on the other hand, used his grief as an excuse to return to his criminal behaviour. He had been doing so well, he had a steady job and a girlfriend, but when their Mother died that all vanished. It was like their Mother was holding Danny in place, the force which stopped him from going down a path he would regret. As soon as she died, he seemed to no longer have any one to stop him from doing the stupid things he did as a youth. As soon as Hayley learnt her brother had been arrested, her first thought had been ‘thank god Mom wasn’t here to see this’. Now Hayley, having finished school, came home to be with her brother to get him on track, and as soon as she could, would join the Army.

Deep down Hayley knew that Aiden was the reason why she had delayed getting the papers to fill in and pass the physical which was required to join the Army. The more she spent time with him, the more confused she became, wanting more from him than his usual kiss goodnight. Aiden had made no move towards her, preferring to take things slow and get to know each other. While that had been an informative and eye-opening experience for Hayley, she wanted more. She knew Aiden felt more for her than just friendship. Aside from the way he had looked at her that first time in Danny’s apartment, she felt his attraction for her. His hand would linger on her back as he ushered her in the door, when he thought she was unaware he would allow his gaze to linger on certain places.

As the weeks wore on, Hayley became restless, not liking the inaction in her life, feeling like she was floundering. To put off her career to be with Aiden wasn’t part of her plans, despite knowing deep down that the time they had spent together had allowed her feelings for him to grow. She knew she loved him, she couldn’t help it. The crush she had on him turned into teenager adoration, and eventually as she got to know him, adult love.

The last week Aiden had been distracted when they went out. Hayley had tried to talk to Nicole
about what was happening, but she had a then 2 year old Jackson and an increasingly absent boyfriend to deal with, so she didn’t want to bother her. One night Aiden picked her up as usual, but he was quiet. This normally didn’t bother Hayley as she was never one for incessant chatting and liked that Aiden didn’t feel the need to fill the silences. However, he seemed…nervous, which was unlike him. Hayley attempted to garner what was wrong but he brushed off her concern.

They ate at a nice restaurant, but instead of returning her home, Aiden had asked if she would be okay if they went to his place for a while as he was waiting for a call. Hayley felt her heartbeat increase at that, despite being a little perturbed that his only reason for inviting her back was because he had ‘other business’. Hayley was surprised by Aiden’s apartment; it was neat, stylishly furnished with definite masculine undertones.

Aiden seemed completely relaxed, a contrast to Hayley’s increasingly nervous behaviour, stumbling over words, picking at pillow threads on the couch she sat on. Aiden poured them some wine, turned on the TV and sat next to her, closer than normal, placing his arm over the back of the chair. Hayley felt the warmth of his body next to hers, but he seemed to genuinely want to watch TV.

Aiden sent so many mixed signals so felt like she needed to be a linguist in order to interpret them. Hayley began to have second thoughts. Aiden had such a pull over her already, she wondered if sleeping with him would be a mistake and plunge her into territory she didn’t want to be in. Already she found herself trailing behind him, allowing him to be in control of where they went, when and for how long. If she wondered if this was normal behaviour, she had no one to truly ask. Making a decision, she scooted towards the end of the couch, intending to ask him to take her home. Instead, she felt his hand on her thigh and looked up to see him staring at her, those beautiful green eyes intense, and blazing with lust. Hayley’s heart seemed to jump into her throat as he leaned towards her slowly. Hayley felt like a deer stuck in headlights, she was frozen to the spot and didn’t move. It wasn’t that she was a virgin; she’d lost her virginity in College, and had since had a few boyfriends. It was the thought that if things progressed, it would never be the same. Sensing no resistance from her, Aiden closed the gap, his lips claiming hers in a kiss. Hayley noted that he had nice lips, but when she felt the push of his tongue, all other thoughts escaped her. As Aiden deepened the kiss, his tongue expertly entwined with hers, he grabbed her hips to pull her towards him. His hands began to roam over her back and Hayley suppressed a moan, savoring the way his hands felt on her body. Hayley pressed her own hands against his chest, liking the feel of muscle beneath his shirt.

Aiden certainly was a good kisser, knowing when to deepen the kiss, and using his tongue in such a skillful way. Hayley felt excitement in her veins when after a while he moved closer and leaned his body into hers, gently pushing her back onto the couch. Hayley complied, and when he leaned back she could see in the flickering of the TV that his eyes were an intense, almost electric green. Aiden didn’t move, seeking permission from her with his expression. Hayley gave it, reaching up for him. He bent over and let his warm hands slide under her shirt, thumbing circles on her hips. He leaned over and kissed her, before moving away to remove her shirt. Hayley suddenly felt exposed, lying on the couch beneath him in her bra and jeans. Aiden seemed to sense her indecision as he spoke for the first time since he started kissing her.

“You’re beautiful,” he breathed.

Hayley felt the sincerity in his words and reached for him again. He began kissing her, while also undoing her bra at the front. As soon as it was off, he trailed kisses down her neck, over her collarbone to take one of her nipples in his mouth. Hayley couldn’t help but groan, loving the feel of his tongue tracing circles around her nipple. So lost in the sensation, Hayley didn’t hear Aiden’s phone ring, nor react when the door to his apartment burst open a moment later.
Aiden jumped up from the couch, reacting far quicker than she thought he was capable of. She stared open mouthed as he deftly reached into a box under the coffee table and produced a gun. He wasn’t fast enough though, whoever had broken in came running towards Aiden, who didn’t have time to raise the gun before the intruder tackled him to the ground. Hayley heard Aiden grunt before watching him scuffle with the guy who was on top of him. Hayley gasped as the man drew his hand back and hit Aiden over the head with some kind of object.

“Aiden,” she heard herself scream.

The guy on top of him whipped his head up to stare in surprise at her, obviously not having noticed her presence before. His gaze flickered over her shoulder before returning to Aiden, who was struggling beneath him. Once more the guy hit Aiden over the head, but Hayley’s focus was split as she heard movement behind her. Another two guys were in the room and had switched the light on. One held up a gun at her and was leering at her exposed breasts. Hayley watched the guy nervously while reaching down to gather up her top from the floor in an attempt to cover herself.

She quickly looked around to see how Aiden was doing and was alarmed to see blood seeping from a wound just under his hairline. The guy was pulling Aiden to his feet, although Aiden was having trouble standing, as he was blinking rapidly and seemed groggy from the blows to his head. The guy eventually stood him up and held him at gunpoint. Aiden eyed the men behind the couch before his gaze shot to her and lingered there. She saw no fear, only anger, which worried her. She knew Aiden was impulsive and worried he might do something stupid.

“Nice bit of ass you’ve got for yourself Pearce,” the man behind her spoke to Aiden. “Did we interrupt something?”

Anger flared briefly in Aiden’s eyes before he shut it down. What he said next caused Hayley to turn cold.

“She’s just some slut I met tonight. Look guys, what’s all this about? I was about to get some but you’ve interrupted a nice evening.”

Hayley stared at Aiden in confusion, but he refused to look at her. A man behind her walked in front of the couch, ogling her in a way that made her feel uncomfortable.

“We can do business after if you want to share?” the intruder asked, thrusting his hips in an obscene gesture.

Aiden’s lip curled. “No I don’t want to share,” he sneered. “And before you get any ideas I won’t have you rape a girl in my apartment. You do that and our deal is off.” His voice was low, but full of menace.

They guy in front of her made a type of growling noise. “Shut the fuck up Andy, we ain’t here for that.” The one called Andy seemed about to argue but at a look from the guy who spoke he shut his mouth. Andy gave her one last smirking look before he wandered off.

“We have business to conclude. The Boss wants to know when you’ll have that money from the Risoni’s. He said you’re taking too long. He hired you to hack into their accounts and take their money. He suspects you’ve already done that but have stolen he money yourself. Is that true Pearce? Because if it is, you and this pretty little piece in front of you will pay.”

Aiden rubbed the blood off that had dropped down his forehead into his eye. He sighed. “I’ve told your boss that these things take time. The Risoni’s accounts are spread out and I have to get through their firewall, route the money to different accounts, and make sure he can’t trace it.”
Aiden turned around and stared at her, his voice cold, his eyes uncaring. “There’s no use threatening her. She’s just someone I intended to fuck.”

The more Aiden spoke about her, the more Hayley cringed and felt her cheeks redden in embarrassment and horror. Aiden spoke so coldly about her and to her that despite the situation she realized how stupid she had been. No one could be that good of an actor, she had seen his eyes, knew he spoke the truth.

The guy holding the gun near Aiden’s stomach considered him carefully, but Aiden started back insolently. The thug lifted his shoulders in a careless shrug before whipping his gun up to smack Aiden across his cheek. Aiden barely had time to react before the guy punched him in the stomach. Aiden doubled up and dropped to the floor gasping.

“That’s a bit of incentive from the Boss to get you to do your job a bit quicker. Get the job done Pearce, and quickly. Or you won’t like what the Boss will do.”

The thug who hit Aiden didn’t even look at her as he gestured for the guys behind him her to follow him out the door. Hayley sat on the couch, adrenaline coursing through her body, making her feel nauseous and dizzy. Aiden groaned, and Hayley quickly put her shirt back on and was on her knees beside him. She didn’t touch him; his earlier dismissal of her making her hesitate. Aiden uncurled himself and sat back, panting, blood covering his face. The look he gave her made Hayley’s head jerk back. It was so devoid of emotion, so unlike how he usually looked at her.

“Is what you said true?” Hayley asked in a whisper.

He stared at her for a long time. “No,” he said, but he didn’t sound at all convincing and Hayley felt her heart breaking all over again.

Biting her lip to keep from crying, Hayley stood up and collected her bra. She looked at Aiden again, who hadn’t moved from his position and made no move to stop her. Hayley wasn’t sure if Aiden meant what he said about her being just some girl he was going to sleep with, or whether he was acting to keep her safe from the men who had broken in. That was the whole point; she was never sure with Aiden and either way she was sick of guessing.

Hayley took a deep breath, fighting back tears at what she was about to say. “I think this was a mistake. I’ve never been sure of you Aiden, I feel like I follow you blindly without ever questioning why. I know now. It’s because I love you.” Hayley stopped at this juncture, watching as Aiden regarded her, his emotions shut down tight. This frustrated her, but she continued.

“But after tonight I can see that those feelings aren’t reciprocated. You’ll always be who you are, and damn it even that is what I love about you. But I don’t want to get caught up in whatever it is you’re doing. I don’t want this life for myself, I deserve better.”

Hayley felt a tear spill over but she didn’t wipe it away. Tonight had been a wake-up call for her; Aiden just wasn’t good for her. There were times in the last few months that she believed he cared for her, but she couldn’t figure out if it was real or not. Her love for Aiden was toxic, she allowed herself to be caught up in her feelings, knowing it wasn’t exactly healthy. The problem was, she genuinely liked him, she knew his faults, he could be controlling, moody, and impatient, but she also knew the good parts of him, his ability to listen without judgement, his intelligence and good looks, even his humour which was sarcastic and made her laugh. Most of all she knew that he presented excitement to her, and he was dangerous, not to her, but he had that aura about him. Her obsession with Aiden Pearce needed to stop. She needed to grow up and realise that Aiden could never be for her what she wanted. She knew that all along, and against her better judgement she had allowed him to ingratiate himself into her life. At that moment, she decided she would take control.
Hayley left Aiden’s apartment and the next day signed on for Basic Training. It took her away from Chicago, away from Aiden and away from all her hurt and anger, not just at Aiden, but at her Mom’s death, her brother’s irresponsibility, and her heartache. Aiden didn’t contact her again, but she did learn from her brother that he was arrested and charged with Computer fraud, Grand Larceny and possession of an illegal firearm not long after she left the state. He was sentenced to 15 months in Cook County Correctional Facility.

Present Day – Aiden’s Apartment Block

Hayley realized she had been staring off into space, reliving painful memories for so long, that her coffee was now ice cold. Hayley wondered why she even followed Aiden here after he stopped those thugs from hurting her. After all she had been through with him; it surprised her that she was here in his dining room. There was still that pull there, she figured there always would be. However, she was a vastly different person now, compared to the person who had gotten involved with Aiden years ago. The Army had given her the training and mental fortitude to withstand anything. Or so she told herself anyway. In all honesty, if she hadn’t come back to Chicago she would not have given Aiden Pearce a second thought. That thought pleased her. Hayley knew that she would never allow someone to totally consume her again. She may be forced to work with Aiden again but she would not allow him to feel like he could control her.

With that thought in mind, she grabbed her phone and headed out the door. Hayley may have been too shocked by Lena’s death to argue with Aiden about his ‘confinement order’, but that didn’t mean she would allow him to control her movements. She saw the sense in taking his lead while out in the field, but she would not sit there while Aiden was out and about doing his own thing. She had his phone, had the scrambler, so she saw no danger. She would go to her old apartment, pick up some clothes and be back. After all, she didn’t need his permission.
Chapter 4

The morning air was crisp, watery sunshine filtered through clouds that couldn’t decide whether a shower was imminent or not. It had rained overnight; the pavement was still wet making the cold feel like it froze you from the feet up. Before Hayley left the apartment block, she had orientated herself with the phone Aiden had provided her. Hayley stood inside the interior of the building and activated the scrambler, hoping Aiden knew what he was doing.

When ctOS has been rolled out around the city, Hayley had reservations about the technology. She had found the woman’s neutral and almost computerized voice in the ctOS advertising overtly creepy, wondering how people could trust a system that sounded like it was controlled by a Matrix movie rip-off. She also couldn’t help but wonder where all that collected information went, and most importantly who had access to it. The fact that Aiden, and most likely other hackers, had access to the system was worrying. Having seen how the technology could be used against citizens, Hayley wondered if ctOS was such a blessing that others believed it was.

Hayley had told Aiden that she had researched ctOS while she was overseas, but that was a long time ago. Now, she went through what she knew in her head, wondering if stepping outside would put her in more danger like Aiden had warned. Hayley knew that the Blume Corporation was responsible for creating ctOS. Hayley had already worked out that the fundamental weakness of the system was that it could be hacked. That meant the information that ctOS stored on each citizen could be accessed by unknown third parties. What Hayley found troubling was how the control centres continually gathered new information with the help of surveillance. Hayley wondered how ethical this so called surveillance was. In all reality, who was Blume? How did they come to have total control over a cities’ surveillance of citizens without some kind of corporate watchdog?

Aiden had told her that the various data servers and towers that were scattered around Chicago could be taken control of. This was what allowed him to access the information stored within the servers and also the mechanisms it controlled, so that he could use it for his own purposes. The fact that he could overhear her conversation in the prison and hack a car via his phone meant that he wasn’t exaggerating how deeply he was able to delve into the system. Although Blume liked to boast they were reducing the overall crime levels in Chicago, that obviously didn’t mean that the city was as protected as they liked to tell the public. And that was what Hayley had an issue with. What other information was Blume withholding, and how else did they use the data they collected from citizens?

Despite being apprehensive about the scrambler, Hayley decided to trust Aiden’s tech as she walked to a more populated area and hailed a cab. Hayley directed the driver to her apartment block, looking out of the window at the passing scenery with mixed feelings. Hayley noticed how integrated the ctOS technology was within the city. Besides the cameras, the transportation system, electric grids, traffic cams, bridges, cell towers and many more were all were controlled by ctOS. Hayley was in the midst of contemplating whether society’s modern day love of convenience made them vulnerable or not, when the driver pulled up to the curb of her building, jolting her out of her musings.

Hayley knew her apartment would be empty, despite having rented it out until recently. After Hayley’s Mother passed away she and her brother had received a large and totally unexpected life insurance payout. Both had been unaware that their Mother had even taken out a life insurance policy, and were even more stunned at the amount. Hayley, ever the sensible one, had used the money to pay off student loans and buy an investment property. Hayley knew that finding a rental property in Chicago was a huge hassle so decided to buy a modest apartment and rent it out. At the time of purchase she was home for a semester break and knew that it would be another two years before she finished school, so could rent it out knowing the rental income would come in handy. Hayley rented the apartment to a lovely young man named Randy who she liked immediately. His
“Hi, my name is Randy and yes I’m gay. With a name like that you’d have thought my parents were clairvoyant, I mean who names a child Randy and doesn’t expect said child to grow up and be randy?”

Hayley had laughed hilariously, especially when he proceeded to tell her all his best qualities which including cleanliness and an excellent taste in shoes. Since then Randy had become a friend, asking for her number so they could ‘chat’. While Hayley found this request amusing at first, Randy did ring for ‘chats’ and what had started out as a tenant relationship had bloomed into friendship so that they now talked frequently and when Hayley came back to Chicago for visits he let her stay in her apartment even though he was under no obligation to do so. While Hayley was overseas Randy met the love of his life and had moved in with him. Hayley didn’t mind as she knew that she planned on moving back in when she got home, so didn’t bother with getting a new tenant. She had arranged to move, with Randy’s help, the rest of her belongings out of storage and put them back in her apartment.

Getting out of the cab, Hayley glanced at the ctOS camera set strategically down the street, wondering again if the scrambler was working. Out of habit Hayley also scanned the area around the apartment for threats. Profiling was a skill that she had picked up later on in her career. Reading people successfully by learning, decoding, and utilizing nonverbal behaviour to predict human actions was vital in her line of work. Today, however, she was only attempting to identify threats. The main threat she identified was a man leaning on the building across the road. However, he was on the phone and didn’t even glance at her. The only other people she saw were women pushing prams and a few stray teenagers. Not that these people couldn’t be threats, but unlike the war zone she had come from, the city streets of America typically had less woman and children trying to hide AK-47’s from her.

Hayley was relieved to open up her apartment door and be around things that were familiar. While the furniture was covered in what seemed like a decade’s worth of dust, Hayley nonetheless felt herself relaxing for the first time since coming home. She had come straight from the airport to the prison, only to be whisked away by Aiden to stay at his place. The familiar sights around her made Hayley feel calmer. The pictures of her mother, the furnishings and knick-knacks, all of these things made Hayley feel grounded. She hadn’t been home for a long time and seeing that her apartment was there, unchanged and still feeling like her sanctuary, meant a lot to her.

Hayley grabbed a bag from her built-in wardrobe, and began packing essentials. Hayley had only had her carry-on bag when she boarded the plane to Illinois, having very few civvies while overseas, which she didn’t bother to pack. Her essentials like her phone, tablet computer etc, were all back at Aiden’s. What she needed now were clothes, toiletries and her weapons and holsters. Hayley knew if she were to work with Aiden then she would certainly need guns.

Hayley was taking her time in the apartment, lingering even though she had packed what she had needed. An unfamiliar ring tone startled her out of her concentration and it took her a moment to realise it was the phone Aiden had provided her. Sure enough Aiden’s name appeared on the screen as the caller. Hayley answered the phone but didn’t get a word out before Aiden spoke.

“You need to get out of there,” Aiden almost shouted, sounding breathless and agitated at the same time.

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Aiden had left the apartment quickly, the topic of Lena’s death still too raw for him to be able talk about, especially with Hayley staring at him with those sympathetic eyes. He hadn’t intended on
even bringing up Nicole or the kids to Hayley but he supposed the topic was unavoidable; they had been friends for a long time. What had had shocked him was Hayley’s lack of knowledge about the events. He had assumed, incorrectly, that Nicki had been in contact with Hayley and had told her about Lena’s death and his involvement. When Hayley had asked about Nicole, she had unknowingly been treading on his emotional ‘no-go zone’. Going by his reaction back there he wasn’t any closer to dealing with his role in Lena’s death then he was six months ago.

Aiden found himself scowling as he left the building, resenting Hayley’s intrusion into his life. Stuffing his hands into his pockets, he sighed, watching as the breath he let out swirled around his face, showing just how cold the morning was. Aiden attempted to compose himself as he walked down the street, his scrambler already on. He felt a slight twinge for his uncharitable thoughts about Hayley. He knew she didn’t actively seek him out, he had found her, not really giving her much choice but to follow him. Hayley’s arrival in Chicago had rattled him as much as he suspected his sudden appearance had unnerved her.

Bringing his phone out, Aiden looked around the neighborhood for a car. Older cars couldn’t be hacked as they didn’t have the hardware but newer vehicles came with electronic systems that his car hacking app could override. He had encountered a few cars that didn’t respond to his app, but they were the most recent models. Eventually he had cracked their codes, but it was becoming more work for him to keep up with Blume’s upgrades. It wasn’t just cars, but newer ATM’s, some security feeds etc. When he encountered an error he set to fixing it right away, hating not having access to even the smallest aspect of ctOS. The hard part was that Blume had numerous workers actively trying to prevent hackers from getting into the system. He was just one man, and wouldn’t admit it to anyone but was finding it tiring having to always be on top of ctOS upgrades. Before his Vigilante status and DedSec’s interference, he had been able to move freely within the system. While still able to keep ahead of the updates, he wondered if one day his skill and luck would run out.

One swipe of his finger and the car closest to him, a Lexus HS250h model, beeped open. Looking around quickly, he opened the door when he saw no one watching him and sat in the driver’s seat. Adjusting the rear-view mirror, Aiden’s mind drifted back to his recent disagreement with Hayley. He knew working with her would be a challenge. Aiden saw similarities in their character even if Hayley failed to; they were both were scarred individuals, battle-hardened and cynical.

Truth be told, Aiden felt like he needed some space today, to sort out a plan of attack but also needing some breathing room. He’d worked with people before, like T-Bone and Clara, but in essence he felt like they were working for him, rather than working cohesively as one entity. With Hayley it would be different, she’d want to know and be in on every aspect of his investigations. He wasn’t used to working as a team, but knew he’d have to make an exception. He also felt responsible for her safety; although he recognized that she could take care of herself. Aiden grunted quietly to himself as he drove towards his destination. Yesterday he certainly hadn’t expected to have Hayley working with him much less talking to him.

Aiden got out of the car in front of a tired looking weapons store. The building itself was more than 20 years old and didn’t look like it had undergone any repairs since its inception. Bars were welded strongly to the windows, the only part of the store which was maintained diligently. Aiden opened the door, tilting his head away from the blaringly loud electronic jingle that announced his arrival. His eyes adjusted to the dim lighting and immediately settled on the store’s owner, Jasper. Jasper was behind the counter serving one other customer, but his sharp eyes looked up. Noticing Aiden he nodded his head in greeting and went back to serving the customer. Aiden wound his way around the shelves and rows of guns until he got to the back of the store. He leaned up against the steel door that led back to Jasper’s storage room, waiting patiently for Jasper to finish his transaction.

As soon as Jasper had finished he walked the only customer in the store to the door, closed it and
locked it. He flipped the sign showing he’d ‘be back in 10 minutes or you can shoot your way in’. When Aiden had first seen the sign he had grunted, his version of being highly amused. Jasper made his way towards the back of the store where Aiden waited. Jasper was one of the few people who knew of Aiden’s identity and could be trusted not to go to the Police.

Jasper Hemmington was a 56 year old ex-Navy Seal who had received a dishonorable discharge after he beat his commanding officer unconscious after a botched raid that had got all but one of his buddies killed. Since that time Jasper had despised authority but loved guns and believed in his Second Amendment right to bear arms. His legitimate business was at the front, but his more shady dealings were held in his storage room which actually doubled as a second armory.

“Aiden,” Jasper drawled, hitching his pants up as he walked.

He nodded in reply, watching as Jasper’s 6’4 frame ambled around a stack of crates. Aiden thought that in his day Jasper would have been a formidable force. Now, a little past his prime, Jasper still carried his height well, the only concession to his age was his increasing mid-section, the result of too many beers. With Jasper’s furry silver streaked brown beard that reached to below his neckline, his broad shoulders and tendency to hunch in on himself, he looked just like an old grizzly bear.

Unlocking the steel door, Jasper ushered Aiden into his back room, closing it carefully behind him.

“What’cha need?” Jasper asked, already unlocking cabinets for Aiden to peruse.

Aiden gave Jasper the list he had prepared earlier, and wasn’t surprised when Jasper whistled in appreciation.

“Damn, you going to war bub?” Jasper asked, giving Aiden the nickname ‘bub’ he used for all his well-known customers.

“Something like that,” Aiden replied casually, unwilling to be drawn into reason for the amount and type of weapons he needed.

Jasper gave him a sharp look, sucking his teeth in contemplation before he shrugged. “Ain’t my business. I have some of what you need here. You’ll need to give me a few more days to acquire the higher end items.”

Aiden nodded, he expected as much. He’d asked for specific weapons and knew the larger items could only be procured from Jasper. Right now he knew Jasper had a few items that he needed in stock, like the Vector .45ACP, a sub-machine gun. He chose this weapon mainly because behind the main body of the gun there was a lightweight folding stock. He knew from experience that the folding stock helped aid the user with their aim. Not that he had trouble with his aim, but the extra balance helped when he wasn’t stationary but shooting moving targets. He also required a Bio-metric Assault Rifle, a U100, two AK-47 rifles, a few IED’s and a G106 grenade launcher. It was the grenade launcher and the Bio-metric Assault Rifle which Jasper would need to order.

Jasper opened a trunk, placed the weapons and ammo he had available in it, while Aiden handed over an inordinate amount of cash, which he didn’t even blink over. There were perks to being a hacker, and accessing bank accounts to siphon money was one of them.

Aiden hauled the trunk towards the front door, which Jasper hastened to open. “I’ll call when your order comes through,” Jasper told his departing back.

Aiden had barely gotten the trunk into the car when his phone sent him an alert. As soon as he saw what it was he cursed, loudly. The night before, Aiden had hacked into the ctOS feed and had run
facial recognition on the men who had attacked Hayley. As he had expected information about their identities was not forthcoming. Aiden wasn’t surprised; he knew that whoever was involved in the trafficking ring had access to ctOS.

Aiden suspected that the hacker had been able to hide their identities by inserting a malicious SQL injection into ctOS’s facial recognition software. Although ctOS had an impressive firewall and wasn’t exactly easy to hack into, those with the knowledge didn’t even need the advanced encryption software required to hack into the servers. Aiden suspected that the unknown hacker had used the improper coding of the facial recognition program to inject SQL commands to allow them to gain access to the data held within the database. The data, which in this case was information about Hayley’s attackers, had been deleted from the system. This made them impossible to trace without a name, address or social security number.

While ctOS ran smoothly most of the time, certain code was corrupted which created errors in the system. The most common error was pixilation in the facial recognition software. That was how he was able to utilize his scrambler, by using corrupt code to deliberately create his own pixilation so as not to be identified.

Aiden hated to admit it, but he admired the hacker’s skill. They obviously knew what they were doing as they used the corrupt code to attack the data-driven facial recognition application, which Aiden, without administrative capacity, was unable to pinpoint or fix. To maintain his own continual access to ctOS required a certain level of skill. He created his own programs which cleverly ran in conjunction with some of ctOS’s processes, making them impossible to trace as they weren’t subverting their systems, merely operating alongside of them. Something ctOS obviously didn’t know about otherwise his access would be cut off.

Aiden’s main connection to ctOS was via a root-kit, which was a malicious type of software designed to hide the existence of certain processes or programs from normal methods of detection and enable continued access to a program. Root-kit hacking was notoriously difficult to detect as, depending on the skill of the hacker, they were able to design the root-kit to subvert the software that tried find it. That was why he used it; it was fluent, adaptive and almost impossible to track.

However, despite being unable to track Hayley’s attackers movements, he was able to upload his own program that would essentially try to track them, but in a limited capacity. Aiden did stop and wonder why the hacker would delete their identities but allow facial recognition, but he was unable to come up with a plausible explanation. In any event, his own facial recognition program that he installed was far too small to try and track them throughout every camera in Chicago, so he had installed the program for specific areas, such as Palin Correctional Facility and Hayley’s apartment, where Aiden had a hunch they might visit. His hunch had proven correct; the men who attacked Hayley were at her apartment. However, the problem was, so was Hayley. He should have known she wouldn’t have sat at home while he went out. The only concession was that she had taken his phone, allowing him to see exactly where she was.

Aiden rang her immediately, frustration and worry fighting for the dominant emotion.

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“You need to get out of there,” Aiden almost shouted, sounding breathless and agitated at the same time. Hayley opened her mouth to respond but no sound came out.
“Hayley, did you hear me? You need to get out of there,” Aiden reiterated when she didn’t answer him the first time.

“What? Why?” Hayley asked, perplexed by Aiden’s tone. It didn’t escape her notice that he knew exactly where she was.
“Get out of your apartment. Now. The guys who tried to rough you up yesterday are just exiting a car across the street from your building. I’ll be there in five minutes but you need to hold them off until I get there. Do not let them take you Hayley.” Aiden’s voice was strained, and she could hear the screech of tyres.

“How many?” Hayley asked brusquely, not panicking, her training kicking in as she was calculating possible escape routes. Hayley reached down into her bag and clipped her weapon holster to her hip, then swung it around so that it was hidden under her jacket.

“Seven,” Aiden spoke grimly.

“Okay. There’s a parking garage under the building for residents only. I’m going in there; the building has a key card access so if they want to get in they’ll have to break in or use someone else’s key card,” Hayley stated, grabbing her bag and locking the door behind her.

“Do you have any weapons?” Aiden asked.

“Only a handgun, with one clip.”

“Good, you might need them. I'll meet you soon.” And with that Aiden hung up.

Hayley felt a surge of nervousness, wondering how she would react in a firefight again. The last one she had been in hadn’t ended well and going by her panic attack this morning, her PTSD wasn’t exactly under control. Hayley jogged down the stairs, unwilling to take the elevator and risk becoming trapped. Her floor was only a few stories up so it didn’t take her long to get downstairs. As she opened the door and walked across the foyer she glanced across at the double glass door at the entrance. She hesitated, and then stopped as she saw the guy who tried to attack her yesterday walk up to the door. His nose was bandaged where she’d broken it, while bruising and swelling made his whole face look puffy. When he noticed her, he grinned menacingly.

He attempted to open the door but of course, it didn’t budge. He needed a key card to gain access to the building. He gestured to someone behind him and another guy stepped in front of him and put key card attached to a small black box into the scanner. Hayley almost groaned out loud, realizing they had a portable programming device used to circumvent key card access. Not waiting to find out if it worked, Hayley swiped her card to the underground garage, hid her bag then made her way to an area with the best possible tactical advantage and hoped no civilians would enter if a fight erupted.

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As it so happened, Aiden wasn’t but five or so minutes from Hayley’s apartment so was able to get to her place, even within the speed limits. He parked a few meters down, grabbing his phone so that he could hack into ctOS’s cameras and look around. Despite Hayley being in danger, he wasn’t about to go in blind. Aiden saw himself as a consummate gambler, taking risks only when he was relatively sure of the outcome. A quick scan of the surrounding area showed that all but six of the men he had identified in the two cars had entered the building. One was standing near the car; he looked young and gave himself away by constantly reaching into his coat, probably to reassure himself his weapon was there.

Aiden decided to take him out first, assuming he would be the one to call for backup if he heard sounds of a fight. Aiden walked down the street towards the young guy, his head down, cap covering his face. He kept an eye on him through the nearest camera feed that was relayed to his phone. Aiden was able to walk within a few feet of the guy before he looked up, dismissed Aiden and looked back at the building across the road. It was the boy’s one and only mistake to think danger would come from in front of him. Aiden checked both ways and seeing no one close enough
to raise an alarm, grabbed the boy from behind and used the sleeper hold to disable him. Aiden was able to render the boy unconscious by placing an arm around his throat from behind, using his biceps and inner forearm to exert pressure on the carotid arteries on either side of the neck. Despite the boy struggling, Aiden was much stronger and had the boy unconscious and packed into his car in less than a minute.

Once that was dealt with he crossed the road to the building, accessing the two security cameras within the underground garage. He found Hayley, hunched behind a solid concrete pillar, gun out next to a van. Aiden tracked the movement of the other men, noticing how they fanned out to cover more ground to try and find her. When Aiden got to the building, a quick swipe of his phone had the override code sent to the building’s key code and he entered the foyer and then the garage. He pulled out the Vector he had stashed in his coat, unlatched the folding stock quietly and proceeded further into the garage. Aiden activated the jamming app on his phone, which would disable all communications inside the garage. Now, the men hunting Hayley would be unable to call for backup, which had been a concern for Aiden. Deliberate, calculating and never taking unnecessary risks, Aiden made sure that when he did engage an enemy he had every advantage. Now that his enemies were unable to call for backup he felt the odds were slanting much more in his favor.

If he moved carefully, he’d be able to take out a few before they noticed their numbers were being thinned. Using the cameras Aiden was able to track their movements far more efficiently than their random search for Hayley. Aiden silently approached his closest target, stopped behind the trunk of the car and waited. As soon as his target passed in front of the car Aiden got up, walked behind him grabbed his mouth to stop any sound from escaping and jabbed his gun hard into his temple. The guy immediately collapsed to the floor and Aiden pulled his unconscious body behind a car.

Aiden checked his phone again, moving the camera angle in the garage to see where the other men were. He gritted his teeth as he saw how close one of the men were getting to Hayley’s position. One guy was approaching the van she hid behind, and he deliberated, wondering whether to open fire and draw them away from her. He raised an eyebrow as he saw what she intended.

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Hayley could hear someone approaching from the opposite side of the van she hid behind. Whoever it was certainly wasn’t stealthy, his footsteps were loud as was his breathing. A quick check from behind the van showed that she could see the other men, but none were close to her position. As the guy rounded the van, Hayley crept around the opposite side so that she stood behind him. He must have sensed her there as he attempted to turn around, but Hayley was quicker. Bringing her foot up she kicked him hard in the back of the knee, and as he collapsed Hayley was on top of him almost immediately, smashing the butt of her gun into the back of his head before he could emit a sound. Placing her handgun back in its holster, she rolled the guy under the van, and then grabbed his gun. Hayley’s phone vibrated in her pocket, startling her. She grabbed it and read the message Aiden had sent to her phone.

I’m in the garage.

As far as communications went it was quick and to the point, much like Aiden himself. Hayley had no idea where he was nor how many men were in the garage. She was at the back of the lot, which presented some problems. While it had given her time for Aiden to arrive as backup, she had effectively trapped herself. The men would soon converge on her position.

Hayley swore quietly when she heard the parking garage open and a car come through. The last thing she needed was civilians involved. Still behind the van, she peeked around the corner, sucking in a breath when she saw the guy whose nose she had broken make his way towards her position.
Hayley hesitated, hearing a car park not two rows away from her position. She didn’t want to risk firing her weapon with an innocent person in the garage.

Hayley tried to sneak around the back of the van, but soon ducked as she saw another guy walking towards her, his eyes sweeping around the cars. She’d have to move, which would give away her position.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Hayley muttered to herself, squeezing the handle of her gun.

The men were closing in around her and she felt trapped. She didn’t know what to do; the last time she had made a decision in a situation like this people had died. Unwilling to see any more civilians become casualties, she straightened her shoulders, stood next to the van and made the decision to engage the men who were trying to get her in an attempt to draw them away from whoever was in the car. Hayley heard the slow approach of someone near the van. Her heart thundered in her ears as he crouched, waiting for them to come closer.

An instinct, honed by countless missions, warned her that something was amiss. She turned and stood up to see a guy emerge from behind the van, and realised too late that she had been so focused on what was in front of her she had neglected to concentrate on the danger behind her. The guy spread his legs and raised his gun, but Hayley, before she even realized she had made the conscious decision, felt her arm come up to shoot. Hayley watched as blood exploded from his shoulder and the guy was jerked back from the impact of the bullet.

Hayley didn’t even have time to process her next move before she felt an explosion of pain across the back of her head. She stumbled forward, but was able to stay on her feet despite the blow to her head. She turned around in time to see a fist coming at her head. Ducking instinctively, she moved under the punch that was thrown too wildly, the guy’s body bent too far forward to adjust his position. If the punch had connected the man would not have been off-balance, but since it didn’t it gave Hayley an opening to step closer to his body and lift her knee into his groin. The man grunted and hunched over, his hands automatically grabbing his groin. Hayley used the guy’s forward momentum to push his body down and ram her knee into his face. Only as the guy sprawled, groaning on the floor, did she realize it was the same guy whose nose she had broken yesterday. From the look of the amount of blood pouring out of his nose she had done more damage.

Hayley let out a choked sound that resembled a kind of slightly hysterical laugh. That guy certainly wasn’t having the best of times trying to subdue her. The back of her head ached fiercely but she ignored it as she heard the sound of a scream, and one gunshot which echoed loudly around the lot. Hayley flattened herself again the van, wishing she could see what was happening see but unwilling to poke her head out in case it was blown off.

“Hayley,” a voice hissed behind her, making her flinch.

Adrenaline pumping wildly in her system, Hayley raised her gun at whoever was behind her. Before she could even blink she found herself pushed roughly back against the van, a body leaning into hers, trapping her while her hand was held in a vice-like grip. She struggled frantically for a second, panic coursing through her veins. Someone was saying something to her but she couldn’t register what it was.

“Hayley,” Aiden said again, more sharply this time, his voice finally filtering through her panic stricken mind.

Hayley stopped struggling when she realized it was Aiden who was holding her. Limbs trembling, panic subsiding she suddenly became aware of how close they were. Aiden’s 6’2 frame towered over her smaller 5’5 height. With Aiden’s body pressing her hard up against the van, she could feel
the heat coming from his body. Hayley craned her neck to look into Aiden’s eyes, trying to gauge what he was thinking. He gave her a probing look that made her wonder what he saw on her face, before he loosened his grip on her hand, but he didn’t pull away completely. Hayley realized just how strong he was, he had overpowered her with such ease it was frightening. What was even more frightening to her was the way her body was responding to his close proximity.

Aiden finally eased his body away from hers; his gaze was steady as he looked her over. Hayley shuddered, trying to shake off recent events and also how she felt when Aiden pressed against her. She tried to convince herself that Aiden’s desirability was only due the heat of the battle; her senses were heightened and she wasn’t thinking clearly.

“Are you okay?” he asked. His posture was stiff; she could tell he was angry.

Hayley nodded that she was. She looked behind Aiden as a groan filtered through the air. The man she had shot struggled to sit up but didn’t make it and fell back with a groan. Aiden spared a quick look behind him, shrugged, clearly dismissed the guy as a threat, and took his phone out of his coat pocket. Hayley watched his frown deepen as he tapped on his phone. Without another word, he grabbed her hand and pulled her away from the collection of bodies around them.

“We have to leave, someone has already called the Police,” he informed her curtly.

Hayley could tell Aiden’s anger was close to the surface; his words were clipped when he spoke to her. He pulled on her hand sharply, but she tugged back, slipping her hand from his. He glanced back at her irritably.

“I can manage to walk by myself,” she declared, becoming increasingly annoyed at his taciturn demeanor. The back of her head where the guy hit her was throbbing painfully and she wasn’t in the mood for Aiden’s surliness.

He didn’t say anything but turned to walk towards the parking lot garage door. Hayley followed closely next to him, but asked him to wait while she veered off to grab the bag she had hidden. Hayley subtly felt the back of her skull so that Aiden couldn’t see. She wasn’t surprised when her fingers came away coated in blood from the wound on her head. It wasn’t a lot of blood but she needed to make sure she wasn’t concussed. Embarrassment and anger were creeping over her, making her feel worse than her pounding headache. Her embarrassment was mainly due to the fact that she felt like she had screwed up, like going to her apartment even though Aiden warned her not to. Her anger was at herself for thinking that Aiden had any right in telling her where she could go and when. Aiden’s obvious irritation just added to her already precarious mental state.

They exited the garage quickly, aware of shouts behind them as a few people had begun to converge into the garage, obviously having heard a commotion. Hayley followed Aiden until they reached a white Lexus. Hayley watched as Aiden shot a look down the street, his whole body tense, before he got into the car. Hayley followed his lead, strapping herself into the passenger seat while Aiden drove off. Aiden kept shooting worried glances in the rear-view mirror, which worried Hayley.

“Fucking hell,” Aiden burst out suddenly.

“What?” Hayley asked warily, wondering what else the day would throw at her.

“We have company. We’re being followed,” Aiden informed seemingly unperturbed by this development. Aiden seemed so calm that Hayley wondered if evading possible enemy vehicles was just a regular occurrence for him.
“Just another day with Aiden Pearce, shooting and vehicle evasion included,” Hayley thought rather acerbically.

Hayley tried to turn around in the seat to see who was following them when a sudden shattering of the back window’s glass stilled the question on her lips.

“Great, they’re shooting at us,” was Hayley’s surprisingly calm thought before the sound of bullets ricocheting off the car ripped into the silence that enveloped the car.
Despite firing his weapon, the smell of cordite didn’t hang in the air or stick to his clothing, despite what the movies informed people. To smell cordite you’d have be firing very old ammunition. When the alert was sent to his phone about Hayley’s whereabouts, Aiden’s already irritable mood turned downright sour. He slanted an aggravated look Hayley’s way as she sat stiffly in the passenger seat. The anger he felt was palpable; this was what happened when people didn’t listen to him. He held on to his anger at her, spurning the fear he felt when he saw that she was in danger. He didn’t like fear as it subsequently caused him to remember a previous encounter where he hadn’t been quick enough to save a person who had trusted him.

Irritably shrugging those thoughts away, he gripped the steering wheel, cursing under his breath and ducking instinctively as he heard the back window shatter. A quick look in the rear-view had him swerving the car so suddenly to miss the hail of bullets that sprayed in their direction that Hayley was caught unawares and he saw her slam into the side door. An SUV, black, decked out in illegal tint with an enormous and ostentatious grill loomed behind them. He added pressure to the accelerator wanting as much distance as possible between them and the monstrosity behind.

He flicked his gaze to the front of the road and let out a string of expletives as he saw another black SUV on the other side of the road approaching them. The appearance of the second SUV in front of him wasn’t a coincidence; they were attempting to box him in. He wouldn’t let that happen. He was as confident in his driving skills as he was with his skills as a hacker. The SUV in front accelerated quickly, but changed lanes so that now it was heading towards him in his lane. He felt a grin escape as exhilaration rose in his blood like bubbles in champagne. The other vehicle sped closer, the distance between their two cars closing rapidly.

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Hayley was quietly contemplating how agreeing to a partnership with Aiden Pearce may not have been the smartest move she had ever made. In the space of a little under 24 hours, she had committed more crimes than she had in her entire life. At the very least she was associating with a known and wanted criminal, had been an accessory to grand theft auto, twice now, as Hayley did not believe this was not a ‘borrowed’ vehicle, had shot someone in her own apartment building, and was now trying to escape in a car whilst being shot at.

Despite her PTSD, her training was so ingrained in her that she acted before she thought most of the time. Having been under heavy fire previously, the bullets, noise and chaos within the car didn’t necessarily spark a hysterical streak in her. What did was seeing Aiden’s almost maniacal grin while accelerating towards an oncoming SUV.

"You've lost your mind," Hayley shouted at Aiden when he showed no sign of slowing his speed.

"You have to trust me; I know what I'm doing."

Hayley’s lip curled at the word trust. She grabbed hold of the dashboard in front of her, wondering if she’d survive this encounter.

"You're going to get us killed!" Hayley screamed as Aiden hit the brakes, yanked the wheel to the right and expertly maneuvered the car into a small alley. The SUV sped past where they had been just moments ago, Hayley hearing the screech of tyres as their driver stamped on their breaks.

"Who the fuck is following us," Hayley yelled, seemingly unaware of how loud her voice was.
Aiden winced, and then shrugged. “Lower your voice. And I have no idea,” he answered, watching as the SUV that had been behind them turned the corner in pursuit.

The question Hayley asked was something he would very much like answered. He had disabled communications within the garage, the radius of the jamming app expanding to include not just the garage area but the surrounding building so that even if he had missed taking someone out, they would have been unable to make any calls. The SUV’s weren’t waiting outside of the building before he went in, he would have noticed them. So where did they come from and who was chasing them?

In an attempt to lose his pursuers, he took as many turns as he could, using his skill to take the corners at tight angles, never giving away his intention to turn until the last minute. The problem was whoever was behind the wheel of the SUV was almost as skilled as he was. He could hear the popping shots of the bullets at times, but apart from the first wave none as far as he could tell had hit them again.

Aiden chanced a glance at Hayley; she looked extremely pale and was gripping the edge of the dashboard like it was a lifeline. She hadn’t spoken to him again since asking him who was chasing them. He wondered if she was going into shock.

He knew he had the advantage as the lead driver, being able to veer in and out of lanes without warning, using the confusion of other traffic users to his advantage. As he drove further, he knew he was running out of backstreets and would soon be on open roads. He could double back, but despite his maneuvers, he still hadn’t managed to shake them, so decided that wasn’t the best option. He also wasn’t keen on using side streets as they tended to be more populated and he felt like he’d already used up his share of luck evading the few pedestrians he had encountered.

Once on open road, he could use his phone apps to try and tip the scales. If he couldn’t lose them the old fashioned way as a last resort he could always rupture a steam pipe. That always pretty much ended the chase for him. As he exited the last of the city block, he groaned as his phone picked up the Police scanner and echoed it over his speakers.

“911 calls report vehicle chase involving two black SUV’s and a white Lexus. Be advised gunshots were reported. Proceed with caution. Air is support available.”

“Just fucking great,” he heard Hayley mutter.

He pretty much agreed with her sentiment but couldn’t spare the concentration to say so. Aiden found himself accelerating sharply as the SUV, which had struggled in the backstreets, found its power in the open road. The added complication of a possible Police presence meant he’d have to deal with the SUV’s quickly if he had a hope of escaping an enormous Police chase if they found out the Vigilante was in the car, and they’d figure it out eventually.

Weaving in and out of traffic, the SUV’s stayed with him. It was a two lane stretch of road, but that didn’t stop him from using the other incoming lane to escape the SUV’s relentless pursuit. On a stretch of open road the SUV leveled with their car and veered towards them. Aiden did the only thing available to him, he jammed his foot onto the break just as the SUV swerved in a vicious maneuver that would have side-swiped them into the metal railing alongside the roadway. The back tyres screeched and horns blared as the vehicles behind him also slammed on their breaks. Despite the chaos behind him, no cars had crashed into his, mainly due to blind luck, as no car was even remotely close to him in his lane.
Hayley lurched forward in her seatbelt so hard she felt the jarring down her collarbone, into her chest and through her back. She groaned in pain, idly wondering if Aiden had a dual personality disorder and believed himself to be Aryton Senna.

Hayley glanced over at Aiden as she rubbed the sore part of her chest, already imagining the bruising that would accompany it later. Seeing the calm determination in his face didn’t exactly instill her with confidence, especially as she saw the small smirk on his face as he accelerated past the SUV which had only managed to stop with the help of the roadside railing. Anger began to work its way up from her gut. Did he think this was a joke or some kind of game?

As they sped past, despite seeing that the SUV had some front damage, Hayley turned around in her seat and was disappointed to witness it back up, into a car that partially blocking its way, and continue to follow them, albeit some ways behind now. Hayley heard sirens in the distance as Aiden turned off the road.

Aiden turned left abruptly, but Hayley was used to his sudden maneuvers by now so was ready and grabbed the handle above her door to steady herself from being slung against the car door again. They were approaching what looked like container yards, as she could see huge cranes, metal crates and parked semi-trailers. The area wasn’t densely populated and Hayley blew out a breath, feeling like this was a much better place to lose their pursuers without injuring anyone.

Aiden sped towards what looked like a back entrance to the containment yard; only the problem was the two metal security gates were closed. No one manned the concrete post in the middle to open the gates so Hayley shifted uncomfortably as Aiden showed no sign of slowing down. Wondering if he was planning just to plough through and hope for the best, Hayley sent a short prayer to a God she didn’t believe in that her death would be quick. She watched as Aiden palmed his phone, and without looking, going by touch alone, pressed on an app. To her utter amazement one of the gates began to slide open.

Hayley gaped at him, “How did you do that?”

Aiden’s amusement was obvious, especially when he indicated she ‘watch this’. Hayley looked back and was completely amazed when one of the SUV’s sped up in an attempt to get past the gate which was now closing behind them. It was obvious he wasn’t going to make it as the gate closed on the vehicle quickly. Hayley saw sparks as the gate shredded the paint on the side of the car while also crushing the SUV into the side of the concrete wall. Hayley couldn’t help but grin as she saw that the SUV was out of commission, the car effectively trapped between the wall and the gate. The gate retracted back and forth, slamming into the SUV door repeatedly, crumpling it further in an attempt to close. The other SUV continued their pursuit however, by slamming into the second gate, which was chain link unlike the other gate which was made of some heavy metal. The fence bowed under their speed and force so that they could continue their relentless pursuit.

Despite their situation, Hayley couldn’t help but admire Aiden’s skill as a driver. Having taken some basic defensive driving courses while in the Army, she knew the consummate skill it took to keep a car on the road while driving at above average speeds and avoiding real time dangers. Knowing that and seeing Aiden handle the car, she knew that he needed to have a firm grasp of race craft to even attempt some of the maneuvers she had witnessed. His situational awareness, reflexes and discipline had gotten them through the last quarter of an hour of a high stress situation with skill and a level head. Hayley saw that Aiden seemed to know almost instinctively how to execute a pass on another vehicle, how to use traffic to gain an advantage, and knew where and when to accelerate or slow down. Concentrating on all those processes required a driver to run their mental processes at a very
high level. It didn’t surprise Hayley that Aiden possessed those skills, especially the higher mental processing. Aiden was certainly of above average intelligence, but the way he reacted to situations showed how quickly he was able to process and act accordingly. She hadn’t once seen him hesitate or make a wrong move, despite the high stress situation.

Hayley watched as Aiden got his phone out of his pocket and scrolled through his phone by touch alone, never once looking down at the screen. Aiden drove them further into the container yards, the SUV still behind them. Bullets pinged against the car and Hayley ducked in her seat.

“Can you try and shoot them? There’s a trunk in the back full of weapons. We need to lose them before the cops catch up to us.”

Hayley hesitated, her conscience hammering away at her. “Hayley,” Aiden barked at her. “We don’t have time for you to sit and mull this over.”

She shot Aiden a frustrated glare before undoing her seat belt and clambering into the back seat. Wind whipped at her hair from the broken window as she unlocked the trunk. She gasped as she saw the amount of weapons available in the trunk.

She grabbed the AK-47, but noticed it wasn’t loaded. She quickly found the correct ammo, placed a round between the feed lips, and pressed it down until she heard it lock inside the magazine. Hayley put the selector to the middle so that the weapon was engaged in the fully automatic position for continual fire.

“Try and keep the car as still as possible,” Hayley said to Aiden over her shoulder.

Taking a deep breath she centered herself, lent into the car seat and leveled the gun out the window. She placed the wooden barrel against her shoulder and aimed. The men inside the SUV obviously had the same idea as Hayley, as she saw a man had leant outside of the passenger window and was aiming with his own AK-47 at the back of the car. She had one errant thought, which was ‘Must be a popular weapon for car chases’, before she attempted to withdraw from the window. Aiden must have seen the guy lean out as well as he yelled something Hayley didn’t hear before swerving to the right.

That maneuver saved her life as a hail of bullets from the SUV pounded through the window. Hayley, who had set herself up to shoot the car behind, had placed the weapon on the middle head rest. When she saw what was happening she was in the process of taking the weapon off the head rest and ducking for cover. She would not have been quick enough to avoid the bullets if Aiden hadn’t jerked the car at the exact moment he did. As it was Hayley felt a bullet pass unerringly close to her head.

Hayley felt herself tip sideways with no warning when Aiden jerked the car. Despite his evasive technique Hayley felt a searing pain at the bottom of her neck. Off-balance, she was unable to find any purchase to stop her fall so toppled back and to the side, hitting the back of her already sore head. She must have let out some kind of noise as Aiden was yelling at her, asking if she was okay. Her vision blurred briefly before she managed to awkwardly grab the seat in front of her and pull herself up. She rubbed the back of her head, her headache ramping up a notch from a dull ache to a fierce throb.

“I’m fine,” she croaked, not exactly feeling fine, but she’d worry about that later.

Anger coiled in her like a spring, if she hadn’t been killed overseas in a war zone she certainly wouldn’t allow it to happen while she was home. Not taking the time to aim, she fired first at the front windows, but watched as bullets pinged harmlessly. They’d obviously outfitted the windows
with bullet proof glass. Hayley next shot at the hood of the car to hopefully hit the engine or another vital component. In a last ditch effort, she used the last burst of ammo to shoot at the tyres.

She expected the recoil and lent into the barrel to minimize damage and maintain control. She had the satisfaction of watching as the bullets hit the tyre. Hayley knew that it was exceptionally difficult, even at close range to hit a tyre, and even harder to puncture it. She had no idea if she’d have any success, but thought that placing the weapon on fully automatic would help her chances of hitting anything. She also only attempted this because she knew they weren’t in a populated area. She would not have chanced it otherwise, knowing the bullets could ricochet off the car and endanger members of the public.

The SUV swerved dramatically, the driver obviously having trouble maintaining his present course and speed while his front tyre was deflating. The rim, unable to support the weight of the vehicle due to the deflated tyre, began to buckle. Smoke billowed up from the hood, and Hayley watched as the car swerved uncontrollably. The whole car suddenly shuddered, clipped something and in a spectacular display of crumpling metal, ploughed into a metal container. The screeching of metal was horrendous and the sound the car made as it hit the container was something Hayley would never forget.

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Aiden’s heart was pounding furiously, a new emotion sweeping over him. One that he didn’t particularly like, helplessness. After Hayley had climbed into the back and readied her weapon, he had a few seconds to watch in mounting horror as the guy in the car behind leant out of the passenger window and opened fire. He had quickly swerved to the right, but when she tumbled backwards he didn’t know if it was because she had been hurt. Dread lodged in his throat, making his voice hoarse as he shouted at her, hoping she wasn’t injured or worse. When she had responded to his shouting, the relief that washed over him was tangible.

The way she had efficiently picked herself back up and fired at the SUV had impressed him. There were so many variables in a fire fight and training was critical for survival. He had put his faith in Hayley, and in the quality of her training to get the job done. He knew that giving someone a gun and a few rounds of ammunition wouldn’t automatically make them proficient with it. He had never seen her shoot before but the way Hayley had handled herself was a testament to her skill and training. Despite being impressed that she was able to actually hit a moving target, something that was incredibly difficult despite what TV shows portrayed, Hayley had shown that she had the ability to think and react quickly in rapidly changing situations and was able to maintain a cool head despite the pandemonium that had erupted around them.

Right now Hayley seemed to be fixated on the smoking ruins of the car. She hadn’t turned around, but sat on her knees, gun carelessly discarded next to her as the wind caught her hair to whip it wildly around.

“Hayley,” he called out, wondering if she was okay as she had yet to turn around. He was watching her in the rear-view mirror as a shudder went through her frame when he said her name.

Her shoulders slumped visibly, but she didn’t respond to him. Finally, she turned around staring bleakly out of the side window. Concentrating on the jumble of containers which made him feel like he was in a maze, he used his phone to bring up GPS and orientate himself. His gaze flicked back up to the mirror and what he saw worried him; Hayley sat slumped in the back seat, the front of her shirt bloodied near her neck. That wasn’t what worried him the most, it was her expression. She was staring out of the window, her face showing such raw anguish and suffering that she seemed unaware of anything but her own inner turmoil.
In spite of his concern for Hayley, he needed to get out of the container yard and into another vehicle. He could hear sirens so, with the help of the GPS, found the nearest exit. The container yard was surrounded by eight foot high fences, and at set places around the perimeter control stations operated sliding fenced door for entry and exit. He had no problem hacking the control centre and opening the fence, much to the surprise of the worker operating the controls. Aiden sped past the worker, managing a chuckle as he saw the white safety hard hat he wore fall off as his head when he jerked it up too quickly, open-mouthed as he watched the Lexus speed past.

A few streets away Aiden breathed a sigh of relief, as hearing no tell-tale sirens following him he felt it was safe enough to ‘borrow’ another car. He pulled over in a quiet side street, turned off the ignition and got out. He walked towards the car back door but hesitated opening the handle. Hayley’s eyes were downcast and she hadn’t reacted to the vehicle stopping. He didn’t want to startle her but time was of the essence, and he still needed to get to the trunk of weapons.

As soon as Hayley saw the SUV explode and smelt the familiar acrid scent of smoke, and slew of images crossed her mind. The images came so hard and fast she was unable to concentrate on anything but them. It was like a movie on continual replay and she didn’t have the remote to stop it. All she saw before her was blood, smoke, sand and metal, but beyond that she felt like she could hear the resounding screams of the injured and even the smell her own burning flesh. Aiden’s voice was like an anchor as he said her name, the images flickering before her until they died away. She had shuddered in resignation; this was not the first time this had happened.

Suddenly she felt every ache in her body, so turned around warily to lay her head against the headrest. The cold air of the shattered back window helped, it lashed around her, reminding her of where she was. Not like that was much better than where her mind went but at least she wasn’t critically wounded now. She watched as the containers whipped past her, the metal combining to create a grotesque blob of an unyielding wall that made panic try to bubble its way to the surface. She briefly closed her eyes, reciting the mantra the Psychiatrist had taught her.

“Ground yourself, find a focal point and stick with it. You are in control.”

Hayley repeated that to herself over and over again in an attempt to gain back some semblance of normalcy. She was vaguely aware of Aiden driving but she was so focused on her inner thoughts that she didn’t even notice that he had opened the door. His touch startled her; she had no idea how wild her eyes looked. She saw Aiden retract his hand and jerk his head back as she stared at him without comprehension. Aiden stepped warily back, but Hayley blinked a few times as she came back to herself. All of a sudden, realizing the car was stationary Hayley lurched out of the seat, wavered a few paces and promptly threw up.

Hayley was aware of Aiden’s hovering presence behind her as she fell to her knees on the cool grass. She groaned and wiped the back of her hand over her mouth, gagging a little as she saw vomit on her hand. Aiden squatted a little behind her, not touching her or saying anything, his silence a soothing balm compared to the destruction of a few minutes ago.

Finally he spoke. “Hayley are you okay?” he asked hesitantly. “Can I come closer?”

Aiden was only now beginning to understand what was going on with Hayley. The look on her face when he opened the door before clued him in. She had been reliving some traumatic moment and his unknown intrusion had almost caused her to react violently. He should have realized sooner, the fearful way she reacted back at the garage when he had touched her unawares practically screamed
PTSD, but he’d been too distracted at the time to properly take note.

Sitting here in the open was making him nervous; the car had bullet holes in it and Hayley’s shirt was covered in blood. Someone would come along eventually. He wouldn’t chance touching her before she acknowledged his presence or allowed it. He knew enough about PTSD to know that when an episode occurred the person was likely to react irrationally and sometimes aggressively.

Finally, Hayley nodded at his earlier question so he got up cautiously, walked around to stand in front of her, then slowly dropped down to his haunches. Aiden warily looked her over but her eyes had lost that haunted look, and she seemed calmer.

“You’re bleeding. Can I check?” he asked as quietly as he could, so as not to startle her.

She turned her head to look at him and blinked owlishly, surprise flitting across her face at his statement. Hayley suddenly looked so vulnerable he felt his insides clench at the thought of her experiencing such a level of trauma that she had developed PTSD. She inclined her head so he inched closer. His movements were unhurried as he pulled down the neck of her shirt to expose the wound. The bullet had only grazed the skin at the junction of her neck, slicing through the muscle just above her collarbone. It was bleeding sluggishly and she would require stitches but otherwise she seemed okay.

“Just sit here a minute, I’ll be back,” Aiden informed her.

He walked back to the Lexus, pulled Hayley’s bag and the trunk full of weapons out of the car and placed it on the sidewalk then walked to the car across the street. Getting out his phone, he hacked the car, walked back to the bag and trunk, hefted them into the back seat and turned around to get Hayley. He hesitated as he stared back at the Lexus. Normally, he would have just left it for the cops to find; not minding that they’d dust it for prints. Hayley, however, had been in the car and her fingerprints were all over it. When they discovered she was involved, they’d put out an APB and as soon as she tried to board a plane the authorities would take her in for questioning.

Making a decision, one he didn’t intend to inform Hayley about, he searched the car and found a shirt in the trunk. He stuffed the shirt into the petrol valve then went back over to Hayley and offered her his hand to pull her up, much like he had done yesterday. She gave him an inscrutable look before allowing him to pull her up. He guided her towards the idling car, watched as she strapped herself in, and went back to the Lexus. He pulled a lighter out of his pocket, lit the shirt, jogged over to the car, got in and accelerated quickly away.

“I’ll warn you now; there’ll be an explosion soon. I’ve rigged the Lexus so that the Police can’t find your fingerprints or any other incriminating evidence.”

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Hayley turned in her seat to stare at him before the sound of an explosion rippled around them. Hayley flinched but the adrenaline had left her body, and she just didn’t have the energy to argue so sat back and stared out the window without really looking, wondering why she was having such issue with Aiden and what seemed like a dual personality. The tender way he had spoken to her back there was at odds with his tendency for violence.

They hadn’t spoken during the entire trip back to Aiden’s apartment. A coiling tension arose between them though, both aware of it but neither commenting. Both had their reasons but by unspoken agreement didn’t say anything. Just like the night before Aiden parked a few blocks from his apartment, but this time in the middle of a basketball court.
As Hayley got out the car a sudden thought occurred to her. “What about the car from last night, won’t the cops get my prints?”

Aiden’s smug expression made her pause. “The cars would have been stripped for parts long before the cops arrived,” he indicated the car they had just got out of, “as will this one be.”

Hayley stared at Aiden, but bit the inside of her lip to keep from saying anything until they got back into the apartment. She could see the necessity of it, just, but was morally opposed to Aiden’s complete disregard for how this act would be someone else’s major inconvenience. With her bag of belongings and Aiden lugging the trunk full of weapons, they made their way to his upstairs apartment.

As soon as they were inside his top-floor apartment, Aiden directed her towards the dining chair, while heading off to get his first aid kit. When he returned he placed the kit on the table and Hayley eyed the contents as he opened it.

One brown rose appreciatively at the gear and she asked, “Why do you have a Hospital Grade medi-kit?”

He shot her an amused look before rummaging in the container. “Because I’ve had need of its contents a few times.”

That effectively silenced her as she appraised him. Hayley wondered how often he was injured and whether he did his own suturing.

“Shit,” he said under his breath, “I’ve run out of anesthetic.”

Hayley waved her hand, “It’s not the biggest deal. These won’t be my first set of stitches without something to dumb it first.”

Aiden eyes found hers, and he stared at her in a penetrating way. It felt like he measured her words against certain parts of her that only he seemed to see. Hayley looked uncomfortably away; the feeling that Aiden was inside her barriers knowing exactly what she was thinking was unnerving.

Aiden stood in front of her, tapping the antiseptic wipes until Hayley looked up at him expectantly. His head was cocked to the side and the barest hint of a smile played around his lips.

“I guess I’ll have to settle for invisible sutures,” she commented dryly as he made no move towards her.

He blew out a breath and stared straight at her, his green eyes challenging. “I can’t reach your wound unless you take your shirt off,” he informed her in a mild tone.

Hayley choked on a laugh that had been bubbling up when she realized the implications of what he said. Hayley had absolutely no intention of taking off her shirt, but not for the reasons Aiden probably thought. Hayley had her own reasons for refusing to let Aiden see her without a shirt, and none of them had to do with the false modesty of him seeing her with her shirt off years ago.

“Just cut the shirt, I’ll have to throw it away anyway,” she said, trying for nonchalance but not quite sure she pulled it off.

Aiden just nodded like her refusal wasn’t strange, besides he wasn’t looking at her anyway; he was tearing open the package of antiseptic wipes. Aiden retrieved some scissors from the first aid kit and carefully cut away the fabric near her neck. Next, he used the antiseptic wipes to clear any debris and dried blood from the wound. He put the stained wet wipes down and picked up the suture needle and threaded it expertly. It obviously wasn’t his first time threading a needle and again Hayley wondered
how often he had to patch himself up. Aiden eyed her warily, needle hovering near her shoulder. Hayley rolled her eyes, her various aches and pains making her short-tempered.

“Just get on with it Pearce, I’m not a balloon, piercing me with that needle won’t make me deflate.”

Hayley saw Aiden trying to hide a smile as he leant over to complete the stitching. Hayley endured the stitching of her flesh without a sound. She only needed five stitches, which Aiden completed quickly and efficiently. If anything it was Aiden’s warm fingers on her skin which made her want to move away; it made her remember the night they’d almost slept together.

As soon as he was finished, Aiden placed a small adhesive bandage on top of the stitching. Hayley watched as Aiden packed up the contents, while she sat staring at the man who had the most distorted sense of morality and was so consistently inconsistent it was infuriating. His actions today were a mix of contradictions which made it impossible to determine who he truly was. He’d shown himself to be reckless and egotistical as well as demonstrate a casual disregard for the general public’s safety. On the other hand he showed her that he could be fearless, cool-headed, calculating and stunningly lethal.

“Did you want to talk about what happened back there?” Aiden asked suddenly. “Is there something I should know?”

Hayley had been so busy mulling over Aiden’s dual personalities when he asked a question. It took her a few seconds to process what he meant. Hayley knew her behaviour would not go unnoticed by someone as perceptive as Aiden. She recognised that she had a bit of a breakdown after she shot the SUV, causing it to swerve into a container at high speed, most likely causing the passengers to be injured if not worse. Her PTSD was something she had not expected to be truly tested while at home.

Despite that, Hayley avoided looking at Aiden, although she could feel his gaze, like a bolt of lightning, ready to sear through her. She knew firsthand that Aiden’s gaze could be so intense at times it could transfix you, make you feel so caught up that you’d blurt out a confession even when you had no intention of doing so. Hayley had no intention of talking to anyone about her recent experiences, especially not Aiden. Instead, she used her own tactics to try to subvert him.

Slowly raising her head, she finally did look him in the eyes. “No,” she responded quietly, “but is there something I should know about you?”

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The alarm Aiden felt was instantaneous, but he quickly shut the emotion down, as he locked eyes with her. Aiden knew Hayley was referring to his involvement in Lena’s death. She must have looked up on the Internet and found out what happened. Despite the anger he felt uncurling itself in his gut, making his veins fizzle like a dropped soda bottle, he didn’t respond, didn’t move a muscle, just continued to stare at her. Never before had Aiden experienced his own plays thrown back at him so effectively. Hayley had used reverse psychology on him so efficiently he almost didn’t notice it at first. She had deflected her own discomfort that his questions had caused, and had insinuated she wasn’t the only one who had things they’d rather remain hidden.

Despite feeling an initial surge of irritation and feeling like he’d been outmaneuvered, he also felt a surge of excitement. Very few people had the ability to keep up with him physically let alone verbally, so much so that he found encounters with most people mundane and tedious. That was probably why he sought out people like T-Bone and Jordi, characters a little off centre.

He had read up on psychology manipulation, and employed intimidation tactics, honed in on
personality weaknesses, and used coercion to get what he wanted. He could see that Hayley was just as clued in, if not more so, to psychological strategies. So he didn’t answer her, preferring to leave their psychological dance for another time, despite the small smile he saw on her face as he walked away. She hadn’t won; he would just take the time to decide his next move.

As Aiden walked away Hayley probed the back of her head. Aiden stopped mid-stride as he saw the gash.

“Were you going to mention this?” Aiden asked behind her, which made Hayley start guiltily.

When Hayley didn’t answer he grumbled and began to unpack the first aid kit again. He dabbed at her scalp with antiseptic and she hissed. The gash was superficial and had already stared to clot.

“You shouldn’t have gone out today,” Aiden announced as he continued to work behind her.

Hayley stiffened before turning around slightly so that she could look Aiden in the eye and respond. He expected a biting, sarcastic remark, but Hayley surprised him with her response.

“Aiden, I didn’t get to say this before you walked out this morning, but I’ll say it now. You may be used to giving orders and being in control but that doesn’t mean that you can tell me what to do. I may have been okay in the past with you telling me what to do, where, when or how, but things have changed. I have changed. I might be a guest in your home but unless my life is in immediate danger I will not have someone impose their will on me. I will take your lead in the field, as I think I’ve proven today. If there was a reason for you not wanting me to go out, then you should have said so.”

Hayley paused, eyeing him but he made sure his normally blank expression was in place, not giving her an inkling of what he was thinking.

Hayley continued, “However, I accept that my decision to go out today had its consequences, which involved you, and for that I’m sorry. I’m in your debt for saving my life. We both probably don’t agree with the choices each other made today. We’ve agreed to work together despite our past. I don’t expect trust is something that we’ll ever achieve between us, but you have to know that my independence is something I will hold onto fiercely. We need to work as a team to help Danny and then you’ll never see me again. Is that something you can cope with? Because if it isn’t you need to tell me right now and we go our separate ways.”

Aiden could tell Hayley was serious; she would walk out if he disagreed. It wasn’t an ultimatum, something he wouldn’t take kindly to, she was just stating a fact. He should say no, let her walk away, because people who he tried to help only ever saw pain and violence while they were with him. Despite knowing that he couldn’t let her go, if nothing else she presented a challenge to him, one he hadn’t had in a really long time. It was a petty reason to keep her close, and he wasn’t willing to examine the other feelings floating around in regards to her so he clung to his original reasons.

Aiden crossed his arms and seemed to contemplate what she had said. Finally he looked at her, and smiled, but it was more a baring of his teeth while he leaned down to place a hand on either side of the chair she was sitting on. His face was a few inches away from her, so close in fact she could see the individual stubble on his cheeks.

“Today only happened because you didn’t listen to me. You can keep your independence as long as it doesn’t intrude on my plans. I’ve changed too Hayley, so don’t think you can even pretend to understand my motivations. Or me for that matter. So let’s try and work with each other instead of against each other.”
Aiden paused and leaned in even closer. He could tell Hayley tried hard not to flinch away or move back in the chair. He was invading her personal space, trying to make her uncomfortable. Going by her stiff posture she was certainly uncomfortable, but not because she was afraid of him. Her breath quickened and he could see the way her pupils flared when he lent in close.

“The trust aspect we can work on. You need me Hayley, and I could use your help. So I guess we’re stuck with each other for a while.”

Aiden abruptly pulled away from her. “Get some rest. We’ll try and figure out who followed us in the SUV later,” he spoke over his shoulder as walked away and sat down at his computer hub.

Hayley said nothing, but he heard her get up and leave the room. Aiden was glad his back was turned, he wasn’t unaffected by their close proximity a moment ago. He swallowed, not liking how his body responded to Hayley. His intentions had been to unnerve her, but he felt like he’d only succeeded in doing that to himself. He couldn’t afford to get involved with her, he’d tried that once and even back then he’d endangered her. He rolled his shoulders to release the sudden tension he felt in them.

He had one steadfast rule; keep people at a distance and never get emotionally involved. The problem was, he had a history with Hayley that always seemed to bind them together. The first time Hayley had returned after years away at College, was the first time he had even noticed her as anything other than Danny’s little sister. The attraction he felt back then was still there today, if not stronger. She had, rightly, walked away from him years ago, instinctively knowing he could never give her what she needed. Today was no different; she deserved a life without the constant threat of danger his life presented. He’d help get her brother out of Prison and she’d be out of his life, which was better for the both of them.
Chapter 6

The humming of the computers combined with the monotonous ticking of the nearby wall clock finally filtered through Aiden’s awareness. He’d been staring at the computer screen for the last few minutes trying to decide where to start his search. He had a hunch that whoever was chasing them in the SUV was not necessarily connected with who was after Hayley. The SUV came to the scene later, after they had exited the apartment. If whoever was after Hayley was working together with the men in the SUV, they would have been sitting outside waiting for her to emerge from the building. The fact that they were able to get into a vehicle and escape meant that someone had alerted them to their presence after the other men had arrived.

Tapping at the side of the keyboard, Aiden asked himself the most pertinent question; were they after him or Hayley? Both were a possibility. With little effort he hacked into the Motor Vehicle database and put in the licence plates he had memorized from both vehicles. He got a hit on the vehicles, owned by the same man. Aiden scanned over the information, finding out the typical information such as name, Steven MacAuley, age was 26, born in Chicago, and his address. That was all Aiden needed to essentially cyber-stalk the young man.

In no time at all he had Steven’s social security number, bank accounts, employment details, and even social network accounts. Combing through the data, Aiden found frustratingly little that could tie Steven to anyone who could be after him. Steven had no connection to Blume, ctOS, Chicago South Club or the Viceroy’s. He had other enemies but those were the ones with the resources to truly pose a threat.

He blew out a frustrated breath and searched deeper for any relevant information. Despite a few speeding tickets, Steven didn’t have a record. Interestingly, Steven reported that the two SUV’s that he used for business purposes had been stolen 3 weeks ago. The Police had not found the vehicles. Aiden grunted in amusement, the Police would certainly find them now, although Steven probably wouldn’t be too thrilled about the state they were in.

It was by chance that Aiden even stumbled onto information which he felt was applicable to his search. Having combed through records of Steven’s life, he determined that Steven was not a career criminal and could not have been behind the SUV chase. He then began looking into Steven’s family, not because he believed that he’d find anything, but because he hit a frustrating dead end with Steven. As it so happened, Aiden found out an interesting fact about Steven; he was related to Andrew MacAuley, a cousin, who worked for a certain Club which set alarms bells ringing for Aiden.

Steven’s cousin, Andrew, worked for an establishment called ‘Club Serenity’. For all intents and purposes the Club looked legit; it was a well-known nightclub that catered to higher end clientele. It had a few issues with law enforcement which included fines in regard to alcohol and drug infringements, such as selling alcohol to minors, patrons being in possession of drugs etc. What sparked Aiden’s interest was who owned Club Serenity.

Aiden had a habit of getting involved with the mob bosses of Chicago, who weren’t necessarily long for this earth once he’d become acquainted with them. Dermot ‘Lucky’ Quinn had been the leader of the Chicago South Club until his death, which Aiden was responsible for. Well his phone was responsible for stopping Quinn’s pacemaker, but the end result was the same. Quinn’s successor, his son Niall, had also met an untimely demise during a train accident that Aiden had instigated using similar tech on his phone. As far as Aiden knew, no one had connected Niall’s death to him. Niall’s son, Michael, was now heir to the Chicago South Club throne and owner of Club Serenity.
Aiden made it his business to find out a little more about Michael Quinn. Aiden knew that Michael’s businesses weren’t exactly legitimate. As well as Club Serenity, Michael also owned a number of other establishments around Chicago, including a small Casino, a few restaurants and factories. Michael was just as smart as hiding his nefarious business assets as his father and grandfather had been. Michael, despite being charged with a number of different offenses, had never served time so he was most likely paying someone within the Police department.

Michael had not had the reigns to his predecessor’s empire for long, so his impact was small so far. Nonetheless, Aiden had kept a close watch on Michael for various reasons. He had no idea whether Michael knew Aiden had been involved in his Father’s death, but it was well known that the Vigilante was responsible for his grandfather’s murder. Nothing had reached his ears about Michael wanting revenge for his family’s murders but he thought it best to remain vigilant.

Aiden had done the math and thought it unlikely that Michael was involved in the human trafficking ring. The operation had been carefully set up for months, and Michael had only just started to take over the family business when the trafficking ring was up and running. Also, It wasn’t well known that Club Serenity was owned by the Quinn family. They owned it under a dummy corporation, and those who frequented the club did so because of the illegal activities they offered. Prostitution, drugs and illegal gambling were the main draws of the establishment. Not many people knew this, which was why only higher end clientele frequented the club.

Aiden found this out when he spent time researching Michael, his holdings and financials. Aiden didn’t like an unknown component, which was what Michael was. He had heard little of the youngest line in the Quinn family. It had taken time but eventually Aiden felt like he knew who Michael was, and just like his Father and Grandfather, sociopath was a word he’d use to describe the youngest Quinn. Aiden had collected quite a criminal profile about Michael’s dealings if he ever became a problem. Until recently, Aiden had access to the Club’s security footage, until they created their own network separate from ctOS, which Aiden was unable to access.

Aiden lent forward in his computer chair and began tapping his foot. It frustrated him that there seemed to be two different sets of individuals after him and he didn’t know who they were. He also wasn’t sure how all the pieces fit. The SUV’s having been stolen from the workplace of a man whose cousin worked for a club owned by a mob moss didn’t automatically mean that the cousin was working as a hired thug. After all, a few tenuous links did not a criminal make. But they couldn’t exactly be ignored either. It was all just conjecture until he could prove otherwise. Aiden just couldn’t shake the feeling that Michael Quinn was actively looking for him. He had no proof, it was just a feeling. He also didn’t know if Michael knew about Hayley. There were just too many variables.

Aiden spun around as he heard Hayley exit her bedroom where she’d been resting. She came over to him, rubbing her face. Hayley hadn’t been resting for long, and Aiden noted how tired she looked, her split lip and slightly bruised cheek just emphasizing how rough the last 24 hours had been. She grabbed a chair and came to sit next to him.

“What have you found?” she asked, making no mention of the argument they’d had not that long ago.

Aiden decided to follow her lead and ignore the slight tension between them, replying, “I found out some information about the guy who owned the two SUV’s. His name is Steven MacAuley, but he wasn’t the one chasing us; he reported his vehicles missing a few weeks ago. I don’t know if this is relevant but his cousin works for a mob owned club that isn’t exactly legit. It may just be a coincidence because I haven’t connected him to the human trafficking. I think two different sets of people were after us today.”
Hailey’s brows rose when he mentioned the mob. “Are we talking Lucky Quinn mob?”

Aiden stared at her for a few seconds before responding. “No. Lucky Quinn is dead.”

Hailey’s head jerked back, surprise written on her face. “When the hell did that happen? How? No what happened?”

Aiden hesitated, wondering whether to tell her about his involvement in Lucky Quinn’s death. “A few months ago,” he responded lightly. “His pacemaker malfunctioned.”

Hayley seemed to catch something in his tone as she looked at him sharply, frowning. Silence crept between them before Hayley finally asked, “Were you somehow involved in his death Aiden?”

Hayley seemed to ask more out of curiosity, showing no sign of the revulsion he expected when she figured he’d probably committed murder.

“Yes,” he responded, completely unconcerned that he’d just confessed to murder.

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Hailey realized that Aiden had so many secrets that she couldn’t possibly even begin to unravel them all. The fact that he seemed to have taken down a mob boss as well-known as Lucky Quinn was certainly a big one. Curiously, she felt nothing more than inquisitiveness when Aiden had admitted to taking down the crooked business owner. It was probably incredibly hypocritical of her, but she was not unhappy that Lucky Quinn no longer ruled Chicago’s underworld. Here she was, worried about Aiden’s questionable morality while she sat there almost applauding his involvement in Quinn’s death. Maybe her morals weren’t as steadfast as she thought?

Hayley knew about Lucky Quinn, in fact everyone in Chicago knew about Lucky Quinn. He was a billionaire philanthropist who could be seen splashing inordinate amounts of cash around Chicago, mostly to bolster his image by paying for homeless shelters to be built, providing scholarships to low income kids etc. What few people knew was that Lucky Quinn’s business dealings also included prostitution, drugs and illegal weapons shipments. Before his death, the Police couldn’t or more likely wouldn’t touch him, despite his obvious crimes. He’d been acquitted of more crimes than most people committed in their lifetime. How Aiden had ever managed to take him out was a wonder, the man would have had such tight security, and it amazed her that he was even allowed within twenty paces of him.

Hayley was aware that Aiden was watching her carefully, most likely to gauge her reaction. He’d probably expected to hear reproaches from her and see disgust in her eyes. Not that that would likely bother him. Aiden did what he thought necessary, recriminations from other be damned. But Hayley felt none of those things, just curiosity.

“How did you do it?” she asked, careful that her tone reflected genuine interest and nothing else. Aiden was under no compulsion to tell her anything, so if her tone reflected derision he would be likely to shut down. Not that she felt that way, but this may be a rare time when she could actually learn what drove him to do the things he did.

Aiden sighed, a heavy sound which matched his wary expression. “Lucky Quinn was the last stop on my revenge campaign for those involved in Lena’s death. I don’t know what you know, or what you’ve read about Lena’s death, but essentially I killed her.”

Hailey actually felt her mouth hang open slightly at this sudden declaration. In no way had she expected Aiden to admit to his role in Lena’s death. She was also confused, Lena had died in a car crash, an awful accident yes, but not something that Aiden could have prevented. Before Hailey could muster a response, Aiden continued.
“A long time ago, I partnered up with a guy named Damien Brenks. We were a good team. He taught me a lot about the art of hacking. We never even came close to being caught until one operation which had consequences for both of us. We’d decided to siphon the bank accounts from the wealthy clients staying at the Merlaut Hotel. The plan was; me in the lobby hacking remotely, and Damien offsite siphoning the accounts. We didn’t know it at the time but our intrusion was detected. They sent fixers after both of us. The fixers came after me while I had Jacks and Lena in the car. They shot out the tyres of my car and I lost control, crashed and Lena died.”

“Turns out the fixers were after me and Damien because they thought we hacked the Merlaut because we were after a video hidden within their system. We didn’t know about the video, we were there for the cash. It took me a while, but eventually I was able to find who sent the fixers after me and why. I was able to get a copy of the video embedded within the Merlaut and it showed that Mayor Rushmore murdered a woman named Rose Washington. Turns out Lucky Quinn planned on using the recording to blackmail Rushmore. If the video was made public, Quinn would have had nothing on Rushmore, so he sent fixers to warn us away from the video.”

Aiden took a deep breath and slanted a look her way, his tone edged with something she couldn’t quite name.

“When I found out that Quinn was the one who hired the fixers to carry out the hit on me, I killed my way through half of Chicago’s gangbangers and Quinn’s hired muscle to get at Quinn. I killed him. I stopped his pacemaker using a hack on my phone.”

Aiden’s voice cracked with emotion, the first he’d shown in the entire retelling. “They killed Lena all because I wanted money and she was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Hayley blinked a few times, processing Aiden’s story. It wasn’t what she had expected to hear at all. In a way, it explained some things for her. Aiden reticence about talking about why he became the Vigilante and why he seemed darker than she remembered, like his soul was stained, which she guessed it was. Aiden now had to live with the guilt of knowing he contributed to the death of his own niece because his criminal activities ended up weaving their way into his families’ lives. Hayley was sure Aiden wasn’t exaggerating when he said he’d killed quite a few people to get his revenge. Lena’s death didn’t justify that, but Aiden certainly thought it did.

There also wasn’t an appropriate response to Aiden’s story. He had been brutally honest, which Hayley wasn’t sure whether she appreciated or not. She couldn’t even begin to imagine nor understand his inner turmoil. The Aiden she knew years ago was most likely only a phantom. Aiden had always been a calculating, intelligent person, but now there was that added edge, his niece’s death and his actions while avenging her had changed him. But Hayley knew there was more to Aiden then the cold, ruthless man he made himself out to be. She had seen glimpses of it. The way he had treated her with such understanding when he learned of her PTSD only came from a man who had compassion, whether it was deeply hidden or not. Once again, Hayley felt like the she was only scratching the surface or who Aiden really was. The more she got to know Aiden, the more she became confused by his motives and who he really was. She doubted that even Aiden knew that.

Right now he just sat looking at her, face utterly expressionless, a neat trick to hide his true feelings. Hayley deliberated, unsure what to feel and how to react. She asked the one question which had been eating at her since she had learnt about Lena’s death.

“Do you still speak to Nicole?”

Sadness settled over his gaze as he shook his head. “No. After the accident I went a little crazy and didn’t speak to her or Jacks for months. We slowly reconnected, but I screwed that up too. Damien ended up kidnapping Nicole. I got her back but not before Jacks was also almost killed by fixers who
were trying to go after me. Both had to leave Chicago because it was too dangerous for them here. The media found out my identity so Nicole’s life would have been hell. She asked me not to contact her. I caused her too much grief so I can’t blame her.”

Aiden shrugged at this last sentence, like it didn’t matter, but Hayley knew better. She could practically feel the aching emptiness emanating from him. It must have been incredibly difficult for Aiden, with Nicole now living in a different state, away from the only home she had known, taking Jacks with her and asking Aiden not to contact her. Aiden loved his family with a fierceness that burned like a fire inside of him, so to have no contact with them must be killing him.

“I am sorry about Lena. I know it’s not even an adequate sentiment to express what I mean, but I am sorry. I won’t judge you on what you did after to avenge her because it’s not my place. While I understand that vengeance is a powerful motivator, I’m not sure I can even begin to understand what it must have taken to do what you did.”

Hayley reached out and grabbed Aiden’s hand, squeezing it. Hayley had no idea why she did it, his admission of murder and mayhem should have appalled her. The way he had treated her that night in the apartment many years ago when the men had burst in on them should have warned her off him forever. But for some inexplicable reason, her life was intertwined with his and she kept coming back to him.

She wasn’t even sure she trusted him, but apart from everyone else in her life, he knew pain, knew what it was like to have seen someone you care about killed because of your actions. A part of her soul was also stained with that knowledge. Maybe that was why their connection grew, from mutual grief and understanding. Either way, when Aiden responded, by rubbing his thumb over the back of her hand, Hayley had to repress a shiver. The way he was staring at her so intensely was dangerous, she knew that look, and so despite every cell in her body screaming at her to act on her feelings, she removed her hand from his. Her palm felt cold from the sudden loss of heat from his hand, so she rubbed it unconsciously.

In an attempt to dispel whatever was between them in that moment, Hayley coughed nervously and asked, “So what next?”

There was a brief flash of emotion in his eyes, which she would have identified as regret if it had been anyone besides Aiden. However, he turned back around to the computers before Hayley could be sure.

“Now, we keep a low profile. I don’t know who else is after us but we need to concentrate on exposing the human trafficking ring. You’re going to go through all of my meticulous research and findings and get up to speed on what I know. Also you can see if you can find something I’ve missed.” Aiden shrugged, smirking, “It’s unlikely, but a fresh set of eyes won’t hurt. I’ve got Police reports, computer files, witness and family statements.”

Hayley could help but roll her eyes at Aiden’s cockiness that he’d missed something before he continued.

“The problem is that whoever is running this operation knows what he’s doing so is able to keep it quiet. I took down a similar operation months ago, but that was different. I kind of stumbled across that. I think the person pulling the strings has contacts within the Police because no one in their inept department has even connected these disappearances or murders. I’m also pretty sure this person has ctOS access, and I’m talking high level access.”

Aiden waved his hand, “Anyway, read the reports, take your time. It’d be useful for someone with your expertise to look over this stuff. I’ve got an idea of where to head next but, just let me know if you pick up on the connection.”
Hayley nodded while Aiden got up to bring in some hard-copy reports then tapped on the keyboard a few times to get up the screen he wanted her to read.

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Over the next few days Hayley read over the staggering amount of reports and data Aiden had compiled about the missing and dead girls. Hayley was impressed by Aiden’s fortitude, he had not taken on this task lightly, and the amount of information he had amassed spoke to that. Hayley read through Police reports, eye-witness accounts, watched media coverage and looked over the girls’ digital footprints to try and figure out if they were connected and why these particular girls were chosen.

It was arduous combing through the sheer mass of data to try to find some kind of connection. It was astounding, young women had been going missing or turning up dead for months and the cops didn’t find a connection. To be fair, they weren’t looking for a human trafficking ring, but some disappearances should have piqued their interest.

Hayley sat down with Aiden after she felt like she had read over everything. Again, Hayley was once again reminded of the fact that Aiden Pearce was a complex man who never did anything by halves. His status as the Vigilante was well earned, as this was obviously not the first time Aiden had intervened when the cops couldn’t or wouldn’t.

The way that he had dedicated himself to this task was admirable. He could have turned away, discarded his campaign once Danny was imprisoned. Danny had asked for help with his girlfriend’s cousin, and Aiden had provided it. Aiden obviously cared that these young women were being abducted, and now so did Hayley.

After hours of reading, Hayley felt like she had an angle and decided to sit down with Aiden to talk about some of her findings. He sat at the kitchen table patiently waiting for her to begin. Hayley cleared her throat, wondering where to start.

“Firstly, from what I’ve read, whoever is behind this operation is very clever and has a vast amount of resources and money behind them to be able to pull this off. Every young woman that has gone missing meets a particular profile. They’re all between the ages of 22 and 26, no high and no lower. They are all blonde, slim and very attractive. That suggests a specific clientele wanting young women for who knows what. The girls who have turned up dead have been either younger or older than the stated 22-26 year age range. There hasn’t been a murder for a while which makes me suspect that the girls they kidnapped didn’t fit their demographic. They seemed to have narrowed in on their target, so that the girls killed were most likely a practice run and weren’t what they wanted.”

Hayley paused and looked at Aiden, seeing if he agreed with any of her conclusions. “Go on,” he encouraged, not indicating whether she was on the right track. Hayley hesitated, before shrugging and continuing.

“Secondly, each girl frequented a nightclub a few days before she was reported missing. From the families’ testimony I gathered that each girl was quiet, studious and grounded, not at all likely to run away and never be seen again. Families also noted that it was strange for the girls to even visit nightclubs, it just wasn’t their scene. Now, they weren’t all the same nightclub, which would have been easier for us if they did. That’s the only real connection I can find with these girls. They didn’t attend the same College, none worked with each other or even had friends in common. I honestly can’t find any other connection besides the nightclubs, and even they aren’t the same.”

She gripped the folder in front of her, frustration at finding very little resulting in a headache. She massaged her neck, trying to release the tension. Hayley felt Aiden watching her, but he had yet to say anything about her findings. On top of her frustration and headache, his silence was
exasperating.

“Well?” she asked a touch more irritably than she intended.

Aiden grinned slightly at her tone. “I agree with your findings. You can see why it’s taken me months to accumulate this information. It’s very well hidden, but the connection is there. In fact, I’m impressed you found it so quickly.”

Hayley snorted derisively. “What connection? There is none.”

Aiden made a slight tsk sound which made Hayley’s lip curl in annoyance. She wasn’t here to be lectured and Aiden’s cool, calm and collected act was getting on her nerves. She opened her mouth but Aiden, having seen the angry look on her face, decided it was prudent to be more forthcoming in what he knew.

“The nightclubs. They’re the connection.” He held up his hand to stave off her protests. “Just listen to me for a second. I did some more digging into these nightclubs. Over a dozen girls have gone missing and all had been to a nightclub within a 48 hour period before their disappearances were reported. I investigated the five different nightclubs the girls were reported to have visited. To the cops, it wouldn’t have been enough of a connection to look into. They are owned by three different people, and hundreds of patrons go in and out their doors every night, so there’s no way anyone would remember these girls. That was probably the point; a sea of faces no one remembers makes them harder to track.”

Aiden stopped at this juncture, and seemed uncertain about continuing. This frustrated the hell out of Hayley. Surely this wasn’t all he had to say? The wall clock over the computers ticked loudly in the silence. Hayley ground her teeth together in an effort to be patient. Aiden looked like he wanted to say something, but didn’t know how.

Finally he looked her in the eyes. “This is going to sound a bit odd. Fuck, I’ll say it anyway. I am pretty sure these girls were lured to the clubs by a type of subliminal messaging. I know it sounds crazy, but I have strong evidence which suggests that subliminal techniques were used to influence these girls, making their capture easier.”

Aiden finished the last sentence in a rush; with such a lack of composure it was so contradictory to his normal self-assured behaviour.

Hayley sat quietly for a few moments. “Subliminal messaging?” she responded slowly, a hint of incredulity in her voice.

Aiden nodded, his expression serious. Hayley blinked a few times, waiting for Aiden to laugh and tell her he was joking. When he didn’t she got up abruptly and began to look around before she spotted some drawers. Opening the set of drawers she began rummaging around in them.

“What are you doing?” Aiden queried, sounding confused by her sudden change in behaviour.

“Looking for aluminium foil,” Hayley said, her voice muffled slightly because she’d bent over the drawers.

Aiden paused, a frown marring his face. “Why?” he asked suspiciously.

Hayley stopped what she was doing to level a stare at him. She lowered her voice into what she hoped was a conspiratorial whisper. “Because, I’m going to need a tinfoil hat to stop ‘them’ from sending me messages if we’re to continue this conversation.”
Aiden’s expression was completely priceless. Disbelief was stamped on his features, and the way he was looking at her was like he was contemplating putting her in a white jacket and carting her off to the local asylum. Until she laughed and he frowned, not at all amused.

“Oh, c’mon,” Hayley chided him, “I was joking. You have to admit that even talking about subliminal messaging sounds ridiculous.”

Aiden’s lips twitched in what could have been amusement but it was hard to tell. “Okay,” he conceded, “it sounds a bit far-fetched. But hear me out and maybe you won’t need the tinfoil hat.”

Hayley raised an eyebrow as she sat back down. “Did Aiden Pearce just make a funny remark?”

Aiden smiled at her, which was nice. He so rarely smiled that when he did, the corners of his eyes crinkled in amusement and his face changed, making him look younger, more carefree.

“So,” Aiden began, “I’m going to have to explain some history before I can tell you about what I’ve found out. Okay?” he asked. When Hayley nodded her assent he began.

“Embedded with ctOS’s code is a program dubbed ‘Bellwether’. It was designed by an Italian programmer called Malcolm Desipio, who really had no idea of the monster he created. Bellwether was mainly unused until Lucky Quinn came along and was informed of its existence. This meant that Quinn, who was essentially financing Blume, felt like it was his own personal system that he could use. Quinn instructed Blume to acquire blackmail on Mayor Rushmore, who he backed in the election but was finding difficult to control. And Blume certain did find blackmail, they filmed Rushmore killing Rose Washington, a Blume programmer turned whistle-blower. Two birds with one stone I guess. On the flip-side it seemed Rushmore only killed this woman because he was ‘programmed’ to do it by Bellwether.”

“I know it sounds implausible; even I had trouble believing it at first. I kept coming across this Bellwether word, it kept cropping up and I had no idea what it was. Once I found out I realized how dangerous it was. I tracked down the original engineers of ctOS and found out more about Bellwether. What I found out had me worried. I needed to know more about it.”

Hayley nodded and waited to Aiden to continue. He had paused, shifting in his chair, probably collecting his thoughts.

“Bellwether is used to influence people subtly. The program works out what specific messages people needed to hear and where and when to display them. It’s not mind control as you know it, where people watching adverts go out to buy Coca-Cola because they’d been sent messages via their TV. It’s more subtle, it relies on the masses of data ctOS has on people and it targets specific brain activities. After Lucky Quinn died I got my hands on some of his ‘blackmail’. More specifically the tape he used of Rushmore killing Rose. Quinn recorded that it took just 48 days after Bellwether targeted Rushmore for him to separate from his wife, file for divorce and kill Rose. Apparently Bellwether wasn’t supposed to work so fast. The messages they sent to Rushmore about spotting cheating spouses worked too well. Rushmore was convinced his wife cheated on him, despite no evidence to the contrary. Blume even used Bellwether to basically fabricate a relationship between Rushmore and Rose so that he could eventually kill her.”

“I found some audio logs left by a few ctOS pioneers; I guess it was their insurance policy if something happened to them. One woman, Angela Balik claimed that they tested whether Bellwether would work against the public. According to Angela, they inserted a set of numbers into the ctOS system, 1,2,3,5, and to their amazement these set of numbers popped up everywhere, in social media, newscasts, graffiti. With this proof Angela went to DedSec, a hacktivist group who are vehemently against Blume and their intrusion into people’s lives. After that, Angela disappeared, she
terminated her employment with Blume and went off the grid. I suspect DedSec helped her disappear.”

“I’ve had a few run-ins with DedSec; I’m not their favourite person, so I doubt they’d help me if I just asked for details about Angela’s whereabouts. It hasn’t been easy and I’ve been digging for months but I finally have a contact within DedSec. I’ve checked him out, he’s not playing me as far as I can tell. He’s understandably nervous about using his influence within DedSec to reconnoiter information for me, but he’s doing it. I’ve convinced him to meet us. I need him to drop a message into their servers for Angela, but I need to give him the hardware personally, I can’t risk providing it electronically in case DedSec discover it. I’ve set up a meet with him in a few days’ time.”

When Aiden finished speaking he scrubbed a hand across his jaw, the sound not unlike sandpaper against a wall. He gave her the space to process what he had just told her. And process she did. All joking and tin-foil hats aside, if what Aiden said about Bellwether was true, it was truly frightening to behold. At first she thought Aiden was grasping at straws with his subliminal messaging idea, but she didn’t now. Imagine a system that could predict behaviour and influence your thoughts without you even noticing? This was why Hayley disliked Blume. They had too much power and influence over the masses. Turns out she was right to suspect them of doing something unsavoury with the data they collected. A thought occurred to Hayley.

“Why do you need to meet with Angela Balik? I get that she’d be more knowledgeable than anyone else about Bellwether, but what does she have to do with Danny and these missing girls?”

Aiden lent back in the chair, stretching. “Because someone inside Blume is using Bellwether to influence these young women. I think that these women are being influenced to go to specific clubs, where they are vulnerable to being snatched up and sold into slavery. You saw the evidence, the last place these girls were seen were at a few specific clubs. I need to know who could have access to Bellwether and instigate this. Only high level executives would have access to this program now. I can’t get anywhere near Blume’s head office to even get inside their systems, let alone know who is involved. I need to know who could influence Bellwether and we can go from there. Angela has this information, and I need it. She’ll agree to a meet once she hears what I’ve got to say. I’ve listened to her audio logs; she detests Blume and what they’ve created.”

Hayley felt a little silly about joking about tinfoil hats now that she’d heard what Aiden had to say. Now there was another problem, how the hell were they supposed to stop a human trafficking ring and bring down Blume who really were the all-powerful “others” conspiracy nuts like to theorize about?

Hayley met Aiden’s eyes, his expression as grim as she felt. “So we meet your contact and hope like hell he can get a message to Angela. And that she agrees to meet us.”
The wind howled around the abandoned building, sounding like a deranged wolf baying at the moon. The rain, which had held off all day, now began to fall in earnest. Within a few heartbeats the rain was battering the tin roof like a hail of bullets. The chill of the early evening filtered in through the cracks in the walls, creating a blanket of cold that was hard to displace. Hayley rubbed her hands together and blew into them in an attempt to get warm. She shifted from one foot to the other, shivering despite the thick winter jacket she wore to keep out the persistent chill. She’d forgotten how cold Chicago could be. Aiden glanced at briefly her, before looking away, his eyes darting back to his phone. They’d been standing inside the freezing abandoned warehouse for over an hour. Impatience was seeping into her far faster than the lowered temperature. Hayley was sure they were waiting for no one; their contact had decided at the last minute to ditch them. Again.

Despite a few false starts, Aiden’s contact, ‘Twitch’ had finally agreed to meet them. Twitch, a DedSec associate, was understandably nervous about meeting the Vigilante face-to-face. Aiden had told her of his history with DedSec and why he wasn’t on their Christmas card list. To Hayley, it seemed that Aiden agreed with some of DedSec’s methods, just not necessarily their principals. According to Aiden when he worked to stop Damien’s virus from wreaking havoc on the city by hacking into the ctOS satellite and thus taking control, DedSec had contacted him to ask for 30 seconds to search through the system and collect data that could help them disrupt Blume. Aiden had refused to do so, worried about what DedSec could find and how they would use it.

In any event, it was understandable that Twitch had cancelled their last two meets. Eventually, Aiden had finally cajoled him into this meeting. Twitch had taken some convincing, which included the monetary kind of persuasion, before he had agreed to finally meet with Aiden. When Hayley saw the amount Aiden transferred to Twitch she almost fell off her chair. To his credit, Aiden didn’t even bat an eyelid as he hit the transfer button. That told Hayley two things; Aiden had a lot of money at his disposal, and he wasn’t above bribing people with that money.

So now, an hour after their proposed meeting time, Hayley was cold, irritable, but most of all feeling the creeping sense of despondency. If Twitch didn’t show up, their plans couldn’t be put into place. Aiden was on his phone, constantly monitoring their surroundings via camera feed. Hayley had been impressed with Aiden’s planning and attention to detail. She knew now why the Police hadn’t even come close to capturing him. He was meticulous to a point of OCD about security and contingency plans. Not only had Aiden installed his own cameras in the area, but had strategically placed IED’s, road spikes and other explosives around the perimeter. Having gone to war, and being trained in warfare, Hayley was both impressed at Aiden’s knowledge, but also a little alarmed. It wasn’t paranoia; Aiden no doubt had enemies who would blow his head off as soon as look at him. She also had to wonder how he learnt to do all of this and if it was a trial by error type of training or someone had actually taught him everything. Hayley thought it best not to ask, lest she become more alarmed by the answer.

Aiden had agreed on this meeting place for a few reasons. First, it was an abandoned lot, so no prying eyes or ears could overhear what they had to say. Secondly, the area was vast and could provide numerous escape routes if this was indeed a set-up. Lastly, and probably most importantly, ctOS access was severely limited. Being an abandoned lot, Blume hadn’t bothered installing many security cameras, and even those available were malfunctioning. So Aiden had installed his own cameras and linked them to his phone so that he could have surveillance around the buildings at all times.

“We have company,” Aiden announced, pulling Hayley out of her musings.
Instantly she was alert, pulling out her own phone and bringing up the camera feed. Hayley had to admit, Aiden’s phone and tech really did provide a sense of security. When you had eyes on a target and they didn’t know it, you had the advantage. She wished she had this tech while overseas; it might have changed some things.

Shaking herself from that thought, Hayley watched as a guy in a dark hoodie and ripped jeans loitered around the perimeter. Chain-link fence hung limply, parts of it ripped off altogether. The guy had the hoodie pulled over his head, so it was impossible to discern facial expressions. It was definitely Twitch, though. And aptly named he was, because the guy was twitchy. His shoulders, although hunched, would spasm every so often, like he was trying to shake something off. His hands were shoved in his sweater pockets at the front, while his head constantly swiveled back and forward.

Hayley shot a look at Aiden but he hadn’t moved from his position. The light from his phone illuminated his expression. It was patient, if not a little amused. Hayley shook her head, wondering why he didn’t feel as nervous as she did just watching the guy. It looked like he could bolt at any second.

“Should we go get him?” Hayley whispered. She had no idea why she was whispering, Twitch couldn’t possibly hear her from where he was.

“No,” Aiden responded lazily.

Hayley waited but Aiden didn’t explain further. Glancing at her phone again Hayley saw that Twitch had moved, but only to duck through the hole in the fence. Now he was standing inside the perimeter, but he seemed no less nervous. His head still swiveled like he was watching a tennis match and he shuffled backwards, clearly undecided on whether to go any further. Exasperated at Aiden’s behaviour, clearly he knew something that she didn’t, for him to so calmly watch Twitch without worrying he’d turn and run.

“We have to go get him. He’s too twitchy,” she burst out, immediately regretting the faux pas when Aiden jerked his head up, a teasing grin already spreading over his face.

“No if there was only a nickname we could attach to him that would suit him,” Aiden said slowly, tapping his chin and pretending to contemplate this question. The barely perceptible undercurrent of amusement in his voice showed he knew just how embarrassed she was.

“Fuck off,” she growled, but without rancor, conceding that it was a pretty stupid thing to say.

Aiden snorted and looked across at her. “Relax. He’s like this.” Aiden’s eyes, which still held a hint of amusement at her previous statement, turned serious and something dangerous lurked in their depths. His voiced turned hard. “Besides, he knows better than to cancel on me after he took my money.”

When Aiden turned back to his phone Hayley repressed a shiver of apprehension. What she saw in Aiden’s eyes could only be described as ruthlessness. He would do whatever it took to get what he wanted, regardless of the consequences. A part of her understood that drive, even though another part of her cringed away from it. For Aiden, being ruthless made him focused and, most importantly, feared. Hayley knew that fear did more for a person than any other emotion. Fear was a motivating factor, if your enemies didn’t fear you, you were fucked. Aiden’s enemies, even allies, feared him. It was the law of the jungle. It applied even in the urban environment of Chicago.

Following Aiden’s lead, Hayley watched on her phone as Twitch progressed slowly towards their destination. It was in equal parts frustrating and amusing to watch. Twitch seemed completely
oblivious to the downpour which soaked him, taking a disproportionate amount of time to cross the empty lot which was now muddy due to the rain. When he finally came to their warehouse, he slipped inside the entrance but stayed by the door.

“Pearce?” Twitch called out, his voice surprisingly deep.

“Further in,” Aiden responded.

Hayley watched as Aiden tucked his phone away in his pocket and let his hands hang loosely by his sides. It was a deceptively calm posture, but Hayley knew better, it would allow him to react quickly without any hindrance.

The rain muted the sound of Twitch’s footsteps so they were unable to hear his approach until he walked around a rusted piece of machinery. Aiden was standing in an open area, while Hayley leaned against an old piece of machinery a few feet away from him.

Twitch walked a few paces into the open space, reached up and pulled his wet hoodie off. Hayley was surprised by Twitch’s appearance; she wasn’t expecting him to be so young. Twitch looked to be in his early 20’s, with a shock of dyed black hair that he wore medium length, and he had a lip and eyebrow piercing. His eyes, a chocolate brown colour, widened in surprise when he looked over to where she stood. His gaze lingered on her before he saw a flush creep up his neck and his expression turned fearful. His shoulders twitched again in agitation before he turned to Aiden and spoke.

“We were supposed to…to meet…meet alone,” he stammered.

Hayley felt a surge of sympathy for the young man in front of her. Upon meeting him, Hayley immediately realized that Twitch most likely had Tourette’s syndrome, a disorder of the nervous system characterized by unwanted movements and vocal difficulties. That explained his nickname, which Hayley wasn’t sure whether it was something he had picked out or was a result of teasing and he’d adopted it in a perverse kind of ode to his condition. Either way, he was obviously intimidated meeting Aiden, the infamous Vigilante, and trying his hardest to maintain his cool.

Twitch took a step back, but didn’t get far before Aiden’s voice cut through the air like a whip, stilling the young man instantly.

“Don’t fucking move.”

Aiden walked closer to Twitch, who winced at the command in Aiden’s voice and didn’t move. Twitch crossed his arms over his chest and leaned away from Aiden as he came to a stop a mere arm’s length from Twitch. Aiden stared straight at the kid, who refused to make eye contact.

Hayley didn’t know whether to interfere and tell Aiden to back off, or let him go to intimidate Twitch. She knew what it was like to be on the receiving end of Aiden’s psychological manipulations, and it wasn’t a good feeling. On the other hand, Aiden wouldn’t appreciate her interference and he could shut her out of any future dealings. So Hayley decided to remain silent, hoping this tactic would work and not drive Twitch away.

“Thank you for coming Twitch,” Aiden said calmly, the change in Aiden’s voice taking Twitch by surprise so much his head jerked up to stare at Aiden in open-mouth astonishment.

Twitch seemed at a loss for words, but his cheeks reddened in embarrassment as he nodded.

“If I give you this drive can you drop it into DedSec’s systems? Get a message to Angela Balik?” Aiden asked.
There were no preliminaries with Aiden; small talk was never an art he had mastered. Twitch quickly looked over at her before settling his gaze back on Aiden. He didn’t need to say anything, his look told it all; he wouldn’t talk while she was there. Aiden caught onto Twitch’s reluctance to talk with a stranger in the room.

“I trust her Twitch. Whatever you say I’ll just repeat to her anyway. So talk.” Aiden demanded, an impatient edge creeping into his voice.

Twitch grimaced, looked over at and Hayley, who could see the internal debate that was raging within him. Twitch was going against his hacker organisation, actively committing espionage to help Aiden, who wasn’t being particularly patient or for that matter even seemed appreciative of the risk Twitch was taking.

Twitch remained silent, despite Aiden’s glare. Hayley had to give credit where it was due, the kid had balls to withstand Aiden’s death stare. Aiden grunted in what sounded like appreciation for the kid’s tenacity, before he took another step forward, into Twitch’s personal space. Twitch flinched, but tried to cover it up. Panic flashed across his face as Aiden stared him down. Twitch couldn’t maintain the stare, his gaze slithered reluctantly away. A few more seconds of Aiden staring intently at Twitch before he stepped back, his point loud and clear; don’t fuck with me, you won’t come out unscathed.

“I understand the risk you’re taking for me Twitch. And to show you my appreciation I’ll up my fee another 10 grand.”

Aiden palmed his phone, tapped on the screen a few times then inclined his head to Twitch. Twitch observed him warily, but he couldn’t seem to help a small smile escape, most likely at the thought of another 10 grand heading his way.

“Transfer’s done. Now, the drive,” Aiden reiterated, extending his hand to Twitch with a hard drive in it.

Twitch hesitated before slowly reaching out to grab the drive to pocket it. “Walk me through what you’re going to do,” Aiden insisted.

Twitch appeared a little affronted by this questioning of his skills but he replied nonetheless. “I’ll infiltrate DedSec’s network by using a default password, which will take me through to an unpatched server connected to the rest of the network. Don’t worry, I’ll cover my tracks and create several more back doors so they won’t know where I’ve accessed the server from. It’ll be a zero day attack because it’s a previously unknown exploit. DedSec has numerous antivirus programs, firewalls and intrusion detection systems but from where I’m going in they won’t detect it as their software programs don't have patches for the flaw I detected a few days ago. They will soon so I need to drop your program in tonight. Angela will get the message as soon as she logs on. We just gotta hope your program will do its job and not get detected before Angela gets the message.”

Now that Twitch was talking tech, he had lost his stutter and seemed to be imbued with a surprising new confidence. Even more surprisingly was the fact that Hayley actually understood 80 percent of what Twitch was talking about.

Aiden had raised his eyebrows at Twitch second-guessing his program. “My program will work Twitch, you just do your job and drop it in the servers, and the program will do the rest.” Aiden got his phone out, swiped a few times, before he looked back at Twitch.

“There’s probably no need to say this Twitch but you won’t mention you met me right? And if DedSec catches you, you keep my name out of it.”
Aiden spoke in a calm, almost uncaring manner, but his eyes were hard, daring Twitch to say something. Twitch grimaced and nodded. Without looking at her, Twitch turned and walked out, placing his hoodie back on his head. The rain had eased, only a light pattering could be heard on the roof. Hayley let out a breath she didn’t realise she’d been holding. Now they had to wait, see if Twitch came through for them and most importantly, see whether Angela would agree to meet.

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Three days after their meeting with Twitch, Aiden received a message from Basilik55 aka Angela Balik, confirming that she’d meet with him. Since Aiden had already scoped out the place, he suggested meeting at the abandoned warehouse lot, which Angela surprisingly agreed to.

So a few nights later Aiden and Hayley were again waiting inside the abandoned warehouse. It was colder than it had been a few days ago, since their meeting was taking place later at night. An undercurrent of nervous tension ran through both of them. If Angela could provide the information they need, they’d actually have a target.

Aiden couldn’t be positive that DedSec had not detected Twitch’s intrusion into their network, intercepted his message and had decided to come to the meeting. Unable to bypass DedSec’s servers and their protection software himself meant he’d had to take a risk by using Twitch to get a message to Angela. It was a calculated risk, he knew that DedSec’s network would have a code analysis system which would try and detect intrusions. He had something similar for his own network. However, what he was exceptionally good at was writing program and code to circumvent network systems. That’s how he accessed ctOS.

So when he wrote the program with DedSec’s network in mind, he knew that the code of his file would be analysed to see if there was anything that looked suspicious. That’s where his program would bypass that detection. Typically, a system scanned for malware had characteristic behaviour, but his program wasn’t malware so the code analysis attempting to detect if this was present in the program, would not be able to find anything. Also, he knew a bit about how DedSec hackers worked, so with that in mind, he knew how to exploit their systems. His program had been deliberately written with the intention of defeating analysis. Hopefully.

All of his IED’s, road spikes, and incendiary devices had been activated again in the event that DedSec did follow Angela and planned on getting revenge for what they perceived as an affront when he had denied them access to ctOS. Or if Angela decided to bring unwanted backup. Angela was the unknown component in this scenario. Despite numerous attempts he’d been unable to find anything on Angela, despite her well-hidden audio logs; it was like she was a virtual ghost. No information existed on her. No birth certificate, social security, address, bank details. She’d gone off the grid, and successfully erased some pretty important information. Aiden wondered if DedSec had the ability to do this or if Angela had used ctOS to erase her digital signature before she left.

That made him more than a little apprehensive. Why would Angela agree to meet with him if she was in hiding and would put herself at risk just by coming back to Chicago? He’d certainly find out tonight. His phone beeped as the cameras, which were equipped with thermal imaging technology, detected an intrusion. He’d installed thermal imaging because meeting at night would limit his camera’s detection range and it would allow him a better scope on identifying the number of targets. He pulled up the camera feed, relieved to see just one person walking towards their location.

Aiden glanced over at Hayley, who had also received the alert. They were both armed, but he doubted one person would pose a risk with the two of them. Switching from infrared to the normal feed, he was able to take his first look at Angela Balik. She was an African American woman in her mid to late 30’s. She had a homely face and her hair was brown and shoulder length. She wore a
long black jacket, tied around the middle with a belt, grey slacks and high heels. Her gait was confident, unhurried, although her eyes constantly searched the area, showing she wasn’t as poised as she made out.

Aiden glanced at Hayley again, watching as she studied Angela through her feed as well. She must have felt his gaze as she looked up. She caught his eye, and he saw the combination of nervousness and cautious hope in her eyes. She gave him a quick, tight smile before they both shifted their gaze the right with the sound of a heavy, metal door being dragged open. Unlike Twitch before her, Angela didn’t call out, but strode straight into the centre of the warehouse. She stopped a few meters from where they stood.

Angela’s dark brown eyes gaze raked over him, then shifted to take in Hayley. He saw a calculating intelligence in those eyes which made him wary. Angela would not be as easily intimidated as Twitch. Aiden felt Hayley shift slightly next to him, but she said nothing, despite the heavy silence which filled the room. Angela was aware that she would not be meeting him alone, and by her uninterested glance, seemed to dismiss Hayley altogether.

“So I finally get to meet the Vigilante.”

Aiden felt a frown form at her tone, detecting a slight mocking undertone to her words. “And I finally get to meet the famous Bellwether code instigator,” he bit back, unable to let Angela get the upper hand.

Angela’s eyes narrowed almost imperceptively at his response, but otherwise her expression remained impassive. He wondered at Angela’s hostility. If she had an issue with him, why even bother to meet him? Silence once again infused the room. Angela seemed to be playing some sort of game. Or playing for time. He wondered if she was waiting for backup. He decided to move this meeting along.

“Why did you agree to meet with me Angela?” he asked, not bothering to keep brusqueness out of his voice.

Angela blinked at his tone, surprise flitting across her face. She sighed, and her unruffled façade seemed to collapse, and he saw real fear in her eyes.

“You’ve put me in an awkward situation Pearce. How did you know I was working with DedSec?” Angela asked, crossing her arms.

He gave a derisive snort. “It didn’t take much for me to put it together. You alluded to contacting them in your audio logs. They were the only organisation with the resources to help you.” He just managed not to roll his eyes.

Shock rippled across Angela’s face. “I deleted those logs. Or thought I did. Where did you find them?”

Aiden shrugged. “The bunker.”

Angela gasped. “That site was shut down years ago.”

He shrugged again, unable to repress a smirk at his next admission. “It was. It’s been reactivated. I found quite a lot of interesting information within those servers. Including audio logs from Blume employees.”

Angela rubbed her arms, digesting this information. “No one else has access right?”
He hesitated. “No,” he answered slowly.

Angela stared at him. “Ray Kenney did for a time, but he’s gone dark. I no longer have access to the bunker,” he relented, not wanting to lie and put Angela in danger. He may have use of her again.

The horror in Angela’s expression made him speak before she left without giving them the information they needed. “But if Blume knew how to get to you they would have done so before now.”

Angela began to pace, and despite his arguably false assurances she appeared to already regret the decision to meet him. He stepped towards Angela, which caused her to start.

“Angela, we need your help. You know more about Bellwether than anyone else. It’s still being used, and I need to know by whom.”

The look she threw his way said that would have to be proven to be believed, and her next words confirmed that look. “You don’t have definitive proof of that.”

He made an impatient noise in the back of his throat. “You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t believe me Angela. Let’s cut the bullshit.”

She glowered at him for a moment before letting out a deep sigh. “Fine. I know I was a bitch before but I’ve come out of hiding with significant risk to my own safety. If Blume learnt I was back in Chicago they’d send their private security after me. But what you said concerned me. Bellwether is dangerous. I know that more than anyone. If what you’re saying about these girls going missing is because of Bellwether is a huge.”

Angela took a deep breath and continued. “As you know, Bellwether is a behavioral prediction system integrated in the ctOS system. But it’s more than that, it doesn’t just predict behaviour, it influences it. That’s what makes it so dangerous. If you’ve heard my audio logs, I released the numbers into Bellwether as a test to see if the program could work, how quickly and with whom. The results frightened me. Within days social media was flooded with these numbers. And it went from there. That’s why I ran. I didn’t want any part of this. Corporate could already tell I was getting antsy. After what they did to Frewer and Kenney I was under no illusion I’d be politely escorted out of the building. I was afraid for my life. That’s why I went to DedSec.”

Angela wrapped her arms around herself, worry her lip, looking genuinely frightened. She took another deep breath and continued.

“Bellwether would have been tightened by corporate. When it was first instigated a lot of developers had access. Blume hired social psychologists to work on how to get their messages across. Programmers worked in shifts to get Bellwether up and running. So dozens of people had access to it. After Quinn died I imagine corporate tightened access to it so only a few could use it. The man who would have control over Bellwether now is Julian Collins, he was the CIO. He was fascinated with Bellwether. He’d spend hours going over the code, refining it, watching it work. If anyone would be using Bellwether to get access to vulnerable girls, it would be Julian Collins.”

Aiden watched as Angela shivered, her previous statement obviously calling to mind some unwanted memory. He glanced at Hayley, who was watching Angela with a mixture of wariness and dismay. Before he could say anything, his phone beeped and he glanced at it. What he saw caused him to curl his lip in agitation and anger. Roughly a dozen men in combat gear had breached the perimeter and were approaching the building.

“Fuck,” he heard Hayley mutter as her phone also sent an alert and she what he had.
His head snapped back up to Angela and he stalked towards her. She flinched at whatever she saw in his eyes. He shoved the phone at her, and her eyes widened in fear.

“Who the fuck are these guys? Did you set me up?” he asked, his voice vibrating from anger.

Angela didn’t have time to answer before the sound of an explosion outside ripped through the silence of the warehouse.
The sound of the outside explosion, although muffled, was still impressively loud. Out of the three people in the warehouse, only one reacted almost hysterically to the sound of the explosion. Unlike Aiden and Hayley, Angela Balik was not conditioned to react under pressure. She did the only thing available to her, she started to cry.

Hayley spared a brief, exasperated look towards Angela’s crying form, before grabbing her phone to angle one of the outside cameras. No sign of them. The men had already breached the perimeter and were advancing towards the warehouse. Hayley saw a slight tremor go through the hand holding the phone. She didn’t know if it was the cold or her nerves. Probably both. Pressing another button Hayley was transferred to another camera. At this angle she could see the aftermath of the explosion.

She zoomed in, and then wished she hadn’t. A few men lay on the ground, one without an arm. Roughly a hundred feet from their position the fixers had encountered Aiden’s pressure sensitive explosive. He had them around the entry points of the buildings. At whatever angle the fixers converged on the buildings, they would not have been able to bypass the devices. Aiden had deactivated them before they entered the building, reactivating them once they were all inside. Now they served as both a deterrent and to buy them some time.

Aiden had barely even glanced up at the sound, but continued to tap away on his phone. Hayley on the other hand, while not as unconcerned as Aiden, did jump slightly before pulling her gun out, an M8-8 semi-automatic pistol. The grip was comfortingly familiar, it was one of her own weapons she’d had custom made. It had cost her a small fortune, as she’d asked for a chrome finish and increased cartridge capacity. It was a high powered weapon, very accurate, and one of the few semi-automatic pistols on the market. Hayley manually loaded the chamber of her weapon by pulling back and releasing the slide mechanism. The pockets of her black cargo pants held extra ammo and a few grenades.

Before the meeting, Hayley remembered being faintly amused with what seemed to her like excessive counter measures employed by Aiden. Now, she wasn’t amused and was grateful for the bullet proof vest he had made her wear, and the extra ammo he had shoved at her. She was certainly going to need them now.

When she looked up, Aiden had turned his back on Angela and was stalking towards her, gun in one hand, phone in the other. He wasn’t looking at her; he was watching the progress of the men on the screen. He stopped in front of her and looked up from his phone. The unchecked fury emanating from his gaze was a sight to behold. There was something cold and almost predatory in the way his eyes glinted like ice being chipped away from a block. Even knowing it wasn’t aimed at her, Hayley nonetheless felt a ripple of unease.

Aiden broke eye contact, his gaze traveling over her, lingering on the weapon in her hand, before coming back to settle on her face. When he made eye contact with her again, that fury had been tampered down and something akin to eager anticipation now lurked there. She had no idea what her own expression showed, but it certainly wasn’t eagerness.

Having assured himself she was battle ready, Aiden turned around, but stopped abruptly. “Where’s Angela?” he asked.

Peeking around him, she saw that Angela had disappeared. She let out a string of expletives which did not paint Angela in a particularly good light.

“Fuck her,” Hayley shrugged even as she heard the distant sound of metal scraping. Angela had fled.
further into the warehouse and was most likely finding out the other warehouse doors had been welded shut. There were only two ways out, one she would have no idea about.

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Aiden watched as the fixers outside regrouped after the explosion. He’d thinned a few of their ranks, now he needed to tip the balance further in his favour. Minimising the camera feed, his thumb lingered over the app which would jam communications. He pressed it. Reloaded the camera feed and waited.

The fixers were still a few feet away from the warehouse but closing in fast. He scrutinized the group. One of them lifted his hand and spoke into his headset. The camera feed didn’t have audio but he realized that whoever was after him had anticipated he would try and cut their means of communication. They were obviously on their own frequency, something he could eventually access, but it would take time, which he didn’t have.

“Let’s go,” he growled at Hayley, his voice sounding rough even to his own ears.

He stalked off, not unaware of the concerned looks Hayley was shooting his way, but it wasn’t his biggest concern right now. He had his own escape route and it didn’t involve venturing outside to meet the dozens of heavily armed men.

Aiden grabbed his phone again, watching as the fixers filed into the warehouse. He hadn’t know whether it was Blume or DedSec after him, but now that he had a better look he was leaning towards the latter. If Blume had found him they would send more than just a few dozen fixers. He could expect Blume to throw everything they had at him. No, this was DedSec who was after him.

A group entered the building, leaving others outside to surround the building. Aiden felt a smile stretch over his face. They thought to corner him, flush him out. In a moment of incongruous amusement, it occurred to him that hunters often try and scare foxes out of their dens so that they can then shoot them after they come bursting out. Fortunately, this particular fox had a few tricks up his sleeve and would not venture out so easily.

Using the camera he’d installed above the inside of the warehouse, near the door, he allowed a certain number of fixers to enter the building. He pressed a button on his phone and watched as the metal door slammed shut behind them. The fixers turned around in obvious alarm, guns raised. One guy went to the door, gripped the handle and pulled. The door didn’t budge. They wouldn’t get the door open now unless he wanted it open.

The men hesitated briefly, conversing in their headsets with their team outside. They looked unnerved, hesitant. Good. He now had a psychological edge over them. Aiden watched as they split up, before pocketing the phone. The warehouse was far too large to have installed cameras for every possible angle.

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Aiden looked over to Hayley, tension practically leaked out of her, encompassing the small space they occupied. No trace of fear was evident in her face; she was poised and ready for action. Usually preferring to work alone, he had no doubt that Hayley could hold her own, enough so that worry for her safety would not be a concern.

Silently, they separated as per their pre-arranged plan. Winding his way around the mechanical graveyard, he wondered what DedSec hoped to gain by sending fixers after him. They had to know he’d retaliate after this. He couldn’t let an attack like this go; it could set a dangerous precedent for any future adversaries that hoped to take him down. In any case, DedSec needed to be made an example of.
Grabbing his phone, Aiden accessed an app which would help identify the location of the fixers. All cell phones constantly broadcast a signal, even when not being used. So with GPS technology now commonplace in smartphones, the location of anyone carrying a GPS enabled smartphone can be accurately tracked at any time. To take advantage of this, all Aiden had to do was code an app to piggyback off the GPS signal to identify the signals being given off by phones in the immediate area. Once he had the signal locked on, it was easy to follow their progress. It worked well in situations where cameras weren’t available.

A few seconds later and red dots appeared on his screen, signalling the fixers’ location. Not every fixer might be carrying a phone so he had to be careful of blind spots. One fixer was close. He pressed himself against the nearest machine and waited. A fixer was walking away from his position. Holstering his weapon, he silently stalked the fixer. Baton extended, he crept closer. Once he judged he was the correct distance away he acted. In a blur of motion Aiden swung his baton at the fixer’s legs, crushing the stick into the fleshy part of his calf muscle. The fixer went down immediately, and he crashed his baton onto the top of his head. A sickening crunch signified he’d probably used a little too much force. Either way he wasn’t getting up any time soon.

He left him where he was, on the grease stained floor. Aiden was moving away from the fixer when he heard the sound of approaching footsteps. Rounding the corner, Aiden swore softly to himself. Huge crates blocked his way through. Going over them wasn’t an option. He’d make too much noise. The only other way out was back where he’d come from, and that was now blocked by an approaching fixer.

Pulling out his gun, Aiden realized he’d have to take the other fixer out before he approached his position. Leaning down so that he was crouched against the side of a rather large piece of machinery, he watched as the fixer warily approached his fallen comrade. He kept his weapon up and swiveled slowly, trying to identify where the threat might come from. He didn’t bend down to check on the status of his teammate.

Stepping over his teammate, the fixer continued his slow walk towards him. From his position, Aiden was able to track the fixer’s progress through a gap in the machinery. Unfortunately, the fixer didn’t turn around, didn’t give him time to get a shot in while he was looking elsewhere. Aiden allowed him to approach to within a few feet before he stepped out.

The fixer had his weapon pulled slightly to the side, as was his body, so he didn’t immediately see when Aiden stepped out. It was flawless, if unintentional timing. In quick succession, Aiden sent two short bursts into the fixer’s head. The guy’s head jerked back like someone had implanted a claw into the back of his head and pulled violently. Even in the poor light Aiden was able to see the spray of blood and brain matter eject from the back of his head.

The sound of the gunfire echoed loudly and ominously throughout the warehouse. Almost as soon as the fixer’s body hit the ground Aiden, was crouch running down the walkway. He used his phone to orientate himself with the other fixer’s positions. The small red dots were moving in his direction. He just had time to pocket his phone and duck into cover as a hail of gunfire pinged off the rusted appliance behind him. He ran, trying to use the almost maze-like jumble of machinery and crates to lose his pursuers.

Despite the cold, sweat had begun to form and was now running down his back. Stopping briefly within the shadows, the muted sounds of murmured voices drifted around him. Sound traveled differently within the warehouse, it bounced off the metal machines, making it difficult to correctly gauge distances. A crackle of static from a headset could be heard not that far away. It was impossible to tell how far. Either way, that was why he would never wear any type of tactical headset. It was too distracting, and in this instance, the noise they emitted provided a heads up as to their location. His muscles were taut as we waited, ears strained to pick up the slightest sound.
The faint, but distinguishable sound of footsteps. He didn’t hesitate. He stepped out from the shadows and opened fire on the two fixers standing in the open. He saw the jerk of their bodies as his bullets hit home. A third was lurking in the background, and opened fire on him. Quickly, he ducked behind a wooden crate. The sound of splintering wood and the pinging of bullets urged him to move. He heard heavy footsteps behind; they weren’t trying to hide their movements, but actively trying to nail him.
The jumble of machinery became a hindrance rather than an aid. He couldn’t risk looking at his phone, but he also couldn’t keep running blindly, hoping he didn’t run into a fixer. He could still hear sounds of pursuit. And getting closer. Maybe. Sweat was now forming on his forehead. A creeping sensation was crawling up his spine. Someone was behind him. He turned his head slightly; saw a bunch of fixers in his periphery. They opened fire; bullets could be heard pinging around him, but luckily none managed to hit him. He kept running, dashing around piles of scrap metal. The fixers were still dangerously close.
Veering into a walkway, he faltered. Ahead, it looked like a dead end. He couldn’t go back. A small sliver of panic crept its way into his throat. Until he got closer and spotted a small opening below some pipes. Running straight ahead it would look like to anyone else watching he was going to run straight into the metal grating. At the last possible moment he angled his body and slid below a series of pipes, his momentum propelling him under the small space into a different area.
The group of fixers approached where he had disappeared. Their mistake. Rolling to his feet, in one smooth movement he retrieved a grenade from inside his jacket, pulled the pin and rolled it under the opening. A surge of satisfaction coursed through him as he heard the panicked shouts as the fixers spotted the rolling object. Not waiting to see the end result, he jogged off. Unlike the last explosion, the sound of this one was excessively loud in the confined space. Even behind thick piping he felt the blast of the grenade.
The silence of the aftermath was broken only by the occasional groaning sound of an injured fixer. But that too ceased abruptly. A slight scuffing sound alerted Aiden he hadn’t taken out every fixer. Using his phone’s app, Aiden was able narrow in on the fixer’s location. Moving towards him, Aiden could see that the guy was young, barely in his twenties, and looked pale and nervous. As he should. Aiden had just eliminated quite a few of his colleagues. The young guy held the grip of his weapon too tightly and obviously didn’t have the same level of training as his associates. He made one big mistake. He never checked his flank.
Aiden easily shadowed the young guy’s movements, following behind him until he saw an opening to take him out. As the young fixer turned to the left, Aiden launched himself at him, bringing his baton down hard on the back of his neck. The guy stumbled forward, giving Aiden a brief, uninterrupted view of another fixer standing roughly a dozen feet away.
Shit, the fixer obviously wasn’t carrying a phone with him, so his app hasn’t picked up his presence. He’d acted too confidently, impulsively taking the young guy down without scoping the area first. The angle was bad too. Until he’d walked into the open, he’d been unable to see the fixer further down because he’d been momentarily screened behind a large crate.
As the young guy in front of him stumbled forward, Aiden was able to see the fixer’s shocked expression. The fixer further down overcame his shock quickly, bringing his weapon up to sight him as the young guy in front of him righted himself. Aiden’s quick actions saved his life. In a few swift steps, he grabbed the young guy in front of him and held him flush up against him as the fixer further down opened fire. Aiden heard the young guy emit a series of pained grunts as the bullets slammed into his body.
A brief lull in the firing had Aiden pushing the body of the young guy forward, so that he could raise his own weapon. Firing rapidly, bullets crashed into the unprotected parts of the fixer’s body. The fixer had stepped further into the open, thinking to finish Aiden off since he had no time to get to cover. What he didn’t anticipate was how Aiden would use his young colleague as a human shield. Or maybe he did and didn’t care. Either way once the fixer’s cartridge clicked empty, Aiden didn’t give him to time to reload. He emptied his clip into the guy, a deadly focus overtaking him.

It was often like this for Aiden. The adrenaline surge he felt while fighting was almost addictive in its intensity. Pitting himself against a foe, fighting for the precious thing called life was exhilarating. He recognized that it wasn’t exactly a healthy outlet for the restlessness he often felt, but it nonetheless made him feel alive.

Reloading another clip into his gun, Aiden backed into cover. He waited. No further sounds reached his ears. But still, he waited a little longer. Another fixer could hang back, waiting for him to emerge, then try and take him out. He doubted they’d stay still this long; he’d taken out enough of the fixers for any left to feel nervous about staying immobile for any period of time. But he nevertheless decided to remain cautious. His heartbeat was returning to its normal rhythm, but the adrenaline was still snaking its way around his body. It felt good. His drug of choice.

His thoughts turned to Hayley. He had heard no gunfire from her position. But he couldn’t be sure considering the last few minutes he’d been unable to hear anything beyond the sound of gunfire reverberating from his own position. A sliver of worry shot through him. Had something happened to Hayley?

His breathing was a still a bit heavy. He’d never been short of breath before. As Aiden straightened up, pain sliced through him. The adrenaline had covered the pain, but now that he was moving, the discomfort became known. He winced as he identified where the pain originated from. His lower right side. Just below where his bullet proof vest ended. He wore the vest under his jumper. It was custom made to fit his body. It was streamlined, thinner than most vests, which allowed for more freedom of movement. Unfortunately, sometime during the frenzied moments of the last few minutes, he’d been hit.

Already blood was soaking through his clothing. He lifted his sweater to see the extent of the wound. Luckily, the bullet had just grazed him, taking a chunk of skin off and digging in more than he’d like, but it wasn’t life threatening. He was bleeding steadily, but the wound itself wouldn’t kill him. He shrugged the pain off. After all, pain didn’t hold the same level of fear for him that it did others. It was something he’d come to accept as his penance, was even something he appreciated. Not in a way that made him a sadist. Pain meant you were still alive. Battered, bruised and bleeding maybe, but you’d come out better than the other guy lying in front of you with his head blown off.

A slight wince was the only concession he allowed as he set off towards the rendezvous point. His most immediate problem was Hayley, who hadn’t answered the brief text he sent her.

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When Hayley had separated from Aiden, she had jogged off with more than a little apprehension churning in her gut. Fear buzzed around her head like a persistent bee. And just like a bee it was prone to sting her at the most inopportune times.

Shrugging those thoughts off, she began to take note of her surroundings. The warehouse was huge, filled with old, rusted machinery and shadowed niches which she realized she could use to her advantage. Hayley looked around for a good place to conceal herself. Her plan was to use stealth rather than an all-out fire fight. As soon as she saw the alcove she knew it would be a perfect place to await the men coming after her.
There was enough light for darkness to not totally permeate the warehouse, creating shadows which were perfect for stealthy takedowns. She planned to pick the men off one by one. Tucked into an alcove, Hayley waited until she heard someone approach. She was so well concealed that the fixer had no idea she was there as he passed her.

She extracted herself from the alcove and silently approached him. Since he was taller she couldn’t use a choke hold on him until he was her height. So she kicked the back of his knee, where his tibial nerve was located. The pain would have been intense.

The fixer choked out a surprised gasp before he stumbled forward. She quickly wrapped her arm around his neck, cutting off his airway. He was well-trained though, so despite his initial surprise he quickly reacted, trying to bring his elbow up into her ribs. He didn’t have enough space to manoeuvre as his back was pressed tightly against her chest. His struggles lost momentum as the hold caused him to lose consciousness within a few seconds. Hayley held on a few more seconds before lowering him to the floor. She dragged him into the alcove she had recently vacated.

Gun held in front of her, Hayley moved quietly and cautiously past a few piles of metal. It was eerily quiet. Besides the sound of her own breathing, the faint ticking of metal settling in the cold, and the faint rustle of the wind was all she heard. The sound of bullets further down the warehouse shattered the silence. The sound came from Aiden’s position. She swallowed, or tried to, her mouth was extremely dry.

Hayley peeked around the corner. The long walkway showed no sign of anyone. Still wary, she stepped away from the corner but stopped one step into the walkway. At almost the exact same moment as she stepped out, a man rounded the corner at the end of the walkway. Both seemed startled to see the other because for a few long heartbeats they did nothing but stare at each other. Time seemed to come to a crawl. It reminded her of an industrial Mexican standoff.

In that moment, everything sharpened for Hayley. The moonlight slanting from the window above became as bright as that from a lighthouse. The machines around her seemed to close in on her, almost becoming a tunnel angling towards the man at the other end. Hayley could see the surprise in the guy’s expression when he saw her. For Hayley it felt like incredibly bad timing for them both to step out at the same time. She had one thought, ‘so much for stealth’, before she witnessed the surprise drain from the guy’s face, replaced by determination. In that same instance time seemed to snap back to its normal pace.

Adrenaline surged through her veins as she watched the guy in front raise his semi-automatic rifle. Hayley felt her legs move before she even registered the command sent to her brain. Hayley raised her own gun and pulled the trigger, the recoil operation of the handgun automatically extracting and ejecting the shell casing to reload the chamber. Since they raised their weapons almost simultaneously both fired off shots which hit their targets.

Hayley was in the process of launching herself to other side, trying to dive to cover. Her first bullet hit the guy’s chest, but since he also wore a bullet-proof vest, he merely staggered backwards. Her second bullet must have missed, but the third clipped his neck. Hayley saw blood explode from his neck before she felt a bullet dig into the side of her vest. Because she was launching herself sideways, the momentum of the shot pulled her further off course so that she smashed into a piece of machinery rather than clear it.

Pain burst in her shoulder as she ploughed into a sharp metal corner. Hayley felt herself fall onto the hard concrete, grunting as her head hit the floor. She lay there gasping, for the bullet which had dug into her vest had partially winded her. Aware of the prime target she presented lying there gasping on the floor; she was unable to get her body to obey her commands. Her shoulder ached terribly from the impact, and she couldn’t seem to catch her breath. Eventually, she scrambled to a sitting position, her shoulder protesting. Cursing, because she’d lost her gun in the fall, she frantically searched the
floor. Spotting it, it was wedged under a container; she knelt down to retrieve it. Only to turn around, stand up and freeze with a paralyzing fear.

A few feet away was a man with a gun pointing at her. Terror lodged itself in her throat making it hard to breath. Inexplicably, Hayley identified the type of weapon pointed at her, ready to deal death. A UMP.45. There was no way she’d have time to raise her weapon before he fired. She knew that instinctively. He hadn’t fired yet, but he was close to it. His finger was coiled around the trigger; she could see the dark blue of his eyes as he sighted her down the rifle. Panic gripped her stomach, making her feel like eels slithered around her insides.

The guy lent into the rifle and fired.
Chapter 9

Aiden launched himself at Hayley just as the fixer in front of her fired. He felt the scorching pain of a bullet searing his flesh before he landed on top of her. Thankfully he’d managed to push Hayley into cover, out of range of the continued gunfire. When he landed he heard Hayley grunt, probably because his entire weight landed on top of her. Despite the dizziness swirling around his vision, and the pain of the bullet wound, he clambered to his feet, pulling Hayley up with him.

Hayley reacted far faster than he did, but he consoled himself with the fact that he had just been shot. Twice now. He felt the blood dripping down his arm. Hayley shoved him roughly to the side. He watched the shell casings from her gun ejecting as fast as she could shoot. He heard a gurgle and turned around to see the guy who had tried to shoot them now rested on the floor partially against some containers, a hole in his forehead.

He stared at the dead guy, blinking, his body not moving. “Aiden,” he heard Hayley call sharply, and turned around rather dazedly.

Concern burned in her eyes as she approached him. When her fingers reached up, he followed their progression until they probed his shoulder. He flinched away as her fingers settled around the edge of the wound. He’d been lucky; it was only a flesh wound.

“I’m fine,” he ground out, surprised by how scratchy his voice sounded.

He could see Hayley didn’t believe him, her fingers had retracted but she held them hesitatingly a few inches away from his shoulder. He gave her a hard look and she backed off. He’d been shot twice tonight and each time his mood made a turn for the worse. DedSec were going to pay dearly for their deception. A seething fury was working its way through his body, a coiling energy that needed release.

“Let’s go,” he snapped, and turned around, not giving Hayley time to argue.

He spared a glance at another fixer’s body as he passed. He’d been shot in the neck; the bullet had hit an artery. He’d bled out quickly, died with a tormented expression on his face. No other fixers were in the warehouse. He’d counted the number that had entered; he’d taken out the majority, and including the ones Hayley had subdued, none were left.

So when he heard a choked sob he stilled instantly. Whoever was there was not making an effort to be quiet. Slowly, he made his way towards the sound. As he came closer he was able to identify the sound of quiet crying. Aiden knew who it was before he even stepped out of cover. Angela Balik.

He’d forgotten about her, dismissed her to the back of his mind. At first, he only heard her, didn’t see her. Looking around he realized why. She’d barricaded herself in a large container, the door wasn’t closed, she probably hadn’t been able to it was so rusted.

Angela didn’t acknowledge his presence, just continued to cry. She was sitting on the floor rocking, legs bent, forehead pressed against her knees. It was a pitiful sight. It gave him pause though. Would Angela be a sobbing mess if she had set him up? She had reacted with a convincing amount of fear when she saw fixers approaching the building. He glanced at Hayley who walked around him to peer into the container. She stared at Angela for a few moments before turning to look at him, eyebrow raised. He shrugged. He wasn’t exactly sure how to handle her either.

“Hey Angela,” Hayley called.

Angela whipped her head up, eyes glistening with tears and wide with shock. She looked around
wildly, tried to untangle her legs, but failed and fell sideways. An amused snort escaped Hayley, which she smothered into an unconvincing cough when Angela glared at her. Angela stood up timidly, wavering slightly. She wiped a few tears away from her eyes and looked at them nervously.

“Is it over?” Angela asked hopefully.

“Yeah, no thanks to you,” Hayley retorted, before he had a chance to answer. Hayley’s brow was furrowed, and he could see the disdain in her eyes. Beyond that, he could see that Hayley looked as angry as he felt. Fighting for your life in a shithole of a warehouse would do that to you.

“What did you expect me to do? I’m a computer specialist with no prior experience with firearms. I wasn’t even armed.” Angela’s voice was indignant and she was scowling at Hayley.

Hayley snorted derisively in response. “Maybe if you didn’t lead them here in the first place, this wouldn’t have happened.”

“Enough,” he snapped irritably. He didn’t feel in the mood to witness a bitch fight between the two women. His shoulder and hip ached, making his patience even shorter than usual. Fixers were still circling outside the warehouse, and they needed to escape. They would be able to make their way into the building eventually but they had time before that happened.

Hayley’s lip twitched in annoyance but she held her tongue. Aiden glanced back at Angela, who stared back with a mixture of defiance and anxiety.

“Did you set me up?” he asked, watching Angela’s face carefully. How she responded in the next few seconds would seal her fate.

Angela’s eyes widened and she shook her head, arms stretched towards him in an appeasing gesture. “No. Fuck no. Why would I do that? I’ve heard about what you do to your enemies. I came here on my own. I’ve blown my cover too,” Angela responded, her voice pleading.

Aiden detected no deception in her words, or more importantly her body language. Over the years, he’d become proficient in detecting falsehoods in people’s demeanor. If you knew what you were looking for, detecting a lie wasn’t difficult. Most people had no idea their body language gave them away.

If a person lied, their physical expression will be stiff, with few arm or hand movements. They will avoid making eye contact, and timing and duration of emotional gestures will be off. Angela displayed none of these traits, and he was watching carefully. Aiden knew that even if she had set him up, she’d try and convince him otherwise. However, Angela had just experienced a trauma, her body and mind would be trying to process that, meaning Angela would have trouble mustering a convincing lie. Angela was telling the truth, she hadn’t deliberately led DedSec to his location. Didn’t mean he trusted her.

“Fine. I’ll get you out but after that you’re on your own,” Aiden said, grabbing his phone, already dismissing Angela from his thoughts.

Angling the camera outside, he saw the fixers trying to get into the warehouse. Unfortunately, they were near where he wanted to exit. It didn’t matter; he had a contingency plan for that. Minimizing the camera, he tapped on an app which controlled the explosives he’d planted around the lot. Initiating the timer he looked back up at both women.

“Let’s go,” he announced, turning away, partly to get going but also to hide the wince from his protesting hip.
A series of explosions roared to life outside as the timer counted down to zero. The sound was thunderous, even as secluded from the detonation as they were. The fixers outside had no protection. The blast radius was immense, the shock wave rippling through the fixers. Panic swept their ranks. The explosion was merely a means to an end, a way to unnerve the fixers and draw them away from the building. It worked, they scattered into the night.

The roller door which the fixers outside had tried to access now seemed to open miraculously. Like someone spouted the magical words to allow entry. Or exit as the case may be. Three figures managed to slip out in the confusion.

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The second unexpected explosion of the night had caused the bundles of nerves seemingly permanently lodged in Hayley’s throat to constrict almost painfully. The sound triggered memories that she’d rather have locked away tight. She couldn’t break down, couldn’t allow her mind complete control over body control. So she ran. As soon as the door opened the residual heat she felt, the acrid scent of smoke, the chaotic shouts from the fixers, all were ignored. The pumping of her legs was all Hayley concentrated on. Sludge flicked up as her feet hit the sloshed mud which covered the ground.

Hayley could hear Angela’s gasping breaths as she struggled to keep up with her fitter counterparts. Not that she would slow down for Angela’s sake. Hayley wasn’t convinced Angela hadn’t led the fixers to their location, but it was Aiden’s call. At this thought, Hayley risked a peek to her left. Aiden was right beside her, keeping pace despite his injuries.

The vehicle they had used to get to the warehouse was parked on the outskirts of the abandoned lot. Hayley reached the perimeter first, skidding to a halt and wrapping her hands around the torn edge of the chain link fence. She held the edge up and they all slipped under. Angela was now limping. One of her high heels had snapped off.

There were no sounds of pursuit behind them. They’d managed to escape both the warehouse and the fixers without further notice. Angela trailed behind Aiden like a lost puppy, looking just as forlorn with her struggling limp. Aiden walked ahead towards their vehicle, but didn’t unlock it. Angela hovered uncertainly behind him.

“This is where we part ways,” Aiden announced, expression closed.

In the poor light Hayley could see Angela’s face contort in horror. “Where the fuck am I supposed to go? You said you’d get me out.”

“And I have,” Aiden replied. This was said calmly but his face betrayed the effort it cost him to remain calm.

Aiden turned around slightly and pointed to a clump of bushes roughly a few dozen feet away. “Go through there and you’ll end up on a main road. You could flag someone down.”

He was right, the sound of traffic floated towards them even though they couldn’t actually see it. Angela opened her mouth, looked from Aiden to where he pointed and back again. Anguish was stamped on her expression. She shuffled closer to Aiden, reached out and grabbed his arm. Mistake, Hayley thought instantly.

To Aiden’s credit he merely looked pointedly at her hand which still clutched his arm. Angela didn’t take the hint until he looked down at her. At this angle Hayley couldn’t see Angela’s expression but she saw Aiden’s. A dangerous glint entered his eyes, challenging, displaying anger that was barely leashed. Angela’s head jerked back when she saw his expression, and she snatched back her arm, stepped back quickly, stumbling in her lopsided heels.
Yeah she’d noticed that about him. Aiden was very particular about who touched him. It wasn’t that it was a tactile sensitivity issue. He seemed to view people as threatening or non-threatening. Any person he wasn’t truly familiar with and Aiden went to great pains to avoid contact.

“Please,” Angela implored, “I didn’t set you up. I’ll find out who did.”

Hayley watched the exchange with a kind of horrified fascination. What was Angela so afraid of? Aiden? What would he do to Angela if she was responsible for the fixers? A shiver worked its way up her spine. Hayley was sure she was missing something here. What kind of reputation did Aiden have among his enemies? Whatever it was it had made an impression, going by Angela’s reaction.

Aiden nodded in response to Angela’s declaration. “You do that.”

Turning around, Aiden walked towards the car. The ex-Blume employee stared at Aiden’s back; her shoulders slumped, until she limped away towards the bushes. Hayley watched her leave, before walking towards the car. Aiden was sitting in the driver’s seat, but doesn’t acknowledge her as she gets in, driving off as soon as the door closes.

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A heavy silence envelopes the car. It’s not exactly a comfortable silence. Not a word has been exchanged in the entire twenty minute drive so far. Hayley has decided to rectify that, her exasperation getting the better of her. She wondered briefly whether she’d be unwisely poking the bear. Again. Decided that she didn’t care.

“You’re bleeding like a stuck pig all over the upholstery,” Hayley remarked mildly, eyeing the side of Aiden’s jacket which held the blood stain. Not exactly her best opening.

Aiden didn’t even acknowledge her. The sound of the engine was all the response she got. Maybe he thought she liked to keep up a running commentary of the situation? Just for the hell of it.

Tension was coiling through the rigid muscles of Aiden’s shoulders. She could almost thrum it with it with her fingers; pluck it right out of the taut lines of his body. He was pissed and trying to feign calm. For her sake maybe, she didn’t know. The way he gripped the steering wheel gave away just how tightly wound he was. Aiden was driving fast. Too fast. Especially with blood loss a factor.

“Maybe you could pull the car over before you wrap us around a tree?” she asked coolly, with enough emphasis for him to know it wasn’t a casual question he could choose to ignore.

Still no response. Moody and pissed off he might be, but Hayley refused to take risks because he needed to prove something to himself. He might be running on adrenaline alone, but that couldn’t last forever. He’d need to stop, before his body stopped for him.

Another few long seconds of silence and Hayley’s patience snapped. In fact, if she had listened carefully she could almost have heard the distinct twang as it snapped.

“Pull the fucking car over before I do it for you,” she snarled, surprised by just how angry she sounded.

Without warning Aiden yanked the steering wheel to the right. The car veered abruptly and the back tyres lost traction on the gravel, fishtailing as Aiden slammed on the brakes. After the car came to a stop, he turned off the engine and fixed his eyes on her. His expression was blank. Completely blank, but something dangerous lurked behind his eyes. It was like staring into the eyes of a snake. You didn’t know if it would strike or back down. Hayley held his gaze despite her furiously beating heart. It was more like being enthralled really, she couldn’t
look away. Hayley wondered if Aiden even saw her, his eyes having taken on an oddly vacant look. Suddenly, tension leaked out of him, like spilt milk. His shoulders relaxed ever so slightly, and recognition flickered in his eyes. He blinked at her.

“I’m fine,” he snapped.

“Be that as it may, I’d feel better if I drove the rest of the way.”

Hayley thought it prudent she didn’t mention his wounds. That more than anything else seemed to piss him off the most.

Aiden leaned his head back so it rested against the headrest. He closed his eyes and let out a sigh. Hayley scanned his face, noting how tired he looked. His complexion was pasty compared to its normal hue. The dark stubble on his cheeks just seemed to emphasize that. It was more than just a physical tiredness, his entire being seemed to be weighted down with a million different worries.

He opened his eyes with a suddenness that startled her. And maybe embarrassed her a little. She had been staring at him. The tiredness from a moment ago vanished abruptly from his face, replaced by his normal impassive expression. He opened the door and got out. Hayley watched his progress as he walked around the front of the car. It didn’t occur to her that he’d actually acquiesce and allow her to drive until he opened the passenger door. He still didn’t say anything, just stood there staring at her.

Hayley squinted up at Aiden, considered him for a moment. Considered pushing him and asking him to ‘use his words’, but decided against it. It annoyed her that he couldn’t just admit that he needed help. But in some small measure he had. He had pulled over and was allowing her to drive. In his mind, even giving over that small amount of control was hard. So Hayley swallowed her back a sarcastic remark and got out quietly. After all he had saved her life. Again. And taken a bullet meant for her. With Aiden it was always his actions which spoke louder than his words.

Once settled behind the wheel, Hayley eased the car into oncoming traffic. Aiden was still silent next to her. It wasn’t until a few minutes later that he spoke up.

“Don’t head back to the apartment block.”

She gave him a quizzical look before he shrugged.

“I change safe houses frequently. After tonight I need to go to another one. Here,” he said, pulling out his phone and tapping briefly, “I’ve sent the location to the GPS on your phone.”

Hayley pulled out her phone, the GPS app already loaded on her screen. She knew the area; The Wards was one of the southernmost districts in Chicago. It was a low-income area and would be the perfect place to conceal his movements.

It didn’t take long to get to the safe house, although Hayley thought it best described as a dilapidated house. It was a small dwelling; the outer part so run down it seemed to be held up by chewing gum. It was also a clever camouflage. Who would even think this house held valuables?

Aiden unfolded himself from the car as soon as it stopped. He was concentrating on his phone again. Something which exasperated Hayley at times. While she appreciated the genius behind the tech, Aiden really was one of those obnoxious people who spent their time glued to their screen. Tired, and not in the mood to wait, Hayley walked towards the house.

“Stop,” Aiden yelled, panic threading its way through his voice.

Hayley was so startled by his tone that she actually stumbled. “What the hell is wrong with you? I was just going inside. Jesus.”
Aiden walked up to her and grabbed her arm, pulling her away from the house before she could think to stop him. Irritably, she wrenched her arm from his grip.

“I’m deactivating some of my security measures. But if you want to lose a hand, go ahead,” he remarked, gesturing towards the front door.

Hayley opened her mouth to speak, but found she didn’t know what to say. Of course he’d have security measures, but she thought it would involve tech like back at the apartment. A swipe card or something.

“What kind of security measures?” she asked somewhat reluctantly, not really wanting to know but unable to help herself.

Aiden pocketed his phone, a smile ghosting his lips. “Just a few deterrents.”

He didn’t expand, but walked towards the house. Opening the front door he waited for her to enter.

“Is it safe?” she asked, rather unnecessarily.

The noise he made was too low for her to tell whether it was a scoff or a laugh. Either way it answered her question. The inside of the house was only marginally better than the outside. It was furnished sparsely; a few fixtures which didn’t match. It was also icy cold. Hayley doubted there was even heating. At least the apartments had central heating.

Aiden didn’t turn the lights on, and Hayley had to wonder whether electricity was even connected. He disappeared further into the house, leaving Hayley standing in the entrance way. She blew out a breath in an attempt to remain calm. Aiden’s dismissive attitude was not something she appreciated.

Hayley trailed after Aiden, noticing how he held himself stiffly. Pain was obviously an issue for him. In a bedroom he had his usual set-up of computers and hubs. Electricity was connected, but maybe only for this room. He placed his phone in a cradle and lent over a desk that was not the same quality as the other ratty furniture in the house. Everything in this room was made of the best quality; the chair, desk, monitors and computers would be worth thousands alone.

Leaning against the door Hayley watched in exasperation as Aiden settled himself in the chair. He obviously had no intention of tending to his wounds. His entire being was focused on the monitor in front of him. The tapping of the keys drilled on her nerves. Each tap hammered away at her insides, building into a crescendo.

“Aiden, you need to let me look at your injuries.”

He hunched his shoulders ever so slightly, an indication he’d heard her. He stopped typing, but didn’t turn around immediately. When he did, he swiveled his chair slowly to look at her. It didn’t surprise her when she saw that hard edge to him again. That’s all she saw at times, hard edges. Only briefly did he allow her to glimpse another part of him. Not a softer side, a more human side. Not the dangerous, calculating man he presented to everyone else.

She understood his anger. He’d been set up by this hacktivist group and while they’d escaped relatively unscathed, it could have been different. His need for revenge overrode basic necessities. But those hard edges were cracking; his body needed fixing if his mind was to work.

“Infection will be a problem if you leave an open wound,” she tried again.

A last ditch effort to get him to listen. She wouldn’t ask again, she wasn’t his keeper. He’d learn the hard way. She was a combat trained medic; she knew what she was talking about, knew he was flirting with the edge of his endurance.
Aiden closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He nodded. “First aid kit is in the bathroom.”

Hayley just managed not to blow out a relieved breath. That encounter could have gone either way. Damn Aiden and his stubbornness. It shouldn’t be like trying to walk a minefield every time she tried to have a conversation with him.

Not showing her inner thoughts Hayley merely turned her back on him to retrieve the supplies. When she returned she unpacked the contents then stopped. She could feel a flush creep up her neck.

“Can you remove your…clothing,” she finished lamely.

A faint smile touched his lips, holding a slightly mocking quality, like he knew her request caused her some embarrassment. He removed his cap first, then his leather jacket, making a face when the movement jarred his injured shoulder. Hayley made no move to help him. He wouldn’t appreciate it but it was also a rather intimate thing to do, so she just waited.

Next was his sweater, then his bullet proof vest, which Hayley held her hand out for. Aiden looked faintly surprised, but she grabbed it off of him. She fingered the material and felt rather impressed. She had no idea where Aiden got the vest from but it was a new design she’d never seen before.

A traditional bulletproof vest consisted of layers of Kevlar and other resins woven together to create a strong but bulky outer layer. The problem was that it provided little comfort and was difficult to maneuver in stealth situations. Aiden’s vest was sleek in its design, and crafted to fit his body shape perfectly. The vest was intended to be worn under the clothing, to aid the user rather than hinder them.

Hayley placed the vest to the side, thinking to examine it more closely later. A tight fitting black t-shirt was the last piece of clothing to go. When Aiden removed his shirt, Hayley stopped rummaging inside the first aid kit to stare. A multitude of old scars marred Aiden’s body, from his chest, to his abdomen area, and his arms. Some looked like slashes from a knife; others were obviously old bullet wounds from the puckered look of them.

Hayley realized she’d never actually seen Aiden with his shirt off. She’d taken hers off in front of him, but he’d never done the same. Past the scars she saw the well-defined muscles of his chest, and his impressive six-pack. He had a fighter’s physique; muscular arms, and strong upper body that tapered down into a compact abdomen. Hayley saw that Aiden had a light smattering of hair on his chest, and when her eyes unintentionally roved lower, she saw a small trail of hair leading from his belly button down into his jeans.

All of a sudden she jerked, realized where her eyes had been and swept them up to see Aiden watching her. He sat absolutely still, no sign of that trademark smirk on his face. She expected him to make fun of her, but he didn’t. Something she couldn’t quite name burned in his gaze. He almost seemed to want to reach out and touch her, but he kept his hands on his knees.

Hayley broke eye contact and turned around. Trying for nonchalance, busying herself with the first aid kit. She swallowed nervously. She had no idea why she had such a reaction. She’d seen men with their shirts off before, even seen scars before so it wasn’t that. Aiden’s body surprised her, though it really shouldn’t have. You don’t lead the life Aiden did and not get the marks to show for it.

What was frustrating was that her body seemed hell bent on responding to Aiden, whether her mind cooperated or not. Aiden obviously had some sort of feelings for her. He’d certainly not jump in front of a bullet for just anyone. And now that she thought about it, he was showing her an enormous
amount of trust. Giving her access to his tech, showing her his safe houses, allowing her to stay with him. All of these relatively small things amounted to a lot.

Hayley understood herself well enough to know that Aiden’s dangerous allure was appealing to her because she’d spent the last few years in danger on an almost constant basis. The normal apple pie, white picket fence life was not something she wanted anymore. Or more importantly, could have. Aiden understood a life that was spent on edge more than anyone else she knew. He’d embraced that life, and because of that he was a very dangerous man. She saw that in his eyes tonight, violence lurked beneath the surface of feigned civility. Paradoxically it was something which both scared and enticed her.

In an effort to dismiss those thoughts, Hayley upended antiseptic onto cotton wipes, bent down and dabbed them against the wound on Aiden’s hip. She hadn’t warned him and he jerked as the liquid burned away any bacteria which might impede his healing. After the wound had been disinfected, Hayley inspected the site. She’d seen worse in her time. Just above his hip bone, where his vest had ended was where he’d had the misfortune of being hit. It was a one in a million shot, unlikely to be repeated. The bullet had caught the edges of his vest, luckily slowing the bullet’s trajectory. It required a few stitches which Aiden endured.

Hip now dealt with, Hayley disinfected a new set of instruments to tackle the other bullet wound. His shoulder, or more specifically the deltoid muscle, was where the bullet had torn a pathway. This was the worse of the two wounds.

She shifted around, trying to get the right angle to stitch. It was a difficult wound to try and get to. In the end she didn’t think about it but just maneuvered herself between his legs, studiously avoiding eye contact. She bent over, placing one hand near his collarbone to steady herself. His skin was warm, but not feverish. Hayley could feel Aiden’s gaze on her, but couldn’t bring herself to look at him. She felt incredibly vulnerable even though it was Aiden who was laid bare before her.

Finishing the last stitch, Hayley felt reluctant to pull away. Aiden rarely let his guard down, rarely relaxed, so to have him almost pliant under her fingertips was a powerful feeling. She went to step back but Aiden grabbed her wrist. It wasn’t a tight grip; she could pull away if she really wanted to. But she found she didn’t.

Aiden was a lot taller than her so even with him sitting down Hayley found she didn’t exactly tower over him. Her heartbeat thumped in her chest, and she could feel a small tick start up near her eye. She hoped it was the only visible sign that she was uncomfortable. For in her mind Hayley was having a raging internal debate about the consequences of pursuing a physical relationship with Aiden, hoping none of it showed on her face.

Hayley felt more than saw Aiden’s arm move. His other hand settled on the small of her back, exerting some pressure. She could choose to ignore it or move forward. Hayley gazed down at Aiden, oblivious of anything else in the room. Ignoring the cold and the flickering shadows made from the computer screen. She could see desire in his green eyes, which sparked something within her. Even before she realized what she was doing she lent in. Aiden must have sensed her submission because he pulled her even closer.

Thoughts raced around her mind, like never ending racehorses chasing their elusive prize. Almost as soon as her lips touched his, her mind went unexpectedly blank. It might have been the way he expertly slipped his tongue into her mouth, or the heat she felt emanating from his body which caused all thoughts to flee.

Hayley snaked a hand around the back of Aiden’s head, winding strands of hair into her fingers. Heat wound its way through her veins as the kiss intensified. Aiden had worked free the shirt from
the back of her pants, his hands free to roam her skin unhindered by clothing. It didn’t take long before their kisses became more urgent. Aiden’s tongue was insistent, dominating. Hayley suppressed a moan as Aiden pressed her even closer to him. She was almost on his lap and could feel the extent of his desire. Wanting to feel more skin underneath her hands, Hayley brought both hands down to roam over his chest, but Aiden pulled away abruptly, hissing.

Hayley pulled back in confusion. What she’d forgotten was the needle she’d used to stitch his wounds. It was still held in her hand, which she’d unintentionally scraped across his chest. Blood welled from the scratch on his chest. Hayley stepped back further, the cold hitting her abruptly, shocking her from the sudden loss of Aiden’s body heat.

They were both breathing hard, staring at each other. A slow smile spread over Aiden’s face. He didn’t smile all that much. There was a secrecy about it, like he only ever smiled for her. Hayley smiled back, unable to help herself. The moment was gone though. Who knows what would have happened if he hadn’t pulled back when he did. Actually, she knew what would have happened, and couldn’t help but feel a twinge of disappointment.

“You’ll need bandages on those,” she blurted, just because it popped into her head and she wanted Aiden to stop staring at her. It worked; he blinked and shifted in his chair. Also she didn’t dare touch him again. That proved far too tempting.

Aiden just nodded. She wanted to tell him to rest but he wouldn’t listen, he’d do whatever it was that needed his attention at the computer. Instead she just packed up the first aid kit, intending to head off to bed, hoping there was a bed, otherwise it was the unappealing couch.
Chapter 10

Blood. Thick and congealing. It spattered against every surface. It was still warm. And sticky. Blood was actually quite sticky. Blood was the centerpiece of this madness.

Pain. The pain hit next. Agonizing waves rolling over her body. Time became sluggish. Eternity stretched out like chewing gum as she attempted to come to terms with her rebelling body. Pleading didn’t help. Pain was a malevolent force determined to scrape out its existence where it could.

She knew he was dead. His green eyes, which she had so loved in life, now stared out at her, uncomprehending. She dragged herself towards him. Hot sand scraped under her fingers. She tried to ignore the spiking pain. That proved impossible. She bit her lip to stop from screaming, tasting the coppery tang of blood.

She could not reach him. All she saw was rivulets of blood soaking the sand like a grotesque lava lamp. And the gaping maws of death. It closed in on her until all she saw was his sightless eyes. Something gripped her arm. It was death. She’d fight, but it the end it wouldn’t matter…

Hayley’s surroundings slowly came into focus, making her blink rapidly. Someone was shaking her. Fear lodged itself in her throat. Mind scrambled from the nightmare, she lashed out. Connecting with something solid, and hearing a very male grunt, Hayley tried to find some type of purchase.

Suddenly, she stilled, remembered where she was. Looking over she saw Aiden gripping her arm. She swallowed; dryness etched into her throat. In counterpoint, sweat dripped down her back. She pulled gently and Aiden’s grip loosened so she could sit up.

Once again, her sleep was interrupted by nightmares. Her brain seemed intent, albeit while unconscious, on processing what happened in Iraq. It was always the same nightmare. Scattered recollections of dragging herself through hot sand. And blood. Lots of blood.

Looking around, the safe house wasn’t any more pleasant in the harsh light of day. The floorboards were scuffed, and the walls needed a serious paint job. Not that it mattered, but Hayley felt herself looking around to avoid eye contact.

Unable to look at anything else, there were only four walls, her gaze travelled reluctantly back to Aiden. He was squatting beside the couch. Dark smudges under his eyes showed he’d got little if any sleep. He was dressed in his normal jeans, but now had on a green version of his other grey sweater. It made his eyes seem even greener. If that was possible.

She avoided his gaze, but could feel his scrutiny. Feel the questions he wanted to ask. When she looked up, Aiden was looking at her steadily. A slight tilt to his head the only concession he made to the curiosity she knew was just beneath the surface.

“Sorry,” Hayley mumbled, before he could say anything. “For hitting you,” she clarified.

Aiden shrugged, unconcerned. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Hayley looked away, picked at the blanket on her knees. She stared at the blanket. She hadn’t had one when she crashed on the sofa. Aiden must have thrown it over her during the night. Her heart constricted unexpectedly at the simple gesture.

The nightmare still swirled in the periphery of her mind. The knowledge of Iraq was a burden. She never talked about it. But she felt an almost burning need to open up to Aiden in that moment.
She opened her mouth, but all that came out was, “Yeah.” So maybe not quite so ready to talk.

His eyes tightened, something flashing in his gaze, passing too quickly to make out. Hayley swallowed, almost coughed at the persistent dryness in her throat.

Aiden had not moved. His stillness was unnerving. As was his stare. Aiden had an almost hypnotic stare. It was intimidating at times. The intelligence, the calculation. He really did have the ability to almost pull information out of people just with his gaze. It took an enormous effort but she pulled her eyes away.

“I’ve got a few leads,” he said.

Hayley sat up, the nightmare trickling away as she became excited about the possibility of actually doing something. So far, it seemed all they’d managed to do was to get shot at.

“C’mon, I’ll show you,” Aiden said, getting up slowly and stretching.

“Did you get any sleep?” she asked as he walked away.

“A little,” Aiden replied distractedly.

Hayley rolled her eyes. Translation: none at all. When Aiden sat down at his chair, the humming of the computers reminded her of a beehive. The nano-bytes acting as the bees, busying scurrying around the motherboard.

“Angela contacted me. She checked her computer and found a virus. Of sorts.”

“What do you mean?” Hayley asked, stifling a yawn.

Aiden paused. “The message Angela received via DedSec’s servers was corrupted. She discovered a worm had invaded her email account. In the Sent folder the email she received about our meet was copied out under the guise of spam.”

“Okay.” Hayley said slowly, “And you can prove what she’s saying? That she didn’t send out the emails herself?”

“Yeah. I won’t go into it but I verified it myself.”

Hayley nodded, digesting this piece of information.

“Angela asked to be involved when we pursue Blume’s CIO. She’s offered her expertise and inside information,” Aiden inserted casually.

She glanced at Aiden sharply. His voice was carefully neutral but something in his tone alerted her. She couldn’t say what it was exactly. Or even why she picked up on it. If anything he sounded triumphant, but Hayley couldn’t work out why. Something tugged on her memory. A loose thread she couldn’t quite grab onto. Before she could unravel anything, Aiden spoke again.

“In any case, the worm still came from DedSec’s servers.”

“So it was DedSec who set you up.” This was a statement rather than a question, for it seemed obvious to her who was responsible.

Aiden swung around in the chair to face her. “I’m not sure. DedSec contacted Angela and asked her to relay a message. They requested a time to talk with me,” Aiden paused, looked back at the computer screen, “in a few minutes. I thought you might like to hear what they had to say.”
Hayley frowned, “Sure. But, why did you agree to speak with them? They sent fixers to kill you.”

“I’m giving them the benefit of the doubt. If they did send fixers after me, it would mean endangering Angela. She went to DedSec seeking help in exchange for what she knew about Blume. Angela’s information would have been a huge score for DedSec. Angela isn’t a member, but she still has contacts with their ranks. If they did set me up, they would have tipped her off, not let her walk into a trap.”

Aiden’s lips then stretched into a cold, predatory smile. “And if they did send fixers? I want them to know there’s nowhere they can hide from me.”

Honestly, she did not know what was scarier. Aiden’s face completely devoid of emotion while he calmly threatened someone. Or the manic smile pasted on his face right now, promising swift and bloody retribution. Probably the latter, because when he did show emotion it meant he was actually enjoying himself.

A ringtone broke into her thoughts. Aiden leaned over and swiped the phone. A garbled electronic voice filtered out.

“Aiden Pearce. Our paths cross again. You have used one of our members to gain access to our network. We will not tolerate these intrusions.”

Aiden swore quietly under his breath.

“Is that a threat?” he asked, steel winding its way through his words despite his level tone.

“No. It is not a threat. It is a warning.”

Aiden remained silent. He did not look particularly fazed. If anything, the slight curl to his mouth seemed to denote an inner amusement. The electronic voice waited for his response. When they didn’t get one they continued.

“We have contacted you regarding another issue. You were not the only intruder into our systems. We detected an irregularity and looked into it further. A virus was installed by a mutual acquaintance. Do you recall Danny SoSueMe?”

This time Aiden didn’t bother to hide his expletives.

“Of course I do,” he said brusquely, clearly annoyed. “SoSueMe is dead. You may need to reconsider some of you hires if that’s who they think wormed their way into your systems.”

“Your sarcasm is unwarranted. We are under no obligation to reveal any of this information.”

Aiden cocked his head. “But you are revealing this information to me. Why?” he asked bluntly.

“Despite our differences we owe you a debt. And DedSec always pays their debts.”

Aiden’s expression hardened, his eyes turned calculating. “This is about SoSueMe isn’t it? When he hacked into your servers, he stole some pretty damning evidence against DedSec. Not to mention gained access to the files you had on me. If I hadn’t wiped his hard drives he would have used those files to secure a deal with the Police. And DedSec’s members would have been fair game. That’s why you contacted me. This is you repaying your debts? And those files you have on me have since been deleted. Correct?”

“Correct. The files have been deleted. SoSueMe’s death was fortuitous. What he knew could have
“Okay. So let us get back to this intrusion. How did a dead man let fixers know where I was?”

Aiden asked, his tone more than a little skeptical.

“The virus was installed months ago. Not long before SoSueMe’s death. He must have installed it as a security measure. Your intrusion set off an alarm. His program was designed to find traces of you in our system and track it. A bounty was placed on your head and a message was sent out to a select number of fixers.”

“You also wanted to cover your own asses? Right? Make sure I knew it wasn’t any of DedSec’s members who were after me? Because retribution is a dirty word in your circles.” Aiden didn’t bother to hide the scorn in his voice.

He seemed to be deliberately goading in his responses. The DedSec member didn’t rise to the bait, but continued in a calm manner, despite the subtle threat in Aiden’s words.

“Do with the information what you will Aiden Pearce. This fulfills our obligation. Our paths will cross again. Your actions decide whether it is as enemies or allies.”

And with that portentous warning, they signed off.

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The Harold Washington Library, located south of The Loop, was not just a fully serviced library but also a major tourist attraction. Inside housed ten stories, each floor a spectacular design conceived by a talented group of architects. Clad with granite on the lower levels and red brick above, the structure was monumental in scale and grandeur.

The Library was also the perfect place for a clandestine meeting. You could easily blend into a crowd. Hundreds of bodies passed through every day, each busy with their own lives, paying little attention to others. Anonymity was the draw for the three individuals frequenting the building that day.

It was only the fifth floor, which held government publications, municipal references and structural plans, which was of any interest to Aiden. He arrived through the North public entrance. There were four entrances, each converging into the Lobby. He took the least used entrance, keeping to the walls, careful to keep his face down.

Despite the inherent danger of being out in public, he had chosen this particular location for a reason. To meet with Angela Balik and to hack into the Libraries’ internal server. He quickly climbed the stairs, accessing the fifth level while maintaining constant surveillance via the Libraries’ security feed. Despite having their own network, the Library’s security fed directly through to ctOS. Some bullshit propaganda about keeping citizens safe from domestic and foreign threats. It was about control. Control of information and who accessed it.

His purported ‘fame’ as the Vigilante meant he no longer had the luxury of relative obscurity. Thanks to the media and social platforms, his face was plastered all over Chicago. He was certain Blume had influence over the frequency of these reports. Even when his activities were comparatively quiet, his face popped up on a media report. No doubt reminding citizens of the menace among them.

Aiden wound his way around the shelves. A musty smell preceded him, the result of thousands of
books decomposing, slowly being eroded by the push of modern technology. The table he approached was set against the back wall, as far away from prying eyes as possible. When he rounded the corner, he saw two women inhabiting the small space. Hayley was leaning against a bookshelf, hip resting against a ledge, arms crossed. As he drew near, she flicked her gaze over to him, lingered slightly, almost accusingly, before shifting away.

He had to stop a frustrated noise from escaping. He knew Hayley’s opinion about involving Angela. She was less than thrilled. She didn’t trust her. It didn’t matter. Angela had something he wanted, and if he played it right, she would give it to him.

Sliding into the chair opposite her, Aiden immediately noticed the change in Angela’s demeanor. She was calmer. That wasn’t unexpected. She didn’t have fixers circling her like vultures. Her brown eyes held his, confident now, feeling more in control. It was an illusion. That feeling of control. He’d shatter it, watch as it skittered away like shards of broken glass.

Angela gave him a tight smile, clasping her hands together on the tabletop. She sat up straight, the sun from the nearby window slanting over her position. The sharp planes of her face were highlighted against the lighter background. It just served to emphasize her cunning expression.

“You spoke to DedSec?” Angela asked superciliously. The intrepid smugness in her expression was an indicator that she actually knew the answer.

Aiden regarded her wordlessly, expression carefully blank. Moments passed, each heartbeat poignant. The silence scolding her better than any words he could utter.

His continued silence unnerved her. Angela’s mouth tightened slightly, her hands clasped tighter in reflex. Her façade slipped. He could practically see the confidence trickle out of her.

As openings went, Aiden’s was executed flawlessly. Some encounters felt like playing Chess. He regarded himself as an interested amateur in regards to the game. He knew the basic rules, but the contest itself failed to interest him. The nuances of psychological manipulation in a real setting held far more appeal.

“Yes,” he said eventually, allowing inflection into his voice, “We managed to clear the air. I think they were worried about my disproportionate revenge tendencies.”

He flashed a smile, not a particularly nice one, more a reminder for Angela of who she was dealing with.

Again he fell silent, watching Angela struggle for composure. She came to the meeting believing she had the advantage. She did in a way. But her opponent was far more skilled in the thrust and parry of verbal contests. Something she was just working out.

“I didn’t think you’d agree to meet,” she said, voice a little throatier than normal. Her nerves were getting the better of her.

Hayley pulled out the chair next to him. Angela flinched. Aiden looked over at Hayley, gave Angela time to compose herself. It did not occur to Angela that she didn’t have to stay. Could just get up and walk out. He didn’t want to overdo it, but if she was off-balance there was the possibility she’d say more than she’d intended.

Hayley pushed a tablet towards him. Aiden had preloaded some of his hacking apps, basic tools of his trade. He didn’t expect much resistance from the Library’s network. It was designed to control people’s access to information rather than keep a skilled hacker out of the system.
He initiated a Portscan. It was a simple probe targeting the network with the aim of exploiting a known vulnerability. Finding the vulnerability, he tapped another app. To recover a password, all he had to do was upload a handshake file and allow the program to find the Administrator’s access.

“What are you doing?” Angela asked. Aiden looked up at her. Curiosity tinged her words despite her obvious apprehension.

“Hacking the library network,” he replied. His tone implied it was the most natural thing to be doing.

Angela bit her lip, clearly trying to determine if she had the mettle to ask why he was hacking into the system. Not that he planned to tell her. In the end she remained silent.

Within two minutes he had downloaded the schematics, wiped clean any traces he left, and logged out of the network. He left a backdoor, in the event he needed further access. He slid the tablet back to Hayley who took it without comment and went back to leaning against the shelf. His attention turned back to Angela.

“How is it you have confidential information about Blume’s CIO?” Aiden asked.

Angela blinked at him, clearly not anticipating he would be so direct. Her eyes slid away from him, touched on the leather bound volumes behind him, before settling back onto his face.

“I collected most of it while I worked for Blume,” Angela stated.

She was lying. Aiden had suspected the information she had collected about Blume had actually been gathered with the help of DedSec. Angela’s contacts went deeper within their organisation than she admitted. It was foolish of her to believe he wouldn’t work this out. A person with Angela’s skill-set could not have eluded Blume for so long without significant help. And she had just confirmed what he came here to know. She had access to DedSec’s servers.

Angela leaned over, retrieved her bag from the floor and withdrew a hard drive. She held it up to him.

“This is all the information I have on Julian Collins and Bellwether. Information not easily obtained,” Angela asserted, a judicious smile curving her lips.

Angela’s mistake was her complacency. She believed she held the better hand. Could manipulate her way through negotiations because he needed what she had. Blume’s downfall came secondary to her true motivations.

Angela took a deep, somewhat quivery breath. Her shoulders hunched together, while she tapped her thumb nervously on the hard drive. Cutting her eyes briefly towards the window, Angela squinted as the sun shone in her eyes, before settling her gaze back on him. Aiden saw indecision in her eyes as she regarded him.

Seconds ticked by as calculation and doubt fought for dominance in her expression. It was like watching an emotional seesaw.

“I’m sure we can come to some arrangement. What is this information worth to you?” Angela asked, gazing skittering away nervously before finally coming to settle on his face.

She gripped the hard drive, determination washing over her face. Evidently, the slight pang of conscience she experienced mere moments ago had vanished.

Angela’s question hung heavy in the air, like cigar smoke lingering after a poker game. The implications of her proposition swirled around the space, finally settling like a heavy cloak.
“You want money?” Hayley asked, incredulous.

Angela looked around to Hayley, clearly affronted. She shifted in her chair so that she could completely face Hayley. Angela’s fingers clasped the table, gripping the edge, anger evident in both expression and posture.

“Yes, I want money,” Angela spat. “It’s been so hard. I had to flee the only home I have ever known. Because of Blume. My life is all about threats; I’m constantly looking over my shoulder. Seeing danger in everyone around me. Feeling like I’m fighting for my life on a daily basis. You have no idea what that’s like,” Angela sneered.

Hayley stared steadily at Angela. Her eyes glinted, practically sparking in indignation. Hayley stepped forward, barely concealed violence lurking in her eyes. Angela blanched when she saw Hayley move towards her. Aiden tensed, ready to intercept Hayley. A shadow passed over Hayley’s face before she took a step back. She blew out a breath, glanced away, then back again. When she spoke, it was clear she was back in control of herself.

“Of course I do Angela. It’s called war,” Hayley said softly, voice even despite the flash of anger in her eyes. “I’ve experienced all that and more. So don’t presume you have a monopoly over hardship and suffering.”

Hayley turned her head away, but not before she caught Aiden’s eye. Desolation was carved out in her features, seemingly overwhelming.

Aiden hesitated, his focus split. Hayley’s reaction surprised him. He had never seen that raw aggression in her before. She had secrets, things she wasn’t willing to share with him. He knew that. Accepted it. But he needed stability from her if their plan was to work.

Angela cleared her throat, jarring him out of his thought. He’d deal with Hayley later.

“How much do you want?” Aiden asked.

She appeared to consider his question. It was too rehearsed to be anything other than feigned. She’d calculated the amount before they met.

“Twenty thousand.”

He arched a brow at her. It was less than he had expected. Hayley had reacted in anger to Angela’s obvious extortion efforts. Aiden, however, knew Angela would ask for money. If you knew your opponent, you knew what to expect. And Angela hadn’t disappointed.

Angela held his gaze, swallowing nervously. She tilted her chin up in defiance, as if she expected a negative response from him.

“Done,” he said, allowing a small smile to escape when Angela’s eyes widened in shock. She obviously expected resistance.

He grabbed his phone. “Give me the numbers and I’ll make the transfer now.”

Angela recited the bank account details. He had, briefly, considered rerouting the money after she had seen it hit her account. However, Angela was unpredictable. There was no guarantee she wouldn’t tip Blume off to their plans, despite it meaning she would be vulnerable herself to Blume’s private security. She was conceited enough to disregard her own safety for revenge.

“Hey, I know you. You’re the Vigilante,” an obnoxiously loud voice called out beside them.
Hayley’s head snapped up when she heard a voice outing Aiden as the Vigilante. A young guy, barely out of his teens, was standing a few feet away. He had on a green hooded jacket, low-slung jeans and unnecessarily large headphones draped around his neck. The kid was pointing, his high pitched laugh an octave too loud.

Aiden’s head whipped around to stare at the kid. The young guy’s expression faltered when he saw Aiden’s face. Thunderous didn’t even begin to describe it. He backed up, that odiously pointing hand falling limply to his side.

“Oh shit, oh shit,” the kid intoned as he backed away, crashing into a cart he hadn’t seen.

The damage was done. They might have been able to get away with silencing the kid, bribing him. His crash into the cart had cancelled that out.

“Fuck,” Hayley muttered.

She was angry with herself. She had lost focus, so intent on calming the emotional maelstrom inside her, that she had failed to notice the kid approach.

This was why Aiden insisted they all come separately. If he was recognized neither Angela not herself would be implicated. Even the table they sat at was a blind spot for the camera. Aiden had directed the other cameras in the room away from the entrance. If the tape was reviewed later there would be no electronic evidence to link them.

Hayley swung her gaze back to Aiden, unsure of what he wanted to do. It was blind luck she even looked over and saw what he did in that precise moment. Angela had risen from her chair and was watching the kid scramble off the cart. Aiden, taking advantage of Angela’s momentary distraction, leant over and quickly placed something in her bag.

When he straightened, Aiden’s eyes locked on hers. Understanding slammed into her. She didn’t have time to question him before both their attention was drawn to an approaching Security Guard. He was talking into the speaker-mic on his shoulder. Not a good sign.

Aiden sprang up quickly, heading the Security Guard off. The guy never stood a chance. He put his hand up, palm outward, thinking this would be enough to ward Aiden off. It wasn’t. Aiden continued to stalk towards him, despite the Guard’s warning. By the time the Security Guard realized Aiden was an actual threat it was too late. In typical Aiden style, he efficiently dispatched the Security Guard. Problem was, their disturbance was heard by other patrons, who’d already begun to converge.

They needed to move. Quickly. The downed Security Guard would provide a distraction. Hopefully enough of one to get away. People would mill about in confusion, unwilling to act, shock an effective immobilizer. Unless they had a first responder in the group, a Cop or a Firefighter was trained to act quickly. This would inhibit their escape if they called in additional guards too quickly.

“Take Angela,” Aiden barked at her.

Hayley hesitated. “Go,” Aiden hissed.

People were congregating around them, alarm spreading through them in a wave. A few gasps. Someone shouted for the Police.

Hayley turned and grabbed Angela’s arm. Angela was still staring at the unconscious Security Guard. Hayley pulled on her arm, hard.
Aiden took off in front of them, darting around the bookcases, heading for the exit. She knew the contingency plan. If something happened, Aiden would take the heat; draw whatever response ctOS mustered up away from them. Hayley was to make sure Angela got out of the building. Not that Hayley particularly cared about Angela’s safety. However, if Angela was caught it would take her all of one minute to break down and inform the Police and Blume of their plans. That couldn’t happen, Angela needed to be escorted to safety.

Angela was breathing hard as they raced down the steps, not far ahead of other patrons in their panic to get away. Other Security Guards were running up the stairs, their radios crackling in agitation, matching their expressions. As they exited the Library, sirens sounded in the distance, still far enough away to warrant a brisk walk rather than a full out run.

“What about Pearce?” Angela huffed, trying to keep up with Hayley.

“He’ll be fine,” she responded curtly.

Hayley’s vehicle was parked a block away. They reached it without incident. Hayley drove in silence to Angela’s pre-determined drop-off. It was a parking garage. Angela exited the vehicle without speaking. Hayley didn’t care, she hoped never to see Angela Balik again.

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It had taken a few days for Aiden to arrange a meet with Angela and gather all the intelligence he needed. They stayed in the squatter’s version of a safe house during that time. However, he had moved them to a Mad Mile safe house the day of the meet. It made sense. From now on their investigation would be concentrated in the heart of the city.

Mad Mile, one of the wealthiest districts in Chicago, was home to those with influence and prestige. Characterized by modern architecture and structures, you just had to look around to see the area practically dripping with expensive cars, high-end stores and high-class hotels.

Because of its affluence, Mad Mile was the last place Hayley imagined Aiden would have a safe house. The two story house was spacious, expensively furnished and with a spectacular view of the city. State-of-the-art, high tech security adorned the entire structure. Security cameras, alarms, laser grids, infrared sensors. It was a technophobe’s wet dream.

Hayley stood looking out over the expansive view from the second story. The windows were floor to ceiling, wrapping around the house to create a view which, in any other moment, would have created a sense of serenity.

But for Hayley, her emotions were as turbulent as the approaching storm. She could see grey clouds rolling in from the west, bringing with it heavy rain and a vicious cold front. Hayley was pensively considering how the weather mirrored her feelings. Waiting for Aiden to return was like waiting for a storm to break. Her anger felt like the approaching Nimbus clouds, darkening each passing minute, precipitating her building enmity.

From her position she was just able to make out the gate opening. Aiden was back. Despite her anger, she felt a slight uncoiling of tension in her muscles. Relief in knowing he was unharmed overshadowing the anger she felt momentarily.

She didn’t move from the window, preferring to watch the city. Hayley heard Aiden enter the house and come upstairs. He didn’t acknowledge her, but she followed his movements in the glass. He poured himself a drink. The tinkling of ice cubes seemed to her unnecessarily loud in the loaded silence.
“Are you okay?” she asked stiffly.

“Yeah,” he replied, amusement winding through the single syllable. *Of course I am*, his tone implied.

Hayley gritted her teeth in annoyance. The shroud of mystique surrounding Aiden’s alter ego as the Vigilante meant that his projected invincibility among his enemies was a deterrent. His arrogance and confidence in his own abilities, while notably justifiable, would eventually cause complacency. If he brought into his own mystique, that purported indomitability, he’d make a mistake. He couldn’t be prepared for every contingency. One bad day, one failure, and the consequences could be fatal.

Hayley turned around, didn’t bother to hide whatever she was thinking. Aiden came to stand in front of her, his expression a mixture of resignation and stubbornness.

“You weren’t meeting Angela for that hard drive.” It wasn’t a question. Aiden didn’t even bother to answer her. She had the confirmation she needed in his expression. He sipped the amber liquid in the glass, eyes never leaving her face.

“What did you slip in her bag?” she asked dully, finding it difficult to maintain the level of anger she first felt. She felt it trickle out of her, letting each drop slide away.

Aiden maintained his remote expression as he shrugged. “Portable Wi-Fi.”

Hayley crossed her arms, waiting for him to continue. Aiden sipped his drink again, the tinkling of the ice cubes getting on her nerves.

“Why?” she asked, surprised at how calm she sounded.

“It’s a way for me to hack into her system. Angela has contacts within DedSec’s inner circle. I can hack into her computer and access DedSec’s servers. I don’t trust them. It’s a way for me to have unrestricted access to their information.”

“You could have just told me that was what you planned to do,” Hayley said, exasperation creeping into her voice.

His shrug was made all the more poignant by his expression. He was totally unrepentant. Didn’t seem to understand, or maybe even care, that his actions had hurt her.

“What have I done to warrant this distrust? It was a simple matter of saying, ‘Hayley I’m planting a bug on Angela’. See I used simple verbs, nothing too extreme, I wouldn’t have even needed a dictionary for that sentence,” Hayley pointed out, deliberately provoking.

Aiden set his glass down carefully on the nearby table. Walked towards her until he invaded her personal space.

“I don’t need to run every decision I make by you Hayley. We got what we needed from Angela, so why does it matter? It’s better if you don’t know everything. I’m a criminal, a murderer. The lines of morality are blurry for me at best. I don’t want to involve you any more than necessary in my activities.”

“Protecting my sensibilities? How very noble for a criminal,” she replied sarcastically.

Then as an afterthought, “Not everyone is out to get you Aiden.”

He snorted, “Yes, they are.”
“I’m not,” she reminded him quietly.

Aiden opened his mouth to respond, but clamped it shut. It was the first time since they had reconnected that he didn’t have an answer readily available. He eyed her speculatively, took a step towards her. His proximity unnerved her so she stepped back. Didn’t have anywhere else to go, she’d been backed into a wall, literally. Well, a window.

Later, after she’d thought about it, Hayley wasn’t even sure what happened, one minute they were arguing, the next they were staring at each other. Somehow, that led to…something else.
Chapter 11

The clouds rolled in; eerily quiet despite the oncoming storm churning within. The room darkened, shadows clung to corners before expanding, reaching out for the occupants in the room. It was just as eerily quiet inside; the only sound that of agitated breathing.

Their argument had teetered out, both unwilling to back down. Aiden’s face was above hers, staring down at her with an intensity that was unsettling. For a few long seconds he didn’t do anything; he just…watched her. Something dangerous and sensual lurked behind his eyes, causing Hayley to back up. But she didn’t have far to go, she’d unknowingly been backed into the window.

Aiden was too close, she felt stifled. She reached out to push him away, but her hand caught his jacket instead. Didn’t go any further. Hayley looked up to Aiden, saw a knowing smile creep over his face. That irritated her enough to grip his jacket and push. He didn’t budge. She didn’t get a chance to speak before his arm whipped out, making her flinch.

He grabbed the hair on the base of her neck, yanked her head up. Hard. The slight pain distracted her, allowed Aiden to press her into the window while his mouth dipped over hers. For a few seconds she was so stunned she didn’t respond. Hayley opened her mouth to protest but didn’t get a word out before Aiden’s tongue skilfully worked its way into her mouth. She tasted alcohol on his lips. The sharp flavor of the spirit burning her tongue. She couldn’t help it, she groaned. In that moment, Aiden’s manipulations, his trust issues didn’t matter. All that mattered was that he didn’t stop.

Aiden’s body moulded against hers until it felt like she would be compressed into the window. The pervading chill from the glass crept across her shoulders, made her shiver. Had the odd effect of sharpening each sensation. Nerve endings sparked, lit up like fireworks.

The cold window was a strange counterpoint to the furnace-like heat radiating from Aiden. Hayley knocked his cap off, frustrated by lack of access. Vaguely heard it fall to the floor, but her concentration was taken over by Aiden’s wandering hands. Fingers lifted her shirt, trailed behind to unclasp her bra. She felt a bulge in his jeans as he pulled her hips against his and began to grind against her.

She wondered if it should feel this good, wondered whether she would regret her actions later. She had no more time to wonder when his hands roamed to the front of her pants.

She closed her eyes, tilted her head back. Aiden nibbled along her jaw as he unzipped her jeans. Her eyes snapped open when his fingers dipped into her pants. He withdrew his body slightly, allowing for better access.

Aiden was watching her now, pupils dilated, lips parted in a kind of lustful snarl. It made him seem fierce, and dangerous. More dangerous now that he had let go of his inhibitions. His eyes glittered as his hand parted her underwear and dipped into her. She bit her lip as he stroked her, inside and out. His thumb rubbed her confidently, as if he knew the exact pressure to exert to get her body to respond. He moved his fingers inside her, slowly, teasing out her reaction. Hayley felt an ache below, building quickly, so when he withdrew, she cried out in frustration. Aiden’s throaty laugh wasn’t appreciated, but she didn’t have time to complain further before he was tugging her shirt over her head.
Aiden took immediate advantage of her unsupported breasts, kneading them with his calloused fingers. Hayley pulled away from his touch, ripping open his jacket, trying unsuccessfully to shove it off his shoulders. She made a frustrated sound when it stuck. Aiden took charge, quickly tearing off the jacket, then discarded his jumper, and undershirt.

Lightning crackled behind her, briefly illuminating the room, highlighting Aiden’s naked, pale torso. Needing to feel skin beneath her hands, Hayley slid her fingers over his scarred chest. Liking the warmth generated under her fingers, she trailed the tips down his chest, tracing the muscles of his well-defined abdomen. Aiden made an impatient noise and yanked her forward, clashing their mouths together. He turned her around, pushing her towards the bedroom.

They stumbled towards the room, leaving biting kisses and clothes in their wake. Hayley felt the back of her legs hit the bed, almost fell. Would have if Aiden hadn’t tightened his grip on her hips, pulling her enticingly again him. She wrapped a leg around his hips, ground herself into him, frustrated by the clothing still between them. Heard a growl, didn’t know if it came from her or Aiden.

Aiden trailed kisses along her jaw before dipping lower to swirl his tongue over her neck. He bit down hard, causing a breathless yelp from her and pleased rumble from him. He let his fingers trace lightly up her stomach. Hayley jerked slightly when she felt him encounter her scars.

Hayley felt more than saw Aiden’s confusion. He stilled, surprise transmitting itself through his fingertips, like electrical currents pulsing between them. He pulled back abruptly, looked down, then back up to her. Aiden’s face was partially obscured; shadows draped over half his face. But she could see enough, see the surprise flitter across his expression.

That was almost the end for her; she wanted to stop. To cover herself in hundreds of layers. Shame burned in her. Shame at the horrific scars that disfigured her lower body. Shame in what they represented; a daily reminder of her mistakes.

Aiden tightened his grip on her hip. One hand reached up to cup her face. His gaze held nothing but concern, his thumb brushing her cheek in a gentle gesture she didn’t think him capable of.

“That doesn’t matter,” he murmured, leaning down to kiss her again.

He said the right thing, what Hayley needed in that moment. She could pull away, let her guilt consume her. But what was the point? She’d unintentionally opened herself up to Aiden, he’d seen what she’d been hiding. It would also take a different type of strength to pull away from whatever was between them in that moment. Slowly, she responded to Aiden. Allowed her body to once again melt into his touch, allowed the desire to compress any lingering doubts.

Hayley moved down to unzip Aiden’s jeans. Slipped a hand inside, stroking him. Pleased when he groaned in response and thrust his hips up to meet her. She withdrew, smiling when she heard him grumble.

Aiden leaned into her until she toppled backwards, a breathy laugh escaping her. Aiden grinned at her, so unrestricted in his amusement. It softened his expression, stripping layers of tension away. A bolt of lightning crackled outside, lighting up the room and searing that image into her mind like a photograph.

Hayley watched as he stepped out of his jeans, unrepentant in her appreciation of his body. He flashed another grin before grabbing her legs. Getting off her jeans became a tortuous exercise. Deliberately teasing, Aiden took his time, peeling each leg off agonizingly slowly. Hands caressing, lingering, imprinting against her skin.
Rain sluiced against the window, matching the droplets of sweat forming on their bodies. Hayley moved up further on the bed, watching as Aiden crawled on top of her, muscles flexing, his movements tightly controlled. Predatory, dangerous and entirely intoxicating.

As Aiden held himself above her, the storm outside increased its velocity, thunder rumbled overhead as the rain pelted the windows. Hayley closed her eyes as Aiden parted her legs and guided himself into her. Felt her breath quicken as he slid in further. Once he was fully sheathed, she reached up, tightening her arms around him as her hips came up to meet him.

She didn’t have time to breathe before he started moving inside her. It was a slow rolling of his hips, which infuriated her. Chuckling, he increased his pace at her urging. It distantly registered that the wind had picked up, howling its consternation to the night.

Aiden kissed her, hard, teeth mashing together before swiping his tongue enticingly over her lower lip. She wasn’t concentrating on the progression of his mouth, tantalizing little bites as he moved over to her jaw, too content on the pleasure flooding her body. Only when his bites became harder, his teeth scraping against her collarbone, did she cry out, the pain adding another tantalizing layer to her already overloaded senses.

Wrapping both legs around his waist, she angled her hips up, meeting each thrust as he drove himself relentlessly inside her. Each sure stroke of his body felt like he was cleaving away another emotion, stripping her bare until nothing stood between them but this moment.

She couldn’t help a low moan from escaping as all too soon she felt that coiling tension below.

“Open your eyes,” Aiden growled above her.

Hayley opened her eyes in surprise, not even realizing she had closed them. He was watching her with a focused intensity that would have been overwhelming if he wasn’t doing wonderful things with his hips to distract her. She arched up against him, her whole body tightening around him. The thunder outside sounded like a crescendo, seeming to synchronize with her, almost drowning out her groans as she shuddered against him.

Aiden’s thrusts became faster, his own release near. His rhythm faltered as he tensed up, a low moan tearing itself from his throat. In that moment, Hayley relished the sight of Aiden’s loss of control, giving it over to her briefly as he came. It was an incredible rush, almost addictive in its intensity. His thrusts slowed, becoming more a rolling of his hips before he stopped completely.

Aiden withdrew from her and flopped on his back next to her. Both of them were breathing hard. Neither spoke. Hayley doubted she could even move, a pleasant lethargy overtaking her limbs.

It was cold lying there, but he just could not muster up the energy to care. An agreeable buzz had settled over his mind, his body comfortably languid.

Aiden looked to his right, watched as raindrops slithered down the glass. It mesmerized him for a few moments before he shook himself. He felt Hayley stir next to him. She rubbed her hand over her eyes before allowing her hand to fall limply at her side. Her eyes remained closed so he shifted to his side, propped himself up on an elbow.

One eye popped open to appraise him. Hayley gave a him a lazy, satisfied smile before settling back, eyes sliding shut. His gaze lingered on Hayley’s face before appreciatively sliding down her body. His smile dropped abruptly when he saw the scars on her stomach.
There was scarce light available. When they’d stumbled into the room, neither thought about stopping to switch the light on. There was just enough illumination to see the patterns of scars which ran across her rib-cage, hip and lower abdomen. Jagged and red, puckered in some places, deeper in others.

He wondered how she had survived. Such extensive injuries should rightly have killed her. Especially their placement, whatever had made those wounds would have penetrated at least one major organ.

Aiden suspected that he knew what he caused them. An IED. He reached out slowly, until his fingers hovered an inch above her stomach. He had this inexplicable urge to feel the contours of the scars, to assure himself whatever damage she had sustained was repaired.

The tips of his fingers drifted closer, almost touching her stomach. Stopped when he sensed the sudden rigidity in her body. He stilled, flicked his gaze back up to Hayley. She was observing him quietly, expression wary and tinged with a deep sorrow.

The sanguinity of moments ago vanished abruptly, replaced by the intrusiveness of reality, which left a bitter aftertaste for both of them. His scrutiny clearly made Hayley uncomfortable, so he curled his fingers into a fist over her stomach, tightening it briefly before pulling his arm away. He wanted to say something, but could think of nothing that wouldn’t sound like he was making caustic reassurances.

His mind searched for something to say. Grabbed onto something important. He sat up suddenly, startling Hayley with this abrupt movement.

“Shit,” he intoned, rubbing his forehead. He looked back at Hayley. “I didn’t use a condom.”

“Oh,” she grimaced.

She sat up slightly, pulling the bedspread around her. Tucking a stray hair behind her ear, she shrugged at him.

“It’s not an issue,” she said softly. So softly he didn’t think he heard her correctly.

“What?” he asked.

She sighed, a heavy sound that carried with it a surprisingly amount of sadness. “It’s not a problem Aiden,” she said, refusing to meet his eyes.

He should have thought about it. If it hadn’t been so long since he’d been with anyone, he’d have habitually used protection. Problem was, his life was more about evading fixers and out-thinking Blume, he didn’t have the time or the compulsion to pursue other interests. That wasn’t necessarily a justifiable excuse, but it was all he had in that moment.

Aiden frowned at her. Wondered why she wasn’t as concerned as he was. Thought about it, realized why. The answer came too slowly, but he chalked that up to reduced blood flow to the brain.

“You’re on birth control?” he surmised, unable to keep the relief out of his voice.

“Sort of,” she conceded.

“It’s a pretty simple answer Hayley,” he snapped.

Hayley did look at him then. He was stunned to see tears welling up in her eyes. Abruptly, she threw
the bedspread off, walked around to stand in front of him.

“I can’t get pregnant,” she revealed. Hayley waved a hand near her mid-section, brushing against a particularly angry looking scar. “That fucking IED took that away from me. So don’t worry Aiden, parenthood is on neither of our agendas.”

Shock rippled through him as Hayley turned around, walked towards the en-suite and slammed the door.

“Fuck,” he muttered, processing the full implications of Hayley’s admission.

He heard the shower turn on, realized he was still staring at the slammed door. He got up, looked around for his jeans, found them on the floor, along with the rest of his clothing. Once suitably dressed he settled back on the bed, waiting for Hayley to emerge.

He regretted being short with her. The thought of getting her pregnant had caused a panicked lump the size of Chicago to settle in the pit of his gut. He wasn’t cut out to be a Father. He inherently knew he was too selfish, and irresponsible, too prone to violent and irrational behaviour to be any kind of role model for a kid.

He still needed to talk to Hayley about what happened with Angela. He needed Hayley focused, consistent, not prone to discordant machinations associated with her trauma. It wasn’t only embarrassment at her disfigurement. That played a relatively small part in her overall reticence to even touch on the subject of her wartime experience.

The pipes gurgled their way to a stop when Hayley turned the shower off. She exited wrapped in a towel, hair dripping around her face. She lingered in the doorway, shooting him a quick, surprised look before she exited the bedroom. He got up and followed her to the bedroom he’d allotted her.

He leaned against the door-frame. Hayley had begun to unfasten the towel before she realized he was there.

“Fun time’s over,” she proclaimed, tone undeniably sarcastic.

He snorted in amusement but didn’t move. He expected anger from her. He’d exposed her, even if unintentionally, revealed a secret she wasn’t willing to part with.

She glared at him. “Aiden if this is your idea of post-coital romance, leering at me in the doorway while I undress, then you really need new material.”

This time he barked out a laugh, more amused then he should be by her comment. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen anyway.”

Hayley muttered something he didn’t catch, but it wasn’t hard to guess it wasn’t complimentary towards him.

“Fine,” she said, words clipped in anger as she loosened the towel and threw it at him.

He caught the towel easily, amused and more than a little aroused at the fact that she was now stalking around the room nude.

Once dressed, she tried to push past him, but he grabbed her wrist. She swung towards him, eyes flashing dangerously. He held on, exerted additional pressure.

“Hayley. Wait. We need to talk.”
She was breathing heavily, a wild, rapacious look descending over her face. Slowly, Hayley turned to look at him. She reminded him of a rattlesnake, body drawn into a defensive coil, lip curled, ready to strike.

She clearly had difficulty controlling instinctual reactions. He’d seen this before in PTSD victims. Their mind perceived everyone as a threat. Add in heightened emotions and the affected person had real difficulty discerning between real and imagined dangers.

This was what they needed to talk about. He would never have considered Hayley unstable. But right now, he could tell she was fighting against a real urge to do him damage.

He let go of Hayley’s wrist abruptly. She blinked a few times, calm trickling back over her expression. She snapped her hand back to her side and stepped back.

He motioned to her. “This is what we need to talk about. There are times you clearly aren’t in control of yourself. What happened over in Iraq?”

Hayley rubbed her wrist, sneered at him, “Right, like I’m going to tell you. We have one good fuck and you expect me to open up? Reach into every corner of my soul. For you?”

He calmly contemplated Hayley, unsurprised by her anger. She was deflecting, going on the offensive, trying to hurt him to resist talking about her trauma. She held that knowledge close, like a reverse shield, battering herself daily instead of trying to protect herself.

“If not me, then who? Who are you going to talk to? Danny?” he asked, voice pitched low so she couldn’t mistake his intention for anything other than deliberately confrontational.

He was using the only emotional advantage available to him. Knowing how embittered she’d be mentioning her brother, but unable to prove his point quite as effectively without it.

Hayley flinched as if he’d hit her. Distance crawled between them, closing up any strides they’d made to repair whatever reminded of their tattered relationship.

“You’re a cold bastard,” Hayley remarked, lip curled in distaste.

Aiden shrugged. He agreed with her. His callous disregard for her feelings might seem heartless to her. But that wasn’t his aim. Hayley needed to talk. Needed to purge herself of whatever darkness she carried around. Because he knew what happened when you carried around that type of darkness. It tore at your insides, relentless in its pursuit to dig out every negative emotion you ever had. Wrap it up in a ball and hurl it at you so hard it hurt. Until it latched on to you and there was nothing but the darkness and the pain. That’s when you stepped over the edge, did things you regretted and could never come back from.

“Most likely,” he agreed, “but that guilt or shame or whatever it is that you carry around? It will eat at you until there’s nothing left but bitterness and hostility.”

“What would you know about it?” Hayley asked carelessly.

Aiden snorted, not in amusement but derision. “I contributed to my niece’s death. You don’t have the monopoly on pain.” Aiden threw Hayley’s own quote back at her, what she’d said to Angela.

For a brief second, shame flashed in her eyes. Almost as quickly as it came, the emotion flickered out. Hayley appeared to deflate; her shoulders slumped and she moved back to sit on the bed.

When she looked back up at him she was calmer, although the muscles in her arms strained as she
dug her hands into the bed.

Uncertainty wavered around her like a kite, lifting high and low, seemingly in sync with her emotional state. Hayley remained quiet for a long time. Aiden was about to move out of the room when she spoke.

“I don’t even know where to start,” she said, voice barely above a whisper.

Aiden stepped toward her. “What about from the beginning?”

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The sun shimmered above, its relentless heat pushing down on the individuals below. It felt compressing, that heat. Stifling. Especially in layers of combat gears. Boots, clothes, guns, ammo, vest, water bottle, helmet. Each item felt like a medieval torture method created by the Army to inflict additional hardship on an already weary unit.

The Humvee crawled at a leisurely pace. The driver had an easy job compared to the individuals outside, trudging along in the dragging sand.

“Your turn to wash out our clothes Sharpie,” Damon yelled at the Humvee.

Hayley sniggered. Washing out their stiff, sand caked clothes was the price paid by whoever sat in the Humvee that week. It was a dirty, hard and physically intensive job. That was the payoff for sitting in the cushy Humvee.

Her team was driving through a small village. If you didn’t know what to look for, you’d be mistaken for thinking the little village deserted. Signs of life could be seen. It was the little things you learnt to pick out. Goat dropping on the road, buckets of water left, scuffed footprints in the sand.

Everyone had scattered at the sound of the approaching vehicle. Iraqi villagers had an instinctive fear of American Military and disappeared before anyone had a chance to see them.

It was a routine patrol that day. They’d already scouted another village five miles back. Reported nothing suspicious. Closer to their base they were investigating another village. Women were being recruited to gun down American troops. These attacks were becoming more widespread. Their sweep today was to identify possible threats and if need be confiscate weapons.

Hayley looked over to Damon. The brown haired, green eyed man with a cheeky grin and surprisingly deep dimples she was beginning to have more than casual feelings for.

They’d been sleeping together for a few months. Secretly. Or so they believed. It was the worst kept secret among their unit. Not that the others minded. A closely bonded unit of different sexes, backgrounds and skills, it was inevitable that their close quarters and daily life and death struggles would bring certain individuals even closer.

The Humvee stopped and Private Sharpie got out. They all took up positions. Waiting for the villagers to emerge. They usually did. It caused less panic if they came out willingly. They waited. No one emerged. An uneasy feeling swept over her. Hayley swallowed, throat perpetually dry from the unceasing dry weather.

Jamison, their language expect, fluent in over a dozen language including the Iraqi dialect of Farsi, called out. No one answered. The wind swirling the sand around them the only response.

Hayley gripped her M-16, turned around in the saturating silence. A slight scuffing noise alerted her
so she turned around. A woman had silently walked out into the middle of the road, approximately a few dozen feet from their position. She was dressed all in black. A burka obscured her face. Hayley wasn’t looking at her face. She watched the young child next to her.

The boy was young, about eleven years old. In his right hand he held a 9 mm. It was pointing at her. The edges of her vision blurred before sharpening almost painfully, registering tiny, inconsequential details. The faded brown hat he wore, the stain on the front of his shirt. She couldn’t move. It felt like her entire body was emerged in quicksand. Her limbs wouldn’t cooperate, her mouth wouldn’t open.

Suddenly, Damon shouted, and that seemed to snap her concentration. The little boy raised the gun higher, hands shaking. Her training should have kicked in, should have identified the little boy as a threat. But that’s all she saw him as, a little boy.

Hayley hesitated, finger curled around the trigger. Her hesitation cost her. She imagined she saw the flare as the bullet left the chamber, but in reality she was just being fanciful. Attributing meaning where none existed.

The bullet buried itself into her bicep, pulling her to the side with its force. As soon as she hit the ground, all hell broke loose. Gunfire peppered the surrounding village, shouts could be heard above the uproar.

Damon sprinted to her side, slid next to her, sprayed sand over her. He took up position, firing into the fray as she choked on sand. He pulled her up, dragged her across the open into a nearby house. Pain was snaking through her veins sending shock-waves through her system.

She was panting too hard. Shock already a factor. The din of their surroundings blocked out the two huddling figures in the corner. Damon shouted at them, pointed a gun. A man and a woman, they were shaking their heads, terrified, their whites of their eyes showing.

Hayley checked the bullet site. An ache had settled into the muscle and it was bleeding sluggishly. She could move her arm, it was painful and stiff, but she could ignore it.

Damon was firing out the window. Shell casings littered the floor around him. Hayley took up position next to him, shocked at the war zone she encountered outside. A peaceful village was now strewn with bodies, bullet were zinging past, while scarcely a breath could be in-drawn without the sound of gunfire.

Private Sharpie was propped up against the Humvee’s tyres, hand plastered over his stomach, a large bloodstain spreading under it. Hayley shook Damon, motioned toward their fallen comrade. A quick argument took place. Hayley outranked Damon, so in the end he had to adhere to her command.

Despite the chaos around them, Hayley and Damon reached the Humvee unscathed. They packed Sharpie into the vehicle. Radioed their team. They needed to retreat; they had two injured, one seriously.

Hayley spared a quick look towards where the young boy had been. Saw him sprawled on his back, blood soaking his torso. Nausea threatened to overwhelm her, so she looked away. Knew that image would be seared in her mind. Be the result of nightmares yet to come.

A civilian ran out behind the Humvee, screaming. He waved his hand, a warning perceived despite the language barrier. She had enough time to notice the grenade strapped to the guy’s hand before she watched it blow him up.
Hayley gagged, heard something behind her and spun around to identify the threat. A man was chasing a woman, gunned her down in the street before she could react. Hayley brought up her rifle, added pressure to the trigger. Saw the man jerk backwards and flop on the ground.

The rest of her unit were approaching. Some climbed into the vehicle, others took up position around it. Damon moved the vehicle slowly, allowing the team to keep up.

Hayley banged on the door. “To the left,” she shouted at Damon, pointing at a different path. One that wouldn’t pass by the dead boy.

Damon nodded, navigated the vehicle to where she pointed. A few more feet and they’d all be able to climb in to the Humvee.

An explosion rocked the ground around them. She couldn’t figure out what she was seeing, or hearing. Orange flames licked around her vision, scraping metal, pained screams, burning flesh. Hayley felt herself being propelled backwards, felt as if someone yanked her ten feet in the air then slammed her on the ground.

She couldn’t hear anything besides a loud buzzing. Her vision blackened at the edges, like burnt toast. At first she couldn’t feel anything, just a numbness where her body should have been. Then the pain hit, agonizing waves spreading out from her abdomen. It stole her breath away. Was all she could think about for what seemed like an age. Until she smelt it. Her own burning flesh.

That spurred her into action. She rolled over painfully, almost passing out, fighting against waves of dizziness threatening to overwhelm her. Once on her side, she curled in on herself, rocking, trying to get a grip on the agony assaulting her senses. Sand stuck to the side of her face, clogging her airways.

The burning hunk of metal that was the Humvee lay on its side. Hayley looked away, spotted a familiar shock of brown hair. Damon. He was laying a few feet away from her, green eyes staring sightlessly toward her. She opened her mouth, coughed, didn’t know if she was screaming because she couldn’t hear anything.

She tried to drag herself towards him. Had the thought that if she could touch him, he’d be okay. He’d live. The sand scraped under her hand as she attempted to drag herself towards him. It might have been glass she was dragging herself through. Or felt like it. The pain was so intense she was actually screaming. Or though she was until she realized her throat was too dry for any type of sound. The screams originated elsewhere.

The pain was horrific now. Blinding in its intensity. She continued to drag herself towards him. Kept repeating ‘sorry’ in her head. Like a mantra. If she said it enough it would bring him back. Make the decision she made negatable. The pain became too much, her vision flickered on and off like a cheap TV set. At that time, Hayley hoped she’d wake up on the other side, sipping heavenly cocktails with the man she secretly loved.

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Hayley was completely unaware that tears were rolling down her face, like a faucet that couldn’t be fixed. She stared at Aiden, unseeing, mind evidently in another place.

Aiden had been involved in situations that made even his steel-edged nerves falter. But he’d never been in a war-zone. He could draw parallels with his life in Chicago to that of a war-zone, but that’s all it would be, a parallel.

He knew what it was like to fight for your life. Duck and weave, assess, shoot and run. But his
enemies were always after him alone. Men, and some women, fixers, Police, Private Security. All out vying for his blood because of how he lived his life. That was ultimately his choice. That seemed cleaner, more acceptable. As a soldier, you were a mark for everyone. You took the hits for the public so that they didn’t have to.

He’d witnessed a kid being shot in a drive-by. That just didn’t seem to compare to watching as a child raised a gun to you. He wondered if he would have hesitated, as Hayley did. Or if he was that far gone that it was just instinct, a blind fight for survive, the face, age or sex didn’t matter. What mattered was being ahead, eliminating the threat regardless.

“I died you know?” Hayley asserted, pulling him abruptly out of his reverie. Her eyes still had that vacant look, but she was nodding, as if to assure herself what she said was correct.

“Twice. On the operating table. The surgeons brought me back. They told me, after I’d woken up, I’d lost so much blood, they had to transfuse me. Twice.” Hayley paused, swallowed convulsively before stealing a quick look at him. “They removed one rib, a part of my small intestine, both my ovaries, which we apparently beyond repair, and my uterus. I thought it only fair you know. Like a trade-off. I stole life from my team members, so now I can’t produce it.”

Aiden opened his mouth to respond, to deny this but Hayley continued. “I made two mistakes that day. I should have shot that boy. My hesitation cost other civilians their lives. The villagers had been taken hostage. If I’d acted sooner we could have saved them. My fucking squeamishness about seeing that boy lying there influenced my decision to make Damon turn the Humvee away. If we’d gone the way he wanted my team would be alive.”

Aiden didn’t know what to say. Anything that came out would just sound like false reassurances. People could tell him Lena’s death wasn’t his fault. Was instead a sequence of random events, tied together by one precipitating factor which culminated in a tragic event. But that was meaningless. And useless. As useless as glue trying to hold water together. It was his fault. He’d dissected the events in every which way and it always came back to him. Hayley would have done the same. However way she looked at it, she would be the constant factor, her choices that contributed to the death of her team.

So he didn’t say anything, just shuffled over, reached out tentatively. Hayley accepted his touch, leaned into him, body relaxing against him. Wrapped her arms around him and held on. He wasn’t usually inclined to provide comfort to people. It meant dropping his own barriers. But the desolation floating around Hayley, plucking at her emotional barriers and sucking life away like an emotional parasite, meant that he’d sit there on the floor, letting her breathe. Letting her draw whatever small comfort she could from him.
Chapter 12

Bellwether was designed to gather data from technology sensors networked to ctOS. Through phones, tablets, security feeds, laptops; everything was recorded and stored. Physical location, phone contacts, conversations, social media; all this information was constantly documented, analyzed and used to influence behavior.

It was to provide Blume with an open source of data on every citizen. Data collection by companies wasn’t a new concept. Even outside of ctOS run Chicago, apps downloaded to Smartphones often had data collection software embedded within to influence advertising of the masses. Nevertheless, Bellwether was used for far more malevolent purposes than to incite gluttonous consumerism.

However disturbing Bellwether was, just as troubling was the knowledge that one man, Blume’s CIO Julian Collins, had unrestricted and more importantly unregulated access to it. The problem was, while Angela provided a name to focus their investigation, she was unable to provide proof of wrongdoing.

Angela had compiled a digital background on Julian. He graduated from Chicago State majoring in IT, had no criminal record, no spouse or children. Julian had a promising career with Blume. Starting from a simple beginning in IT he worked his way up to CIO.

Aiden did his own digging on Julian. It took a few days but Aiden hacked his way into every network or database he needed to amass his own synopsis of Blume’s CIO.

Either Julian was the most scrupulous individual on the planet, or he knew how to hide his criminal activities. Hayley believed the latter, as Aiden found nothing to suggest Julian Collins was the megalomaniac with sociopathic leanings Angela Balik led them to believe.

However, Aiden’s persistence paid off; he managed to find some incriminating evidence. It was so benign it was easily missed. A College grievance report, filed by a woman named Kerry Myers, alleged Julian had been harassing her.

Interestingly, the grievance was withdrawn a few days later, coinciding with another report made by College Security. A masked assailant allegedly assaulted Kerry on Campus. The Police were called, but no mention of Julian’s name appeared in the report. These two events seemed too coincidental.

It was a simple task for Aiden to find Kerry’s current residence. As luck had it, Kerry still lived in Chicago. They decided to visit Kerry to see if could shed some light on Julian’s character.

The cozy little cottage on the outskirts of the Parker Square district was a small, simplistic dwelling. A little old fashioned in design, but with white clapboard shutters and a wraparound porch, it nonetheless had character.

A charming old-fashioned bell sat to the right of the front door. Aiden pulled the bell string, raising a satirical eyebrow at the fixture. These types of homely touches were lost on Aiden, whose idea of homely included having a shelf for his tools.

They came to Kerry under the guise of Detectives. Their cover story was simple. They were
investigating a series of physical assaults on Chicago State Campus. The ‘attacks’ had an identical modus operandi to when Kerry attended the University.

Aiden wore a suit, charcoal grey with a dark blue tie and white shirt. It certainly was a shock to the system, seeing Aiden in civilized attire. The look suited him, minus the obvious pun. Without his cap he looked different. Scarcely recognizable as the Vigilante.

An attractive woman in her early 30’s answered the door. Black curly hair framed an oval shaped face that produced a hesitant smile.

“Can I help you?” she asked politely.

Aiden flashed his badge. “My name is Detective Barber, this is my partner,” Aiden motioned to her, “Detective Gale. Is your name Kerry West? Previously Myers?” Aiden asked, flipping out a notebook from his pocket. The gesture unerringly reminiscent of a real Cop’s behaviour.

Aiden voice was surprisingly soothing, despite the gravelly undertones. His usual confident, brusque disposition had vanished. Replaced with an unassuming but poised demeanour that was entirely too convincing.

A loose thread pulled at Hayley’s memories. She tried to grab on to it but felt the recollection slip away. Something to do with Aiden’s acting. She let it slide, frustrated by her minds inability to provide an answer.

Kerry’s smile faltered, before she nodded her assent. “Yes it is. May I ask what this is about?” she queried, nervousness threading through her words.

“If it’s okay, we’d like to come in and talk to you,” Aiden replied smoothly.

Kerry’s eyes darted between them, settled on Hayley. “May I see your badge?” she asked, clearly stalling, but unwilling to say no to ‘Police Officers’.

Hayley smiled. “Of course,” she replied, flipping open her own badge.

Kerry made a show of looking it over. Hayley swallowed, careful to hide her own nervous reaction. Aiden procured the false identification from a fixer. No questions asked.

Kerry’s smile dropped and she nodded, stepping to the side to usher them in. The inside of the house was well maintained. Hardwood floors, intricate latticework on the entranceway arch and heavy wood furniture suited the overall cottage feel.

Aiden and Hayley sat on a floral sofa Kerry pointed them to in the living room. Kerry hesitated in the doorway before sitting opposite, coffee table between them.

Aiden consulted his notebook. “We’re investigating a series of physical assaults perpetrated by a masked man on Chicago State campus. Your name came up in our background check as having experienced a similar incident. We just wanted to ask a few questions.”

Kerry’s face drained of color as she gripped the single lounge armchair hard enough for the fabric to protest. Kerry blinked rapidly, her breath quickening. Short little gasps of air. Fear, evident in her eyes, seemed to leak through her pores. Wrapped around the living room like a fog, thick and unyielding. Hayley grabbed the sofa herself, feeling strangely affected by Kerry’s distress. Like some type of weird osmosis.

“I’d like a drink before we start,” Kerry burst out.
The single chair sofa slid back loudly on the hardwood floor as Kerry stood up and made an obvious effort to walk unhurriedly out of the room.

Hayley let out a breath and turned to Aiden, still feeling oddly influenced by Kerry’s fear. Aiden was contemplating the doorway where Kerry disappeared. He didn’t say anything, even after the faint sounds of Kerry in the kitchen floated back to them.

“Did you see her reaction?” Hayley whispered inanely.

Aiden spared her a brief sardonic look before palming his phone.

“What are you doing?” Hayley asked suspiciously.

“Hacking into her computer and setting up a trace on her calls,” Aiden replied laconically.

“Why?”

Aiden voice was impatient. “I want to see who she calls. And if there’s anything in her computer about Collins.”

Hayley made a face at Aiden’s moral ambiguity. It seemed wrong somehow to delve into Kerry’s personal life just because she had a grievance with Julian.

A thud in the kitchen got Hayley out of the chair. Aiden pulled on her arm, shook his head.

“Let her get herself under control. She won’t talk if she’s afraid or hysterical.”

Hayley hesitated before sitting down again. Settled instead for asking, “Are you okay Mrs. West?”

“Yes,” came the muffled reply that sounded suspiciously like Kerry was crying, “I just dropped something.”

A few minutes later Kerry returned, tray in hand. She gave them a watery smile as she bent over the coffee table. The small tremble in her hand as she placed the tray betrayed the effort it cost to appear composed. Kerry busied herself with making tea, before she sat back, looking apprehensively at Aiden.

As Aiden smiled at Kerry, Hayley jolted seeing his expression. It wasn’t so much the smile as the sincerity it depicted. A sincerity so convincing, it was difficult to fault his execution. And that was disturbing. Witnessing just how much of an accomplished prevaricator Aiden was.

Aiden’s ability to modify his behaviour so persuasively sparked a creeping feeling of unease, although Hayley could not discern why.

“If you don’t mind Mrs. West, we’d like to go over what happened when you were attacked on campus,” Aiden began gently.

As Kerry sipped her tea, flashes of emotion escaped, despite her best effort to conceal them. Fear, anxiety, anger. Each emotion was like lightening crackling across the sky, intense, uncontrollable, and gone in an instant.

“I can’t remember much. It was a long time ago. The guy was wearing a mask,” Kerry explained in a rush, refusing to meet their eyes.

“That’s okay,” Aiden soothed, “we understand. We’re investigating a few suspects. We’re not sure if it’s the same person but the MO is very similar. Do you know this man?” Aiden questioned,
removing a picture of Julian from his jacket pocket.

He held out the picture to Kerry. Kerry’s gaze barely touched on the photo before it skittered nervously away. She was unable to hide the flash of terror in her eyes. Her lips trembled and the tight grip Kerry had on the teacup threatened to dislodge the handle. Kerry made an odd convulsing shrug while shaking her head.

“No,” she said quickly. Realized she had spoken hastily and amended her answer. “He looks familiar. We may have had a few classes together,” Kerry remarked, her mouth trying for a smile but resembling more of a grimace.

“You filed a report this man was harassing you,” Aiden supplied.

Kerry was shaking her head, black curls swaying with the motion. “It was a misunderstanding,” she relayed unconvincingly.

Hayley watched Kerry’s reaction with trepidation. The poor woman was obviously traumatized by whatever Julian did to her. Hayley doubted the ‘masked’ man was anyone other than Julian Collins. Kerry probably kept quiet about the identity of her attacker, most likely out of abject fear.

Aiden tapped the photograph with his index finger, contemplating Kerry as she shifted uncomfortably on the sofa.

“You sure Mrs. West?” Aiden asked, an accusatory edge creeping into to his tone.

Kerry nodded, cringed as Aiden snapped the picture away from her line of vision and tucked it back into his jacket pocket. Aiden stood up, leaned over and gave Kerry a card.

“If you think of anything that could be pertinent to our investigation, please contact me. My number is on the card,” Aiden stated, lingering a little too long when Kerry tried to take the card.

Kerry gazed transfixed at Aiden, her apprehension expanding, encompassing their surroundings. The walls appeared to compress, closing in on them. As Aiden dropped his hand and stepped away, the edges of the room snapped back. Harmonizing with the undercurrent of emotion emitted by Kerry.

“Thank you for your time Mrs. West. We’ll show ourselves out,” Aiden insisted as Kerry went to stand.

Aiden drove a block away before stopping. Reaching into his jacket, he withdrew his phone. A satisfied smile flashed across his face as he tapped the vibrating handset.

On loudspeaker, Kerry’s voice filled the car, hysterical.

“David? There were some Detectives just here. They said they were investigating attacks on Chicago State Campus. Some girls were assaulted. But they knew David. They knew about Julian. They said he wasn’t a suspect but why ask me about him?”

Her husband answered; voice strained in an attempt to calm the woman. “Relax Kerry. Hon, just relax. It’s okay. You know cops they dig into everything. No one knows. You withdrew the complaint. They show up again you ask for a lawyer. You cannot make accusations against him again. You know what he did to you last time.”

Hayley blew out a breath, only vaguely listening to the rest of the conversation. They could pursue Kerry; get her to testify against Julian. But Hayley knew that wouldn’t really work. They weren’t cops and Kerry didn’t seem inclined to press charges.
They needed another angle. Aiden joked, or at least Hayley presumed he was joking, that a sniper’s bullet would be less complicated. But that wouldn’t get her brother released from prison. Or help the kidnapped girls.

After Kerry’s call ended, Aiden didn’t start the car immediately, he was too busy on his phone. Hayley watched him, distracted.

Aiden had sloughed his ‘Detective’ persona almost as soon as the door closed on Kerry’s house. That bothered her. Aiden’s ability to adopt a persona so effortlessly was somehow associated with the buried memory.

Hayley tapped on the door handle, turning to Aiden when a thought occurred to her.

“You know, we could have spent weeks gathering the information Angela provided. Just as well she agreed to meet you. Now I believe her information was worth the twenty grand,” she remarked dryly.

And as an afterthought, “I didn’t know you could play the part of Detective so well.”

Aiden tilted his in acknowledgement but didn’t look at her. Instead, spoke while looking down at his phone.

“Angela was always going to meet me. Everyone has vulnerabilities. Issues to be exploited. I just exploited Angela’s. For her, it was her culpability. For the role she played in Bellwether’s inception. I just used that guilt to manipulate her into meeting me.”

Aiden tucked his phone away and looked over at her. The side of his mouth curled, managing to convey arrogance even in that small gesture.

“And it’s not a part. More a convincing deception. People will believe anything given the right circumstances and motivation.”

Aiden’s outline became hazy, indistinct, as the past blurred with the present. A convincing deception. For some inexplicable reason those words resonated. Comparable to dropping a stone in still water, recollections rippled out, lapping at her consciousness.

The obscure thread of memory unravelled like a wayward ball of yarn. Disentangling slowly until it gained momentum, pulling seemingly random threads together. Like a movie flashback, her mind replayed the night, many years ago, when Aiden asked her back to his apartment.

Overwhelmingly, she experienced quick bursts of images and feelings. Aiden’s contradictory behaviour. His indifference towards her. Harsh words spoken. About her, to her. Disjointed feelings of grief and confusion.

With sudden clarity, Hayley realized Aiden engineered the circumstances of that night. He skilfully exploited her emotional fragility. Convinced her the premise of their relationship was contrived. Even counted on her inexperience to be unable to perceive the indicative traces of his deception.

Hayley shook her head slowly, trying to calm the tumultuous feelings. Enough to at least articulate her thoughts.

“When we were dating and you took me back to your apartment. Those men burst in on us. I didn’t understand why you acted so indifferent towards me. Your whole persona changed. You deliberately pushed me away. I thought no one could act that well. I see how wrong I was,” Hayley remarked, unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice.
Aiden held himself utter motionless. His face appeared as if carved from stone. Except for his jaw. Which flexed once in agitation. After that, no trace of emotion could be seen. He didn’t speak either. His eyes flashed in agitation before he shut that avenue of emotion down as well.

Restlessly tapping her foot, Hayley considered her next words carefully. “That night is burned into my memory. I just couldn’t fathom the change in you. You were deliberately cruel. Seeing you today sparked that memory. It was a convincing deception, Aiden. Well done,” she scoffed, clapping slowly.

Aiden’s eyes narrowed as he watched her clapping. In truth, she itched to do more with her hands than just clap them together against her own flesh.

Hayley blew out a frustrated breath. “I can’t work out why. Why Aiden? Why the hell go through all that for a simple breakup? Even a text, although impersonal, would have been far less cruel than the way you acted.”

For so many years, the memory of that night caused an all-consuming anger. It burned through her thoughts like wildfire; spreading uncontrollably until any other emotion was razed to the ground.

That night was a catalyst, a defining moment that influenced the next few years of her life. Instead of burying the anger, she embraced it. Used it to define her, make her stronger, resilient.

To now realize Aiden’s actions were the result of a carefully constructed ruse caused a bitterness she wasn’t sure any explanation could suitably vindicate.

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Hayley’s words hung in the air, like moisture on a rainy night. Aiden briefly considered lying to her. Falsifying an anecdote. But the flat look in her eyes and the hard set to her jaw soon chased that thought away.

He didn’t answer her directly, preferring to stare at out the window, composing his thoughts.

It was an unforeseen consequence Hayley discovered his deception. That was his fault. Hayley was perceptive but that shouldn’t have mattered. His life revolved around misleading people, using his instinctive skill to misrepresent his way through some dangerous situations.

Aiden realized he had become complacent. Instead of carefully considering every word, each action, he allowed himself to relax around Hayley. That tendency to become complacent was why he worked only briefly with people. They got to know your limits, weaknesses, tells. And that was dangerous in his line of work.

His time with Jordi was indicative of this rule. He had relied on Jordi a fraction too often. Thought a bigger paycheck and tenuous truce would stop Jordi from betraying him. Admittedly, that was business. Hayley was another matter entirely.

Aiden did not explain himself. To anyone. But Hayley’s unerringly accurate summary of events needed clarification. He wasn’t looking for remittance from her. It was about respect. He would outline his reasoning because he respected her. He was justified in his actions. Whether she saw it that way was up to her.

“They threatened you,” Aiden said eventually, allowing the weight of those words to settle over her.

Aiden was watching Hayley closely, so he saw the exact moment the words registered. She drew in a sharp breath, opened her mouth, and closed it again. Clearly could not decide what to say. She
turned to look out the window. Her hair obscured part of her face so it was impossible to tell what she was thinking.

When Hayley looked back at him, he could tell the feigned calm she affected was fracturing at the edges. Like a cracked window, the slightest pressure could shatter it.

“So instead of simply informing me of this threat, you decide it would be better to create an elaborate scheme to run me out of Chicago?” Hayley gave a short, bitter bark of a laugh. “Come on Aiden, don’t insult my intelligence.”

His lips twitched with the urge to lash out in anger. He held back. Just. Allowed himself a deep breath.

He shrugged, the tightness in his shoulders making the gesture appear more contrived than he liked.

“Believe what you want. I don’t need to justify my actions. I did what I had to. To protect you,” he said, leaning on the last word for emphasis.

Hayley considered him silently. Appeared completely unimpressed with his explanation. The tiny specks of yellow in Hayley’s eyes seemed to flicker in agitation. Reminded him of a lion’s tail twitching before it struck.

“That’s what it’s all about? Isn’t it? Justification. Or lack thereof. Aiden Pearce does whatever the hell wants. And damn anyone who questions his motives. Well I’m questioning them Aiden. And fuck you for believing I don’t have the right.”

Aiden’s patience snapped. He shifted in the seat, leaned over into her space. As much as he could in the cramped confines of the car. Hayley flinched, moved her shoulders so she could angle away from him. When he didn’t move, she bared her teeth in a decisively threatening gesture.

The mood in the car shifted. Like the eye of a storm. Emotions swirled on the periphery, waiting for the opportunity to cause devastating destruction depending on the shifting winds.


Aiden couldn’t keep the sneer out of his voice. It masked the seething fury he still felt at finding those pictures. And realizing Hayley had been exposed to the part of his life he tried so hard to shield her from. From witnessing that ever-encroaching darkness within. The part of him which now felt natural. Which had been honed and sharpened so well it wasn’t an act anymore.

It was a reoccurring theme for Aiden. Everyone he loved, everyone he had contact with, eventually felt the inky stains of his criminal activities. It was why he pushed people away. It was the reason he had pushed Hayley away, all those years ago.

“It wasn’t an idle threat Hayley. Those men would have followed through. Hurt you. You were planning to join the Army anyway. I just gave you the push you needed.”

Aiden leaned back in his seat; watched Hayley struggle with her emotions. He knew he’d hurt her. Again. Wondered whether Hayley would leave. For good this time. Surprisingly, he felt resistance to this idea. A sharp pain he couldn’t clamp down on quick enough.

Stands of coppery hair shimmered in the late afternoon sun as Hayley turned to stare out the window.
She was silent for a long time. Contemplative. Shifting in her seat, Hayley finally looked at him. Her gaze, no longer angry, skimmed over his face. He almost felt the touch of it. Trying to pull out the truth from his expression.

“You could have just told me. Asked me to leave,” she said quietly.

Aiden couldn’t help a brittle laugh from escaping. It scraped against the car interior. “Would you? Have left?”

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Aiden’s question pierced through the suspicion and doubt she felt upon hearing his explanation. Deflated her mood as abruptly as a pin in a balloon. She felt the gush of emotion pour out of her. Trickling out one by one, mistrust, uncertainty, betrayal. Until all that remained was Aiden’s question. Sitting there in that stark landscape of her mind, awaiting an answer.

Hayley opened her mouth to respond. Clamped it shut upon reviewing her answer. Reflexively, she wanted to say yes. But knew herself well enough to know that wasn’t the case. She would have stayed. Tried to help Aiden. And that knowledge was like a slap in the face. Her cheek itched as if feeling the residual sting from the phantom blow.

“So maybe I would have stayed,” she conceded, the knowledge leaving a bitter aftertaste in her mouth.

Aiden made a scoffing sound telling her what he thought of her ‘maybe’.

“But that still doesn’t give you the right to make that decision for me,” Hayley snapped.

Aiden’s over-protective nature was borderline possessive. He believed it gave him licence to do whatever it took to keep the people he loved safe. That he included her in that category was irrelevant.

Aiden sighed. “I’m not going to rehash the past. There’s no use. I didn’t deliberately set out to hurt you,” Aiden stopped, made a grumbling sound which conceded his point wasn’t well made.

He shrugged irritably. “Well maybe I did set out to hurt you but it wasn’t to be cruel. You either accept my reasoning or let it come between us. The choice is yours.”

Like a flipped coin, the fate of their relationship hung on which side Hayley’s emotional response landed. Heads, she walked away. Considered Aiden’s duplicity an insurmountable barrier. Tails, she accepted his explanation. Accepted that while his method wasn’t sound, his reasoning was. And more importantly, acknowledged her shortcomings and accountability for their breakup.

Tails won out. The one thing Hayley knew about life was how achingly fragile it was. Almost dying put things into perspective. Years ago, she was hopelessly in love with Aiden. That love blinded her. She knowingly dismissed unsavoury characteristics for his better attributes. So it wasn’t a surprise that when he showed her a darker side of himself she fled.

His deception still stung. However, if she knew anything, reworking past events in your mind didn’t change them. It seemed trivial to let the past come between them considering what they had been through the last few weeks.

“You’re right. The past can’t be changed. I don’t agree with what you did but I just don’t have the energy to be with angry with you anymore. In truth, I got over that anger a long time ago.”
Surprise rippled over Aiden’s face. He obviously expected an argument. Hayley laughed, a breathy sound that wasn’t entirely forced. Until a sudden thought cut short her amusement. Reminded her there was one gaping hole in Aiden’s story.

“You were arrested before I left the States. How’d you get caught?”

Aiden’s hesitation was barely perceptible, “What?”


“The usual way,” Aiden replied flippantly.

Aiden’s glibness alerted her. He was hiding something. Suspicion worked its way through the synapses in her brain.

“Aiden,” Hayley said sharply, despite the apprehension churning her gut.

He shrugged carelessly. “I was set up.”

The statement hung in the air, stale and stagnant like cigarette smoke. His expression was wary, his eyes warning her not to ask. But it was like an itch. She needed to scratch it despite what might happen if she did.

“How?”

“I worked for the Risoni’s. While the Marino family believed they hired me to gain access to their rival families’ financials, it was actually the other way around. Would have worked too except the Marino’s had a mole in the Risoni’s business. He sold me out.” Aiden shrugged, mouth curled in ironic amusement.

“How did they know where to find you?” she asked. It perplexed her how a low-level crime family could outsmart Aiden when the entire state’s Police force couldn’t even get close to him.

Aiden gave her a long steady look. Sighed before answering. “I was following you. Making sure you were safe. The Cops nabbed me after an ‘anonymous’ tip-off as to my whereabouts. I had a warrant out for my arrest.”

Aiden’s words curled themselves around each other and cut into her brain. Sliced through every other emotion to slam home an overwhelming guilt. She was the reason he was caught.

Hayley groaned. “So you went to prison because of me.”

Aiden grabbed her hand, shaking his head. “No,” he said, so vehemently it startled her. “I went to Prison because of what I did. Because they couldn’t find me, they went after you. They saw me following you. And thought a stint in Prison would be my punishment.”

Aiden was rubbing the back of her hand with his thumb. It was nice. Distracting. Until an idea occurred to her. One she almost didn’t voice. But that damn itch started up again, shaking loose questions she wasn’t sure she wanted the answer to.

“How did you know what they thought Aiden?” she asked, unable to keep the slight catch out of her voice.

Aiden looked at her sharply, his eyes hardening. Something dark stirred within their depths.
“I paid the Marino’s a visit after my release. We had an informative….chat. I made sure none of them could come after me again.”

Hayley waited for the antipathy to announce itself. A physical reaction to his insinuation of murder. Bile creeping up her throat, a shiver of revulsion. When there was none, Hayley had to consider why. And was startled to find a shift in her own principles. Black and white splashed together to make grey. A colour which straddled the lines of morality and allowed for gradation in otherwise definitive situations.

Whatever she was thinking must have shown on her face because Aiden gave a low, knowing chuckle. He leaned over and kissed her, lingering long enough so that the push of his tongue made her forget what they had been talking about.

Honestly, she never got enough of the taste of him. It jolted through her like a raw current, sizzling nerve endings. But when Aiden pulled back to start the car, another worry worked its way to the surface.

What amounted to an admission of murder from Aiden should have horrified her. Was it Aiden’s influence which allowed her to dismiss his actions, mark them as justified? Were her feelings again making her blind to his faults? Or had she changed? Did the taking of a life make it easier to understand others doing the same? Hayley didn’t have an answer to either question.

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Surveillance of Julian Collins had yet to yield the anticipated result. Their plan was incontrovertibly simple. Plant a portable Wi-Fi device on him. Theoretically, Aiden could then hack into Julian’s computer to find evidence of his involvement in the human trafficking ring.

The problem was, they couldn’t get near Julian. Or Hayley couldn’t. Aiden certainly couldn’t be seen near any of Blume’s high-ranking officials. They most likely had his face on a Wanted poster above their bed. Used it to play darts.

Originally, Aiden tried to access Julian’s phone remotely. However, his encryption software was state-of-the-art and possibly a new Blume cellular prototype because he couldn’t bypass the firewall. It would dump him from the system as soon as an unknown Wi-Fi point tried to access it. In time, Aiden could eventually crack the system, but he would need to get his hands on the phone. Therefore, they were back to square one.

Today would be Hayley’s last attempt to get close to Julian. They couldn’t afford to waste any more time on this strategy; it wasn’t generating outcomes.

A few weeks had passed since their argument outside of Kerry’s house. It had been a surprisingly honest conversation with Aiden. One of the few she could recall having. It certainly caused her to re-evaluate some long-standing beliefs she held.

Aiden yawned beside her, the leather creaking as he shifted in the car seat.

“Stake-out’s really are boring,” Hayley agreed, the crackle of foil punctuating each word as she rustled around for potato chips.

Aiden looked over, watched for a few seconds as she ate. Hayley narrowed her eyes when she noticed an unmistakably mischievous gleam creep into his gaze.

“There are other things we can do to pass the time,” he remarked in a beguiling tone while reaching down to adjust his jeans.
Hayley looked down at his lap, pretended to consider his veiled request.

“I don’t know Aiden, I feel like the action of biting on these chips is too hard to discontinue. However, if you want to take your chance, I’d be game.”

Hayley smiled blandly at Aiden, watching in amusement as he winced mechanically. The glare he shot her wasn’t that effective considering the slight curl of amusement to his lips.

Hayley clicked her tongue against her teeth, affecting a sombre expression. “That was very unprofessional of you Aiden. What if we’re distracted and I miss an opportunity?”

“I’d take my chances,” Aiden responded dryly.

Typical male. Hayley patted his knee condescendingly before sliding her hand higher and squeezing his thigh. Aiden eyed her sourly.

“Later,” she promised, pursing her lips to keep from laughing at Aiden’s brightening expression.

An undercurrent of tension in Aiden’s body snapped Hayley’s hand back from his leg. Her eyes searched the perimeter, automatically evaluating possible threats. She saw what caused Aiden to still. Julian had exited the restaurant. That was her cue.

Without another word, Hayley exited the car and walked down the street. Despite her best efforts, she hadn’t been able to get within a dozen feet of Julian. Bulky, intimidating bodyguards constantly surrounded him.

His security were consummate professionals. Most likely ex-special forces. She knew the type. They came out of the service and turned to mercenary work, unable to leave their adrenaline-filled lifestyles behind.

Not once could Hayley brush by Julian and surreptitiously plant the bug. This was her third and final attempt. The bodyguards were well trained; at all times they maintained a tight perimeter around Julian. Their eyes were constantly searching, assessing dangers, taking note of their surroundings.

The bodyguards would likely have taken note of her face. She needed to be careful. If they suspected she was following Julian they would do more than glare at her as they had previously when she got too close.

In a beige pantsuit and black high heels, Hayley appeared as any other professional. Just taking a casual stroll down the street on her lunch hour.

Julian was exiting an outrageously expensive restaurant. Nice to know the government’s tax dollars were being spent so lavishly.

A driver opened the limo door for Julian, who didn’t even acknowledge him, but continued to talk with whomever he lunched with.

Nearing the limo, a bodyguard turned towards her. Even a few feet away Hayley saw him frown at her. He leaned over to his colleague, whispered something. His colleague glanced over at her. She felt the weight of his gaze, assessing, probing.

The bodyguard muttered something to his colleagues. Tension rippled through them. Their stances changed, hands brushed against holsters. They edged closer to Julian.

She’d been made. Hayley casually changed course. Walked between two cars near the curb.
Glanced right into oncoming traffic and then casually back in Julian’s direction. He leant against the opened limo door, nodding at his companion.

Julian’s gaze flicked over to her disinterestedly. His smoky grey eyes were piercing as he scrutinized her. His expression changed suddenly, morphed into something akin to recognition. Hayley faltered, but when she looked quickly back, Julian had turned away.

On the other side of the road, Hayley could feel the animosity from the bodyguards, following her movements closely. Peeking to the side, Julian was watching her again. She felt his gaze. It was prickling, almost oily. Slithering over her, making her feel vulnerable.

Hayley breathed a sigh of relief as she rounded the corner and got into a car. Aiden raised a questioning eyebrow. Shook her head in the negative. Didn’t mention Julian’s reaction to her. She wasn’t even positive there was a reaction.

“I guess we go to Plan B,” Hayley remarked sourly as Aiden drove off.

“Plan B?” Aiden scoffed.

“Fine,” she admitted, “your Plan A, my Plan B.”

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The old two-story house was no more than a shack on its foundations. How long the decaying walls could withstand the beckoning call of gravity was anyone’s guess. Hayley eyed the structure dubiously. The roof sagged in places; damp eroded the shingles in parts so that gaping holes allowed water into certain sections. The paint, which had once been red, peeled off to expose the rotting wood beneath. From the outside, the only thing it appeared to shelter now was insects and the occasional bird.

“You sure this is the place?” Hayley asked, unable to keep the skepticism out of her voice.

Aiden grunted beside her but didn’t answer her. Although going by his expression, he had doubts as to the validity of his source.

Aiden glanced at his phone before tucking it away in his pocket. They were in a ctOS blind spot. No cameras recorded this derelict part of town. Likely because no one lived here. This house wasn’t the only one abandoned.

This area was, by far, the poorest part of The Wards. Although it never used to be. The Wards had expanded, encompassing a larger area of another district as more people left their homes to escape the gangs and violence.

“Let’s go” Aiden said, making his way around the unruly mound of weeds near the front steps.

The front door remained stubbornly closed despite Aiden’s repeated attempts to shove it open. He sighed irritably and walked towards the back of the house. They spent the last week tracking down this guy and it was getting old very fast.

Aiden had more success with the back door. Walking inside, the darkness felt saturating. It permeated through the walls and converged on them in a greedy attempt to bring back life to its unloved interior.

Shadows clung to the edge of the room as shafts of light squeezed through gaps in the boarded up windows. Aiden used his phone’s torch to light up the house. Strangely, the illumination made the
house seem creepier.

No one questioned their intrusion as they proceeded further. Dust lay over every surface like dirty snow. The air tasted stale, the motes of dust swirled around, crawled into her throat and lodged there. Hayley repressed an urge to cough.

Standing in the living room, old, rotting furniture around them, an odd humming sound invaded the quiet. They both noticed the noise simultaneously. Aiden stilled; tension evident in the set of his shoulders. He turned around slowly, head cocked to the side, trying to identify the noise.

Aiden lowered his phone to swipe his thumb across the screen. His phone’s light angled towards him until it lit up the space around him. Made him look angelic, trapped in a halo of light, fighting off the darkness.

Hayley walked around Aiden, until she stood at the edge of the light. A whirring alerted her, a subtle vibration in the otherwise still surroundings. A premonition of danger. Unerringly, her eyes sought out the disturbance.

At the edge of the ceiling, a turret was unwinding. The movement jolted her into action. Adrenaline coursed through her veins like acid. Burned a path of urgency through her limbs.

As Hayley swung around, her body felt sluggish. Her limbs heavy, weighted. Stubbornly embedded in the floor, unwillingly to be displaced. Raising her arm to grab Aiden’s jacket took an inordinate amount of time. The confusion on his face appeared in startling clarity.

The sound of the first bullet leaving the turret was deafeningly loud. Or maybe just sounded like it to her ears. But it snapped her focus; the odd sluggishness saturating her muscles fell away. Time crawled back to its normal pace, while her body, however improbable, sped up. Or appeared to.

The spark from the muzzle fire lit up the edge of her vision as they launched themselves behind the closest available cover. Bullets tore viciously into the bookcase above where they landed, spraying shards of wood over them.

The whirring of the turret continued, like a raging homicidal bee bent on destruction. They were given a brief respite as the turret slanted away from them. It tore a path of utter destruction in its wake, shattering the plasterboard, spitting up tufts cotton from furniture.

How they weren’t killed instantly was due to blind luck. The turret was angled away when it opened fire, giving them scarcely enough time to launch themselves into cover. As flimsy as their shelter appeared, it held. The overturned sofa in front of the bookshelf saved their lives. It took most of the damage.

Aiden slung his arm around her, pulling her against his side. Hayley felt his breath against her cheek, ragged and uneven. His stubble scratched against her temple, giving her an odd comforting feeling despite the destruction being wrought around them. Something heavy fell against her leg, caused a pained gasp to escape. Aiden was shouting something at her, but she couldn’t hear him.

The firing ceased abruptly. Hayley’s heartbeat thundered in her ears. Made it difficult to formulate coherent thoughts in the unexpected silence. The air continued to crackle dangerously, unwilling to disperse the brutal energy which had briefly irradiated the lifeless space.

Neither of them moved. It was like a Mexican standoff, only with a mechanical opponent. Hayley stirred under Aiden’s arm, shifting slightly to look over at him. His green eyes looked like shining emeralds beneath a grimy exterior. Chalky dust covered his face and hat.
Aiden tightened his arm around her briefly before his gaze skimmed over her body. He made a displeased sound, almost a snarl, when his eyes came to a stop on her leg. A heavy chunk of plaster had fallen on her calf. No major damage but there would be a bitch of a bruise later. Aiden leaned over and pushed it off with a grunt.

“Are you…,” Aiden coughed, wiped the back of his hand over his mouth before continuing, “are you okay?”

Hayley nodded. “You?”

Aiden growled quietly as he cautiously pushed himself up. Shuffled over to peek around the bookcase. The turret was unnervingly quiet.

The foundation of the house creaked precariously. Hayley looked around at the swathe of destruction. Plaster hung limply from the walls. Furniture looked like Swiss cheese gone wrong.

Their movement didn’t active the turret so they quickly escaped the room. No other deadly contraptions barred their exit from the house.

Outside, the sound of a motorbike’s roaring engine could just be heard coming down the street. Hayley flattened herself against the back wall of the house.

Aiden withdrew his weapon, motioning her to stay back. He inched forward until he could peek around the side. The motorbike came to a growling stop, the rider apparently unaware of their presence.

“Aiden,” a worried voice shouted.

Aiden relaxed, tension receding from the air around him. He grunted and holstered his gun.

“Out back” he called.

Hayley hesitated before holstering her own gun. This was obviously the guy they were looking for.

The man who walked around the corner was not who she was expecting. For a start, he did not fit the hacker sub-type she associated in her head. His dreadlocks hung to well below his shoulders. A salt and pepper beard was long, but tied up neatly near his chin with a metal band. Goggles balanced precariously on a ratty cap. Faded and ripped jeans, workers’ boots and charcoal shirt finished the ensemble.

He walked right up to Aiden and grabbed him, patted him down agitatedly.

“We’re not that good friends T-Bone,” Aiden remarked as he slapped his hands.

“I’m checking for bullet holes. And trust me, you’re not my type,” T-Bone replied in a definitive southern drawl.

Hayley snickered. The man Aiden called T-Bone jerked in her direction. Pinned her with a surprised gaze that nonetheless radiated intelligence.

“Who are you?” He turned back to Aiden without waiting for an answer. “Who is she?” he asked jerking a thumb in her direction.

“Hayley.”

T-Bone tilted his chin forward, waiting. Aiden was, as usual, less than forthcoming in supplying
information.

“Hayley, this is Ray. He’s the one who’ll be helping us.”

Ray’s eyebrows shot up past his hairline. “Oh will I now?” he asked suspiciously.

“Can we discuss this someplace else?”

Ray nodded as he walked towards the back door. Aiden and Hayley didn’t move. Ray stopped mid-stride when he realized they weren’t following him.

“Oh, right. Sorry about the…’welcome committee’. Can’t be too careful. Don’t worry, my babies aren’t active anymore. I was notified of your intrusion while I was driving. I turned the turrets off as soon as I saw who it was.”

Hayley had to bite her tongue when Ray referred to his turrets as his ‘babies’.

Ray barely glanced at the destruction around the house. Near the staircase, he pressed a button, which amazingly clicked open a door. The room opened up into a converted space. Concrete floors, reinforced steel walls. It was a panic room.

“Why are you hiding out here? I couldn’t get in contact with you. Frewer pointed me in a vague direction but it still took me a week to find you.”

Aiden was looking around the room, sharp gaze taking in everything. Half a dozen monitors and processors, racks of guns, hard drives and a smattering of USB sticks were sprawled around the room. Hayley thought she even saw a small kids truck tucked away in a corner.

Ray settled himself in a chair, long legs stretched out in front of him. He shook his head. “That’s why I didn’t tell Frewer anything. I didn’t want him giving away my location. You found me anyway. Of course you did.”

Ray picked up a half-eaten sandwich. Hayley tried to hide her disgust as he smelt it, shrugged and ate it.

“I needed to go dark. The Rosario brothers had an extended family of fixers. Didn’t like what I did to their kin. It’s been taken care of Aiden so you can lose that stubborn set to your jaw.”

Hayley choked back a laugh. This Ray obviously knew Aiden well.

“So what is it that you and your lady friend need help with?”

Aiden settled back against a wall and outlined their plight so far. Of course, when Aiden informed the ex-Blume employee of their current plans, his reaction wasn’t totally unexpected. The way he put it was.

“Lucifer’s blue balls Aiden, can’t you ever find an easy way to do things?”
Chapter End Notes

Detective Barber wasn't a random name I chose for Aiden to emulate. Aiden's voice actor (Noam Jenkins) played the part of Detective Barber in a Canadian Police drama called Rookie Blue. I'll allow myself this one flight of fancy.
Chapter 13

The cityscape was a jumble of shapes, as if a child had cast blocks down randomly and then swept them so close they touched. At night, it was beautiful, lights twinkling, almost mirroring the stars above. By day, while the view was still fantastic, the concrete monoliths reminded Aiden of a strange monochromatic world.

From his Mad Mile apartment window, Aiden imagined he could almost make out the people scurrying around like worker ants in the city streets. Seldom having the inclination, or more specifically, the resolve to break free of the barriers they bumped up against. Work, mortgage, kids, spouses. Dig a little deeper and you saw affairs, violence, scams. Well, that was what he saw.

Shrugging those thoughts aside, Aiden walked back to his computer desk. Leaned his hip against the desk, and scanned the monitor. T-Bone hadn’t said anything in the last five minutes and Aiden wasn’t sure whether that was good or bad. Scrolling through the blueprints, T-Bone frowned and muttered something.

“Where did you get these?” T-Bone asked finally, tapping the screen.

“Chicago State Library.”

T-Bone looked over at Aiden. “And they just had them as public record?”

Aiden shrugged. “Not exactly. They were concealed but it wasn’t hard to access them.”

T-Bone just grunted and turned back to the screen. Aiden repressed a sigh of annoyance. A skilled software engineer, T-Bone was a genius when it came to code and most other programming. He was also erratic and more than a little petulant when it came to being interrupted. So Aiden held his tongue, allowed him to work.

Truth be told, Aiden wasn’t even sure if their plan would work. It was why he had contacted T-Bone. He needed another hacker. Not just any hacker, someone who knew Blume’s systems intimately. Because where they were going, there would be no room for error. He needed the backup, electronically speaking. If everything went to shit, he could count on T-Bone to get him out.

T-Bone turned around in his chair abruptly. “It won’t be easy, but it’s doable. The inherent problem with Blume is they run everything through the same mainframe. Surveillance system, gate access, even their sprinklers run on the same grid.”

T-Bone paused, turned to tap a few keys behind him. “It makes my job easier, gaining access to it. But on your end, if something goes wrong there’s no backup. All I can do is overload the system and you gotta hope you can get out of there.”

Aiden folded his arms over his chest and considered this. His gaze wandered around the room until it rested on Hayley. She sat quietly next to T-Bone, listening to their exchange. He got the feeling she was rather bemused by T-Bone. He didn’t blame her. The man was a walking contradiction, never doing what anyone expected him to do. Even the way he dressed was a clash of styles. Blue-collar worker mixed with old punk rocker. But T-Bone was also the closest thing Aiden had to a friend and he trusted him.

“I can’t do it all on my own. I need you outside, controlling the system. Once I’m inside there’s too much to concentrate on. I can’t dodge security, maintain the system hacks, and focus on hacking into the computer. Something would have to give and all of them are too important. We’ll be fine once
we’re inside.”

Aiden hoped he sounded confident. He had every faith T-Bone could gain control of Blume’s systems, he just wasn’t sure how long he’d need to be inside. It all hinged on what type of security measures he encountered and how fast he could bypass them.

“Alright, let’s get to work,” T-Bone stated.

Night crested over the apartment slowly. The occupants barely noticed. The flick of a light-switch the only concession they made to the darkness.

Boxes of Chinese take-away lay scattered indiscriminately around the room. Discarded like some of their contingency plans. They’d gathered the intelligence, identified security guard routes, familiarized themselves with the facility. All that was left was the coding. Designing, writing, testing, debugging.

It was well into the early hours of the morning, and Aiden was so intent on his screen, he didn’t even notice Hayley stand up. Until he heard the popping of joints as she raised her hands above her head to stretch. Scrubbing a hand over her face, Aiden noticed the dark circles under her eyes. Noted how tired she looked. She hadn’t been sleeping well …

“I’m off to bed,” Hayley announced. “But only if you guys don’t need me …” she trailed off uncertainly.

T-Bone pushed away from the desk, turned his chair towards her. “Nope, you go meet with the Sandman. We’re almost finished here anyway.”

A small smile played around the corner of Hayley’s mouth. It took a while to get used to some of T-Bone’s idiosyncrasies.

Hayley looked over at him and he nodded in agreement. “Yeah, we’re fine. Try and get some sleep.”

T-Bone straightened his legs, bent over to massage a knee, watching absently as Hayley walked away. When she walked into Aiden’s bedroom surprised flitted over T-Bone’s expression.

Aiden frowned, wondered at T-Bone’s reaction. The chair creaked as T-Bone whirled around and slid behind the desk. The shower turning on had T-Bone shooting a quick look at the bedroom, before hunching back over the keyboard.

The gurgling water trickled through the pipes behind the walls. The sound broke up the solidifying silence. The room grew uncomfortably heavy, ready to scoop up the words yet to be spoken.

A rigidity in his posture tipped Aiden off that T-Bone had something to say.

“What is it T-Bone?” Aiden asked bluntly.

The tapping of the keyboard ceased. T-Bone grabbed the edge of the desk and swung the chair around, angled his head to the side. His dreadlocks swung like ropes around his face, oddly hypnotic.

“I don’t think it’s my place to say,” T-Bone finally said.

“When has that stopped you?” Aiden asked dryly.

T-Bone gauffed out a laugh. The sound was like sandpaper, burnishing the rough edges of tension
around them.

“I’m just wondering,” T-Bone stopped and looked around the room as if searching for the right words. Apparently finding them he continued. “Maybe Hayley should stay behind with me when you go inside the compound.”

“Why?” Aiden asked, more sharply than he intended.

T-Bone clucked his tongue. Tapped his thumb repeatedly against the desk. The sound peppered against Aiden’s nerves.

“Well, I just don’t want to see her get hurt.”

“Neither do I,” he snapped. Surprised himself, and T-Bone, going by the tightening of his expression, with the forcefulness of his response.

The possibility was always there. Hayley could get hurt. But he dismissed the idea. Before the strands of doubt could claw their way through his thoughts. Aiden blew out a breath. His agitation had crept up on him unexpectedly.

“She’s a solider, T-Bone. Special Ops. Very highly trained. I don’t doubt her skill.”

Aiden was pleased by his even tone. T-Bone, however, didn’t look convinced.

“I get that. But you’re going deep behind enemy lines. This is a risky operation. So much could go wrong. If you’re caught, don’t fool yourself in thinking Blume would tie you up neatly and call the Police. And what would happen to Hayley? What if she got hurt? How would you react Aiden? I just don’t want a repeat of what happened with Clara.”

The mention of Clara’s name caused a jolt through Aiden’s body. All the air in the room shifted into a sudden vacuum. Strangled the oxygen and made his chest tighten involuntarily. Angrily he compressed the reaction. Refused to be drawn into a conversation about Clara.

“I won’t ask her to stay behind. That’s not fair to her. She’s come this far. And she wouldn’t stay behind. Even if I asked nicely,” he sneered. The sarcasm was unwarranted but Aiden couldn’t seem to help it.

T-Bone looked at him steadily. The monitor flickered as the screen saver, a sinuous blue sphere, bounced around the screen. Aiden imagined he saw a hint of reproach in T-Bone’s gunmetal grey eyes. But then he shifted and the artifice was gone.

“That’s your business. I’m just looking out for you Aiden. How would you react if something did happen to her. Hayley, she…means something to you.” T-Bone stumbled awkwardly over the last sentence. Pulled irritably at his beard and glared at Aiden.

Understanding coalesced in Aiden’s mind. Why T-Bone kept pushing the conversation, however inelegantly a point he was trying to make. Hayley walking into his bedroom obviously clued T-Bone into the nature of their relationship.

He understood T-Bone’s concern, knew how rabidly protective he could be. Lena’s death had sparked a revenge crusade which had caused him to visit some very dark places. It was a valid concern that it could happen again. He didn’t let go easily…

“Just don’t make the same mistakes,” T-Bone warned.
And that comment stung. Left a roiling bitterness churning in his gut. He’d made mistakes with Clara. Let her in far too easily. He’d certainly learnt from that mistake.

But in other aspects he’d failed to heed the past. He’d sworn to himself he’d never allow someone that close again. But Hayley had somehow managed to circumvent that conviction. And now he ran a very real risk of exposing himself to that pain again.

T-Bone got up, hesitated before gripping Aiden’s shoulder, hard. The pain was a welcome distraction. Physical pain was always easier to deal with.

Throwing a goodnight over his shoulder, T-Bone walked downstairs to his bedroom. Aiden watched T-Bone’s outline blur as the darkness swallowed him.

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Aiden stood in the doorway to his bedroom, gaze lingering over Hayley’s sleeping form. Moonlight filtered through gaps in the curtains, spilling across the floor in a large milky puddle. Hayley had pulled the curtains back to allow light in. She didn’t like sleeping in complete darkness.

On more than one occasion she’d woken, screaming. Flailing against the sheets, fighting against her nightmare. Hayley couldn’t sleep after that. She’d sit wrapped in a blanket, looking out the window, waiting for dawn. She refused his touch, couldn’t tolerate any type of physical contact.

Aiden let her be. He’d woken from enough nightmares to know how painfully real they felt. The memories conjured could linger, imprinting themselves on your mind.

Tonight, Hayley slept peacefully. But Aiden’s mind was restless. T-Bone’s comment had dug deep, spread roots and refused to dislodge. Was history repeating itself? Did he not learn from his mistakes? Would he have to watch Hayley die too, drowning in her own blood?

Aiden shuddered, attempting to push the vision away but it wouldn’t budge. Maybe T-Bone was right, he was unnecessarily endangering Hayley.

He undressed, throwing his clothes over a chair. Sliding under the sheets, the cool cloth rustled uncomfortably against his skin as he settled behind Hayley. She was lying on her side, facing away from him. She stirred as he edged closer. He traced his fingers over her knee, sliding up over the smooth skin of her thigh, to rest his hand on her hip.

Hayley was awake now; he could feel the change in her breathing. Aiden’s limbs twitched with a restless energy. Too many opposing thoughts clamoured for attention. Crawled around his brain, lodged in nooks he couldn’t shake out. He needed a distraction.

The smell of Hayley’s shampoo, an enticing coconut and tropical scent, invaded his senses as he bent towards her. He took her earlobe between his teeth, teasingly bit down. Hayley hummed appreciatively, scooted back so their bodies touched.

His hand, still on her hip, slid under her shirt. Skimmed over ribs until he touched the tip of her breast. Teasingly rubbed the underside, up to her nipple until she squirmed. Hayley ground back into him, the friction causing a sharp intake of breath.

Hayley rolled on her back. He could see the flash of her teeth as she smiled at him in the darkness. He kissed her, tasting spearmint toothpaste. It left a sharp trace on his tongue. He took her lower lip between his teeth, playfully pulled. Was rewarded with a groan from Hayley.

He slipped his thumb just under the elastic of her panties. But went no further. Traced the length of
the garment. Slowly. Roving from one hip to the other. Sensed Hayley’s impatience. In the way she dug her fingers into his arm, body straining under his touch.

Like a distinguished candle, his playful mood vanished, blown out only to drift away like smoke on the air. He’d encountered the raised scar tissue. Felt an almost physical spark jolt through him. Proof of the danger she could be in. A low rumble vibrated in his chest, working its way up to a growl. The sound a mixture of arousal and displeasure at his thoughts.

Dipping his hand lower, Hayley’s reaction to his attention was obvious. Gently he applied pressure, thumb working slowly. Then slipped a finger inside her. Hayley’s moans made him increase his pace. She grabbed his arm, fingernails digging deep. He felt the reverberation of her climax. An echo drowning out all other sound. Crashing over them both like a wave, washing away unwanted thoughts.

It was easy to concentrate on his own physical response as he entered her. Their rhythm eroded any lingering doubts. Sliding skin, the touch of tongues, biting kisses.

Hurtling towards the blank euphoria he strove to achieve, it distantly registered that Hayley was shuddering beneath him. For a few precious seconds, he achieved that void. His mind blissfully blank, the white noise drowning out doubts, worries, fears. Reality crashed down mere moments later. But, surprisingly, not as heavy as before.

Beneath the covers, sleep was tugging at the edge of his consciousness. Limbs entwined, Hayley was breathing soundly, tucked in front of him. Aiden enjoyed these moments, his relaxed mind scrounged up images of another life. Where violence, blood and danger weren’t a constant. And the choices he made were the right ones. Where he allowed other people in and could actually feel something for them without the accompanying risk.

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Oakbank Plains. Mad Mile’s one and only gated community. Home almost exclusively to Blume’s high-ranking executives and senior management. Home to Blume’s CIO, Julian Collins.

Even the name, Oakland Plains, conjured images of lush greenery, inviting entrances and subtle landscaping. The reality was a stark contrast. The entire exterior was chromatic, so sterile and dreary, you ran the risk of becoming a drone just living within the community.

High black gates barred entrance. Menacing guards stood sentinel within their command posts. Grey walls stretched stories high around the entire complex. The appearance was uninviting, although the aesthetics weren’t the draw for the residents.

Blume’s elite flocked to the community, believing the company line about enhanced security. They bought into the hype. Security was practically *ensured* with state-of-the-art technology. It wasn’t an idle boast. The entrances were strictly controlled using biometric security. Private, round the clock security guards patrolled the streets.

These measures would have deterred most people. For others, like Aiden and Ray, it was an open invitation. The system practically begged them to try to circumvent their security.

Hacking into the community’s server was difficult, but not impossible. The community had its own Intranet separate from the ctOS network. It was secular, allowing for no penetration from outside threats. In theory.

Ray sent a spam email to every security guard’s company account. They could only access the email
from the communities’ central computer. Whoever clicked on the email opened a virus, a backdoor for Ray into the system. The malware handed Ray control over the victim’s computer. That afforded him access to the entire Intranet. He could then control the entire compound. Cameras, sprinkler systems, alarms, lights.

A few days of waiting and one unfortunate security guard thought he was opening naked pictures of television star Jennifer Aniston. Ray now had complete access to the community’s Intranet.

Despite their preparation, Hayley was still worried. She trusted Aiden, his planning was meticulous. And Ray obviously knew what he was doing. But it was all theoretical until they entered the grounds. If one part of their plan fell apart, they couldn’t proceed.

So much hinged on what they found on Julian’s home computer. They needed proof, needed to find something to tie him to Bellwether and the human trafficking.

“Are you okay?” Aiden asked.

Hayley started at Aiden’s question. The faded blue carpet of the van blurred briefly before her vision sharpened and she was pulled out of her reverie. She looked up at Aiden. He was scrutinizing her, his sharp green eyes questioning.

“Yes,” she said slowly, sounding the word out, tasting the truth of it.

Aiden’s gaze roamed over her face. She knew what he would see. Concern, nervousness. She could hardly hide her feelings; he was beginning to know her too well to be fooled by false assurances.

“You’ve gone on covert operations before,” Aiden asserted.

Hayley narrowed her eyes at him, wondering whether Aiden’s remark was an exceedingly accurate deduction or he’d managed to hack her Military file. Decided either way it didn’t matter. Working with Aiden, privacy was a privilege rather than a right. Something you gave up when working closely with him. He was too paranoid to leave anything to chance. That meant your entire life was an open book. Or screen.

Besides, it’d be incredibly hypocritical of her to act affronted by Aiden’s criminal inclinations considering it was those very activities which had allowed them to get this far.

So instead she answered, “Aiden, that was under sanction of the U.S. government. This is under sanction of you.”

He laughed at her. “I won’t tell if you don’t.”

Hayley smiled despite herself. That was Aiden’s not so subtle reminder that her nervousness was unwarranted. She wasn’t defenceless or vulnerable. She’d been in some difficult situations, warzones, which were a walk in the park compared to this operation.

The van shuddered to a stop. Adrenaline snaked through her veins, the prelude to a battle. A slight tremble went through her, signifying her body was primed, ready for action.

Aiden handed her an earpiece and the small clip-on microphone. Ray opened the van door and climbed in, flashing them a roguish grin.

Pulling on a headset, Ray turned around to face them. “I’ll be your designated conscience for tonight. The perpetual devil in your ear. Hold on to your knickers.”
Aiden shook his head, a smile tugging his lips. The microphone, the size of a small button, was secured to the collar of his shirt.

Grabbing a small stool, Ray booted up his rig. The van was a clever ruse. A rust-bucket on wheels, no one would suspect it contained thousands of dollars’ worth of computer equipment.

“Ready?” Aiden asked, excitement glowing in his eyes.

She wasn’t. But better to get it over with. So Hayley nodded, feeling a tightening in her gut.

They had to walk about half a mile through hilled terrain to access the community. Darkness bathed the landscape. Both stumbled a few times after encountering clusters of vegetation. Stringy plants wrapped themselves around their shoes. Tried to drag them back. Nature’s security system.

The community finally came into view. They stood outside of the perimeter, just beyond the reach of the camera.

“Now, T-Bone,” Aiden whispered. His voice was shockingly loud in the estranged quiet.

“Got it,” Ray replied.

Like a Mexican wave, the lights and cameras around the entire perimeter petered out. Until they stood in complete darkness. Like a shroud covered them, claustrophobically dense. As her night sight adjusted, Hayley felt rather than saw Aiden move. Could just discern his outline. He looked like a dark angel. Walking away, his tall form shimmered in the scant moonlight. Created an illusion of impenetrability.

The impression dissipated as Aiden’s form solidified. The thick steel door of the emergency exit stood silent. Sentinel.

Recent legislation made it possible for them enter the highly secured gated community without going through the front entrance. Over a year ago, a dozen people residing in another gated community died tragically in a fire. At the time of the fire, the fire department could not gain entry through the main gate. Security had updated the access code and failed to inform emergency services.

An investigation was launched, identifying inadequate emergency exits as a leading cause of death. Now, every gated community was required to have at least four exit points in addition to the main entrance.

Aiden produced his phone, got to work bypassing the emergency pad. The exits were designed to permit outside access only to emergency services. Outside each door was a Knox-Box. A Knox Box was usually a wall-mounted safe. Local fire companies held master keys to all boxes in their response area so that they could quickly enter a building.

Blume, however, created an electronic version of the Knox Box. A key card was provided to emergency services. The code changed daily. Blume sent the updated code to the key card through the wireless Wi-Fi network in the fire station.

A flash of red on the console signalled Aiden had bypassed the Knox-Box. For Aiden, it was a simple matter of hacking into the fire department’s network to siphon the code for that day. It was like child’s play sometimes, Aiden really could gain access to almost anywhere.

Slipping into the community, the door clicked shut behind them. Hayley tried not to think the noise sounded as ominous as the cocking of a gun.
Turning around, she saw the perimeter lights flicker back on. Walking down a small brick path, they emerged onto a road. Hayley looked around. Cameras were perched unobtrusively on light poles. But they were angled away from them. Ray’s doing.

Back in the van, Ray would angle the cameras away from them as they moved further into the compound. There were two reasons for that. While still using a scrambler, they couldn’t risk a Guard raising suspicion over their pixilated footage. Furthermore, if suspicion was raised and security footage reviewed, they couldn’t risk their movements being followed to Julian’s house.

Aiden slung his arm around her and pulled her close. They walked casually down the sidewalk. Just another couple taking a stroll. Neither wore any tactical gear. Hayley felt a laugh bubble to the surface at the thought of encountering someone in full tactical gear. Wondered if they could get away with convincing the unknown party they were just really into role-playing.

Aiden appeared deceptively relaxed, but Hayley could feel the tension running through him. Like a humming presence. Reminded her of a motorcycle at the start of a race. Wheels spinning, ready to react to the slightest pressure.

“Guard, ten o’clock,” Ray warned.

“I see him,” Aiden confirmed.

The Security Guard was talking into a speaker mic. Hayley couldn’t hear what he was saying, but his body language denoted a minor agitation. The perimeter outage would probably be seen as a glitch. Nevertheless, she felt the weight of the Guard’s stare as they walked closer.

Hayley fervently hoped the Guard didn’t know every face within the community. The distance between them closed rapidly, despite their leisurely pace. Small details came into focus. The Guard wore a dark blue uniform, pants and long sleeved shirt. His tactical belt held a few surprises; handcuffs, baton, knife, gun. The equipment looked out of place, considering he patrolled a civilian housing community.

They walked past the Guard on the opposite side of the road. Hayley’s nerves felt frayed to the quick. The cold air around them was biting, slicing against her skin. The sidewalk felt like sludge, newly poured concrete dragging against her feet.

“Calm down,” Aiden whispered in her ear. His head bent towards her, looking essentially like a lover’s embrace.

His voice was like a balm, pouring soothing words over raw nerves. Hayley swallowed, realized she’d been gripping his shirt in a death grip. She loosened her fingers and forced her body to relax. Until the Guard ask them to stop.

Aiden turned them slightly, bodies angled away from the Guard’s line of sight. He let the Guard approach, but remained silent.

Stopping a few feet away the Guard spoke, “Sorry to bother you. Just thought I’d let you know, the outer perimeter lights and camera malfunctioned. But they’re working now. It’ll be in your monthly home owners report.”

“Thanks,” Aiden said, nodding his head, voice pitched low.

The Guard lingered, Hayley could feel his scrutiny sliding over them. Aiden hand wandered slowly to his back, under his jacket. Where a gun was hidden.
The Guard still hadn’t moved away. The mood shifted. Hayley felt suspicion emanating from the Guard. Like slimy tentacles, twisting out to touch them. Identifying them as intruders.

The Guard took a step forward. Aiden was too still. He practically screamed danger. Something the Guard was obviously picking up on. Hayley had to do something. Aiden wouldn’t allow the Guard to get much closer.

So she giggled, the sound puncturing the night. Out of place in the sudden loaded silence. Arm still wrapped around Aiden, she deliberately slid her hand lower. The Guard followed the movement, stiffening. Until her hand landed near the base of Aiden’s spine, rubbing slowly, seductively.

“Sorry,” Hayley said, slurring her words slightly for effect. “It’s our ten year anniversary. We’ve been out celebrating. We just want to get home…” Hayley trailed off, words left unsaid but full of meaning. Shrugged under Aiden’s arm, apologetic.

Aiden caught on to her ruse quickly. Lowered his mouth to kiss her neck. A very real shudder went through her. Hayley saw the Guard’s smirk, before he quickly covered it.

“Happy Anniversary,” the Guard said, posture relaxing.

“Thanks,” Hayley replied breathlessly as Aiden steered her down the sidewalk.

Walking around the corner, out of sight of the Guard, Ray’s voice in her ear caused her to lurch unexpectedly.

“And the Oscar goes to…,” Ray joked.

“Jesus,” Hayley breathed, hands shaking.

“I’m so sorry to interrupt your anniversary evening. I hope Aiden got you diamonds,” T-Bone crackled over the shared frequency. Humor melding through the line.

“Fuck off T-Bone,” Aiden replied, his voice vibrating with amusement despite his words.

Hayley felt embarrassment creeping over her. But she shrugged it off quickly. Better that the Guard believe she was a horny wife then have Aiden kill him.

The Guards worked in a grid pattern, walking down each street at least a dozen times during their shift. The Guard they encountered had veered from his grid, possibly investigating the perimeter blackout. Using their knowledge of the patrol patterns, they were able to travel to Julian’s street without encountering any more security.

Julian Collin’s house looked very new. Almost like it had rolled off a production line but they had forgotten to apply the mandatory layer of color to it. The render was an uninspired polished concrete grey, the door a slab of shiny stainless steel. The windows were tall, throwing off an odd reflective illusion. Like if you went up to them and pressed your face to the glass it’d throw back a nightmare image of yourself rather than a true reflection.

Julian wasn’t home. He’d signed out at the front gate an hour ago. Shadowing his movements hadn’t been in vain. They’d discovered every Wednesday night he had a standing dinner date with colleagues. The dinner often lasted well into the early hours of the morning.

“Any movement?” Aiden asked.

Tall hedges, methodically trimmed, separated the house from the neighbours. Shielded them from view as they walked down a pebbled path to the front door. Deceptively small, it was strange to think the electronic box at the height of the doorbell could control entry into a house. The biometric fingerprint scanner was designed to allow entry only to the occupant of the home.

Aiden palmed his phone, tapped on the screen a few times and waited. His phone appeared to take on a life of its own. Connected to Aiden’s phone, Ray was using a ‘Biologger’ hack to circumvent the biometric scanner.

Blume’s scanners were state-of-the-art, but with one glaring defect. The biometric system didn’t encrypt the data during the authentication process. Already inside the network, all Ray had to do was intercept the data and use the raw biometric image to fool the scanner. Allowing them inside without the need for Julian’s fingerprints.

The door gave three small beeps and opened silently.

“Open sesame,” Aiden muttered under his breath.

The interior was as uninspiring and bland as the outside. Surfaces of white iced over the rooms. Grey coated the walls in their featureless monotony. There were very few splashes of color. Not even a comforting wallpaper that imitated warmth.

Hayley followed Aiden through the house. In the third room they encountered what they were looking for. Julian’s home computer. It stood to reason Julian would keep records of his business dealings in his home. Surrounded by high-tech security, he’d likely believe no one could access his data. Or so they hoped.

Pulling out a chair, Aiden booted up the computer. A minute later he cursed.

“What’s wrong?” Hayley asked automatically, hand wandering to her gun holster.

Aiden ignored her, continued to type. Palmed his phone, alternating between each screen.

Hayley drummed her fingers on the desk impatiently. Aiden shot her an irritated glare, eyes wandering pointedly to her fingers before turning back to the screen. Gritting her teeth, Hayley was about to respond with a sarcastic remark, but was interrupted.

“T-Bone, can you link into this computer through my phone? This guy has a pretty impressive firewall.”

Hayley prowled the small space, vaguely listening as their talk turned technical. Time dragged heavily, the minutes dripping away languorously. Julian wouldn’t be back for hours, but Hayley still felt the tug of expeditiousness. Like fine cobwebs, brushing against her skin, unnecessarily cloying.

Hayley walked back over to the desk when Aiden gave a satisfied grunt. He’d broken through the firewall. Hayley looked at her watch. Fifteen minutes had passed. More than they’d anticipated.

The computer screen highlighted the contours of Aiden’s face. A small self-satisfied smirk played over his lips. His eyes danced, excitement obvious. This was what he lived for. This churning excitement. He enjoyed the chase, the adrenaline. The subsequent high from a victory. It was one of the few times he permitted emotion.

Inserting a USB, Aiden clicked through folders. Dizzingly fast. Fingers flew over the keyboard, occasionally stopping to click on the mouse. It was fascinating to watch. Aiden’s prowess in combat was never in question. Lithe, agile, athletic, his inherent fighting ability had been honed over
countless years. Combined with his natural aggression, it made him a formidable opponent. What Hayley found unexpectedly captivating was Aiden’s confidence in front of a screen.

His physical competency wasn’t needed as a hacker. Patience, intelligence, and forethought was. It wasn’t that she thought Aiden didn’t possess those skills. It was seeing them in action which interested her.

Peripherally, she’d understood just how talented a hacker he was. However, watching him now, that cool focus, the calm concentration, it was alluring. Hayley wanted to reach out and touch him. Feel his strength and capability under her fingers.

Almost of their own accord, her hand reached out, nearly touching his shoulder. It felt like she rubbed up against his aura. It was raw. Raw power, raw aggression. Chafing and inviting all at once. Aiden’s sudden exclamation had her snapping her hand back to her side, breaking the spell.

“This partition. It’s well hidden. It must be what we’re looking for…..Fuck. It’s encrypted. T-Bone, you getting this download?”

“Yup. I’ll decrypt it later.”

The download started, the counter laboriously filling up. Aiden tapped his foot, watching the screen intently. Like he wanted to shove his hand in and literally push the counter to complete.

“Uh, Aiden. We have a problem.” Ray paused infuriatingly for a few seconds before continuing. “Collins just signed in at the front gate.”

Aiden head snapped up, a frown marring his face. “You sure T-Bone? He’s not due back for hours. The download’s nowhere near finished.”

“Of course I’m sure,” Ray snapped. The speaker in Hayley’s ear cracked, matching Ray’s agitation. “You gotta move. He’ll be there in less than two minutes.”

Aiden didn’t move. He continued to sit in the chair, tapping away on the keyboard. Anxiety tickled her consciousness, shooting adrenaline through her body so fast she felt the immediate tremble in her limbs.

“Aiden. We need to move,” Hayley urged, pulling on Aiden’s shoulder.

Aiden’s head whipped towards her, a snarl forming on his lips. His entire being crackled with a dangerous energy. It was like holding onto a loose power line. Undercurrents of aggression sparked beneath her hand as his eyes flashed with barely masked hostility.

Hayley felt invisible hackles rise on the back of her neck. Muscles bunched in anticipation of an attack. None came of course. It was an instinctive reaction, responding to the antagonistic energy Aiden emitted.

Aiden wouldn’t harm her. She knew that. Since returning from Iraq, Hayley could never be sure how she’d react to threats. Even from those closest to her. In fact, if she had more time to consider it, she’d realize she was probably one of the few people who were actually safe when Aiden looked like that. When he dropped that mask.

It wasn’t that scarf he wore around his mouth she referred to. He released that façade of feigned civility in rare unconstrained moments. He kept that side of himself tightly clamped. It wasn’t even the change in his expression, which was minimal. It was the deadly stillness. The unmitigated hostility settling over his gaze. But, awareness lurked in their depths, an assurance that despite
Aiden’s enmity, Hayley had nothing to fear from him.

Aiden moved his shoulder away from her irritably. Hayley realized she’d gripped his shoulder harder than was strictly necessary. Dropping her hand she turned and made her way towards the door. Lingered there as Aiden cursed, removed the USB and shut down the computer. Before moving away, Aiden removed a portable Wi-Fi device from his pocket and dropped it behind the desk.

An urgency overtook them as they heard the faint sound of a car out the front. Hayley followed Aiden to the back door. It was solid metal. The surface was flat and shiny like the outside of a stainless steel refrigerator. There was no handle, no lock, nothing to get a grip on. How the hell did they get out?

The hallway was dark, the scant light from Aiden’s phone cast barely enough illumination to see. While Hayley felt a creeping panic, Aiden conversely, projected an indomitable calm. Methodically, he slid his hands over the wall next to the door. Until he encountered a small electronic keypad. Aiden wasted no time. He palmed his phone, worked quickly on overriding the keypad. A green light pulsedated once. Aiden grabbed her arm and they escaped out the door.

The cold night air hit her like a slap in the face. Floodlights flicked on as they exited the house, bathing the patio area with unwanted light. The patio furniture cast shadows, odd looming angles stretching towards them. Aiden edged around the furniture; throwing a look over his shoulder to make sure she was following.

Reaching the lawn, they sprinted towards the back fence. Green blurred, giving way to darkness as the light from the patio dispersed behind them. Following in Aiden’s wake, her concentration briefly wavered.

Red flickered in the corner of her eye. Turning to investigate she almost stumbled into Aiden. Strong hands gripped her arms, steadied her. Cupping his hands, Hayley stared senselessly at Aiden’s hunched figure. Understanding jolted through her. The two meter high fence stood to his left.

“How will you get over?” she whispered.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured her. Unable to see Aiden’s face in the darkness, Hayley nevertheless detected an undercurrent of amusement from him.

Placing a foot in his hand, Hayley barely had time to steady herself before Aiden propelled her up. Sliding down the other side, Hayley grunted when her feet met the ground. She stumbled slightly, the shrub she landed in entangled in her shoe.

As a dog barked in the distance, Hayley turned in distraction. Stifled a yelp when she saw Aiden clear the top of the fence and land smoothly next to her. Allowed herself a brief moment of incongruent envy in Aiden’s apparent athletic ease.

They’d landed in the middle of a short walkway between houses. Pavers stretched from end to end, a small garden bed lined each side of the fence. They moved to the left, away from the pathway that would open nearest to Julian’s house. Hayley wondered whether she’d imagined the flash of red she saw in the garden. If it was an alarm, surely Ray would have said something?

“You guys get out okay?” Ray asked anxiously.

“Yeah,” Aiden replied tersely.

Bitterness emanated from Aiden. Tendrils of the emotion curling outward to similarly affect Hayley. The astringent feeling of frustration distinctive in its intensity. They had been so close. Mere minutes
in fact. There may not even be enough data to decrypt. Their only hope was the Wi-Fi Aiden dropped. The download might restart once Julian logged on. They were rapidly running out of options.

The end of the walkway opened up into a small park. Buttery yellow light spilled from a nearby lamppost, alleviating the stifling darkness. Hayley moved away from the walkway quickly, unwilling to linger near a light lest she be seen.

Large trees, cedar, pine and oak dotted the grounds. The soft susurrature from branches of the deciduous trees the only discernible sound. Turning, Hayley saw Aiden emerge from the walkway before her eyes automatically sought out the man standing a few feet away.

Standing directly under the light, Hayley was able to pinpoint every stark detail of the stranger. Including the gun pointing at Aiden’s head.

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“Don’t fucking move.”

Aiden held himself still. Utterly still, as he glanced over to the left and identified the voice. And the gun. A Beretta M9. Favored by U.S. Military. And Blume private security. The guy had that Military look. Clean cut, short hair, stance. He wasn’t wearing a uniform. So not a Guard.

And where the hell was Hayley? She’d disappeared into the darkness. He had no way of knowing if she’d been caught too.

Not taking his eyes off Aiden, the guy lifted his wrist to his mouth and spoke. “This is Walker. Confirming I have one of the intruders. Behind the house. Back of the park.”

“Aiden, what the fuck is happening? Where are you?” T-Bone asked into his ear.

Aiden didn’t respond. Allowed his eyes to slowly wander around the perimeter. No cameras. At least not near him. T-Bone wouldn’t be able to discern what was going on.

His gaze locked onto the man in front of him. He was too far away to try something. Aiden shuffled his feet apart slowly, positioning himself to react.

“Oh god, is that a gun?” Aiden allowed a decent amount distress into his voice. Enough, hopefully, to convince the Blume agent he was scared. And let T-Bone know something was going down.

Movement caught his attention. He strained his eyes but couldn’t see anything, it was too dark. His gaze settled back on the man in front. He looked young. Mid 20’s. Well trained but probably didn’t have a lot of experience. He could work with that.

Raising his hands, he affected what he hoped was a fearful expression. “What’s going on? I live here. Just down the street. Are there intruders? I have to get home to my wife.”

Uncertainty rolled over Walker’s face, pinched his expression. Unfortunately the weapon didn’t waver. “Sorry sir. You’ll have to wait to be identified.”

T-Bone continued to talk in his ear, but Aiden ignored him. He needed to see if this Walker had an itchy trigger finger. See how close he would allow him. So Aiden took a tiny step forward. Shock rolled over Walker, but he quickly snapped his arms straighter, gun hovering near Aiden’s torso.

Aiden took another step forward. Panic flashed in Walker’s eyes. Another step. Walker hesitated, took a small uncertain step back before remembering he was the one with the gun. Aiden took advantage of this small concession and took another step forward. He was getting closer.

Walker’s expression wavered. This game of chicken wouldn’t last. Aiden had no way of knowing how close Walker would allow him. Or whether he’d have the gumption to shoot what could be a private citizen.

Suspicion and doubt tethered Walker to the ground, his indecision allowing Aiden to gain more ground. Another small step and Aiden was a few body lengths away. Still too far away to make an all-out sprint for him.

Watching Walker carefully, Aiden gambled, took another step. It was a step too far. Hesitation dropped away from Walker’s face, determination washing over his expression. The silver gun glinted as it moved, caught the light and flared acrimoniously bright.

Aiden reacted instinctively, stepping to the right quickly. He had a brief moment to watch Walker’s expression tighten before he lifted the gun. Had an odd moment where he thought he heard Hayley yell before the retort of the gun reverberated in the surrounding night.

Shock hit him harder than the bullet. At first. As he was being pulled sideways the shock trickled away, replaced quickly by a dull pain in his ribs. He felt winded, struggled to breathe.

Writhing on the grass pain overrode everything. For a few brief seconds he struggled to control it. It skittered around his mind, body unwilling to co-operate. It took a momentous effort but he pushed past it. Flipped over, the dewy grass leaving wet trails on his cheek.

Watched as Hayley emerged from the darkness behind Walker, her face a mask of fury. Walker stood staring at Aiden on the floor, face aghast. He turned his gun slightly, looking at the offending object in his hand as if it alone was responsible for Aiden’s current state.

Hayley punched Walker in the kidneys. He lurched forward unsteadily. Hayley’s gun whipped out, smashing into the side of his head. From his position, Aiden heard the painful grunt as Walker toppled to the floor.

Pain continued to pull annoyingly at the edge of his mind. Hayley was a flurry of activity in front of him. Hands frisking over him. Aiden shook his head, tried to speak but choked out a groan.

“I’m okay,” he rasped eventually. “He hit,” a quick intake of breath, “my vest.”

Relief washed over Hayley’s face, even as her hands continued to dance over his chest. Seeking physical confirmation.

“Walker?” A woman’s voice questioned.

Hayley’s head whipped up. She stared out into the darkness for a few heartbeats before her eyes wandered back to settle on him. As she cocked her head to the side, light caught and flared in her eyes, eerily discordant.

“Hey. What’s going on? Hey. You. Put your hands above your head.”

Behind Hayley, Aiden could see a woman approaching, gun pointed at them. She walked towards them before her gaze was pulled towards Walker. Not enough of a distraction to get up. Lying on the ground, his position was all wrong. He wouldn’t have enough time to get up and disable the woman before she reacted. He didn’t like the idea of being shot again.
The woman leaned down as she checked Walker’s pulse. Aiden shuffled into a sitting position, letting out a quiet groan as his ribs protested even this small movement. Finding her companion alive, relief flittered over her expression.

Shooting a quick look behind her, Hayley also shifted position. On her knees, she quickly maneuvered one foot underneath her.

“Hey,” the woman called to them again. Sharply this time. Although Aiden began to wonder whether her vocabulary consisted of words beyond ‘hey’.

Neither of them spoke. He moved forward slightly, gauging the angle between the ground and where the woman might stop. Hayley’s gaze swept down to him, hand squeezing his arm. Gave a slight shake of her head.

Aiden frowned. Didn’t like the intensity sharpening Hayley’s gaze. Wavering between acuity and instability.

His concentration snapped back to the woman. Still continuing with her uninspired dialogue as she drew closer, an arm’s length away now.

In a blur of movement, Hayley pushed herself up from the floor and swung around. Grabbed the arm with the gun extended and smashed her fist into the elbow. The bone shattered. Sounded like a twig breaking underfoot. Only with an odd fleshy undertone.

The woman screamed, the sound vibrating through the trees. She dropped to her knees. Hayley punched her in the jaw and she toppled over.

Aiden got up painfully, ribs protesting. Hayley came over to him, eyes oddly blank. He spared her a brief worried look before he became aware of T-Bone yelling in his ear.

"What the fuck is going on? Did I hear a shot? Answer me damn it."

"T-Bone," Aiden stated tiredly, “we’re okay. We’re coming out now.”

"You better move your ass……” A whailing alarm cut off whatever T-Bone was going to say.

"What a cluster fuck this has been,” he muttered, a headache setting up residence behind his eyes.

Hiding in the relative darkness of the park, Aiden realized they’d never slip past in the confusion. Guards were already congregating on their position, weapons draw. Surrounding them.

People began spilling out of houses, dressed in pyjamas. Milling about in confusion, clutching their children.

“T-Bone shut down the system. We can’t get around these Guards.”

Aiden felt the slight hesitation, even through the comms. “T-Bone,” he snapped when he didn’t get an immediate response.

“That’ll cause a panic,” T-Bone warned. “And I won’t be able to see you guys anymore.”

“The longer it’s up the more pressure we’re under,” Aiden pointed out, gritting his teeth as he watched the Guards gather about outside the park.

“You know you sound like a Viagra commercial, right?” T-Bone quipped, half-heatedly.
Aiden didn’t respond. He knew why T-Bone was worried. This was their backup plan. Overloading the system would shut everything down. Lights, cameras, security grids, gates. But it would also shut T-Bone out of the system, leaving them blind.

The streetlights flickered out simultaneously. The voices of the residents filtered around them. Rising alarm became a whirlpool of panic eddying around them.

Aiden didn’t move immediately. Standing still, seconds slid by. Small drops of tension dripping through his body as he allowed his night sight to adjust. Aiden grabbed Hayley’s arm. Didn’t let go. In the suffocating darkness he’d never find her again.

“We’ll meet you at the van T-Bone.” All Aiden got was a grunt in response.

Breathing was difficult. At such a close range, it was a real possibility the trajectory of the bullet had broken a rib. Hayley was silent beside him, keeping pace but moving in a kind of distorted trance.

The absence of light assisted their escape. As did the residents, whose panicked presence on the street distracted whatever Guard they encountered.

The emergency exit was bathed in a dull red glow. Eerily uninviting. Aiden pushed the steel door. It opened silently. In the event of a system failure, every exit opened automatically. The sound of the door clicking shut reverberated in his skull.

“We’re out T-Bone,” Aiden said, voice sounding like it scraped against gravel.

Silence greeted this statement. A few minutes later, T-Bone’s unexpected announcement caused a tiny spark of hope.

“I did get a partial download. What the hell is Klockwork?”
The harsh glare from the numerous computer screens cast a strange static net over the occupants in the room. The metallic tapping of the keyboard kept them in place, drilled through the dull silence of expectation.

Kenney’s dreadlocks moved like sluggish snakes every time he shifted in his chair. If Hayley didn’t know better, she’d have thought everyone had taken a covenant of silence. No one had spoken for what seemed like hours.

Hayley had given up on her struggle to remain sitting, was instead attempting to wear out the expensively tiled floor in Aiden’s Mad Mile apartment.

Aiden had glanced at her only once since she’d started pacing. But even in that quick look she could see that stoic mask he wore was slipping. He hid the pain well but she could tell he was disguising a wince every time he moved.

The trip back to the apartment had been a tense one. Sitting in the back of the van, every bump only seemed to hammer one glaring obvious point home. Their mission had failed.

All that planning. For nothing. Hayley felt a crushing desolation in her chest. Like an addict coming down from a high, an adrenaline depletion always left her feeling hollow. Like every sensation had been scooped out and all that was left was a husk.

Hayley couldn’t help but replay the events of the night. Where had they gone wrong? Did Julian have a silent alarm in his house they weren’t aware of?

Snapping a heel around, Hayley turned to pace towards the magnificent view from the second story window. The sharp noise her shoes created on the tiles made her wince. It served as a reminder of what she’d done earlier that night.

She slowed her walk as her mind was dragged unwillingly back to the way she’d visciously snapped that woman’s arm. The sound of cracking bone bounced around in her brain like ball. Careening around her skull too fast to catch and stash away.

Standing in front of the window, the twinkling lights of the city looked like tiny fireflies stagnant in the darkness. Letting out a small sigh, she found the tug of remorse difficult to ignore. There had been a time when she didn’t know a hundred different ways to incapacitate a person.

The view blurred as Hayley let her mind wander back to the days of her training. Remembered being a raw recruit, the shock to the system beyond that of having someone splash icy cold water over her. The appallingly early morning roll call, physical exhaustion, restricted freedom. It had been a difficult adjustment.

But once she’d overcome the shock, she found a niche for herself. She adapted well, had excelled in areas of combat, leadership and firearms. The training had given her a purpose, an outlet for the pain she carried from the life she left in Chicago.

The Army’s training saved her life on countless occasions; it made her reflexes quicker, mind sharper. Problem was, the training which made her such a good soldier, now made her a very dangerous private citizen. No one taught her how to react to stressful situations outside of the Army. Like a normal person. Tonight was a prime example. She’d disabled that woman without her mind even registering the intent. She just allowed her body to flow, the accompanying movements well-
rehearsed, automatic.

Turning back around to begin her pacing anew, Hayley spotted Aiden try to hide another wince. In the van, he’d had slapped her hands away irritably when she’d tried to assess his injury. Already feeling like she was one small thread away from snapping, she’d retreated. To get herself under control before she built up the mental fortitude to confront Aiden.

Now she felt calmer, she’d look over Aiden’s ribs whether he liked it or not. Walking over she planted herself in front of him and crossed her arms. Aiden blinked up at her in surprise. He looked pale, tired. Pain chipped at the edges, flickering like a shadow around him.

Almost disinterestedly, he watched her hands reach for the buttons on his shirt. A frown formed with the realization of her intention. She’d unbuttoned down to his chest before he reacted. Grabbing her fingers in a tight grip, Aiden’s jaw tightened in agitation.

Hayley hissed in frustration. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

Aiden scowled at her. Whatever he saw on her face altered his expression. It didn’t soften, but took on a resigned countenance.

“Do you two want to get a room?” Ray asked.

The question startled Hayley; she’d forgotten Ray was there. Turning around, Ray was watching them in amusement. He raised an eyebrow suggestively. She sent him a glare, ignoring his jibe.

Turning back she felt Aiden’s fingers fall away. A silent acquiesce. Removing his shirt and the vest he wore underneath, Hayley grimaced when she saw an ugly purple bruise already forming. Her fingers roamed gently over Aiden’s ribs, brushing up against a long healed scar. His body was a roadmap of scars, a testament to his dangerous life.

Aiden’s scars always evoked a strange response in her. Lying in bed, she’d often trace them with her fingertips. They felt surprisingly soft, despite the trauma involved with their creation. She’d asked the story behind a few of them. Some he told her about, without inflection. The retelling like that of an impartial observer, the pain and blood insignificant.

Some she’d asked about, Aiden had given a careful shrug, told her he didn’t remember. But he did. She could feel the lie through his skin, as if the memory was deeply embedded and refused to be dislodged.

Maybe she felt his scars to convince herself of his invincibility. The battles he’d fought and won a verification of future outcomes. Because thinking of a different result scared her more than she admitted. Aiden didn’t appear to mind her explorations, in fact, the small tug of his mouth even denoted amusement.

Shaking those thoughts off, Hayley continued her examination. Aiden looked off to the side, grudgingly endured her probing without a word.

“As far as I can tell, your ribs are probably just bruised. Not broken,” Hayley declared. Without an X-Ray she couldn’t be sure.

Aiden looked back at her, responded with marked indifference to this diagnosis by shrugging.

“You should probably rest,” she remarked.

Aiden pointedly ignored her, shrugging the shirt back on and grabbing the chair to take up position
next to Ray. Leaning over Aiden made a comment, too low for her to hear. Hayley stared at the back of Aiden’s head in frustration before bringing her own chair over.

Ray cracked his knuckles. “I can decrypt this. What there is of it. But, this cipher has a key I can’t work out. I need my own programs.”

Hayley frowned, her tired mind trying to remember what she knew about ciphers.

“Remind me what a cipher does.”

Ray swung towards her. “All modern ciphers use an additional concept called a ‘key’. Basically, in layman’s terms, a key is a piece of information you use with the encryption algorithm to secure your data. If the cipher is strong, like this one is…” Ray turned around to tap the screen for emphasis.

Hayley tilted her head, watching as code raced across the screen. Fluctuating green, the numbers taunting in their unreadability.

“….and you don’t have the proper key,” Ray continued, “it can be almost impossible to decrypt the data. Well, for most people.” A quick smirk followed this. “I can work around it. It’ll just take time.”

“But we didn’t even get a complete download. Will that matter?” Hayley asked.

Heard hope infuse her words despite trying hard to remain carefully neutral.

Ray hummed quietly. “I ain’t gonna lie. It’s possible that the information I pull out won’t make sense. But we can try. And Aiden dropped the Wi-Fi. It’ll connect when Collins starts up his computer. And hopefully restart the download. Otherwise…” Ray shrugged apologetically, the implications of his words hanging limply in the air.

Hayley blew out a frustrated breath. “Okay, thanks.”

Ray waved vaguely as he turned back to the screen. “Tomorrow I’ll go out and get some of my equipment, bring it back to crack this bitch.”

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The plethora of wires, connections, and hardware lay scattered throughout the living room. Hayley delicately picked her way over the tangled mess. When Ray returned an hour ago with his ‘equipment’, Hayley watched in amusement as he proceeded to empty his van and connect everything. Organized chaos wasn’t the right term. Technical pandemonium came closer.

Aiden sat at his own station, ignoring them. Hayley shot an irritated look in his direction. He wasn’t sulking, although his behavior came perilously close. Aiden didn’t like to lose, couldn’t stand failure. Hayley understood this. But if anyone ought to feel discouraged by their lack of results, it should be her. She was beginning to think she’d never get her brother out of prison.

Aiden’s amused snort jerked her head in his direction. He rolled his chair back so that she could see his screen. The newscaster’s voice filtered through the speakers as video footage played on the screen.

“Last night Mad Mile’s gated community, Oakbank Plains, reported drastic system failures. Residents described a community wide black out. Two Security Guards were taken to Chicago Med with minor injuries. The gated community is Blume’s latest development. Despite this hiccup, Blume’s PR consultant, Charlotte Gardner, assures the public it’s a minor incident.”
The African-American woman appeared on screen, her melodious voice grating in its fallaciousness. Hayley’s lip curled in distaste as Gardner espoused the effectiveness of Blume technology.

“There have been errors, but as with any fledgling technology this can be expected. Blume continues to create technology which helps the citizens of Chicago. We work around the clock to improve any faults we encounter. Future gated communities are being built as we speak. The public can rest assured, our technology is sound.”

The footage glossed over and the newscaster continued with another story.

“Our intrusion wasn’t reported.” Hayley couldn’t keep the surprise out of her voice.

Ray and Aiden laughed simultaneously. A mocking quality flowed through the sound.

“Of course not. How would that look? Two people managed to break into their impenetrable community. Imagine the outcry,” Ray said sardonically, waving his hands theatrically.

“People believe Blume’s bullshit. Plus, they’ve invested a lot of money in other gated communities. Who will move in if it gets out their community isn’t as safe as they say?”

Ray had a point; Hayley was just surprised at Blume’s audacity and misdirection. Although she shouldn’t have been. Blume was a company which liked to have a squeaky clean image. To the public they presented as helpful, innovative and resourceful. But behind closed doors they were underhanded, misrepresented information and used software to spy on private citizens.

When Hayley looked over to Aiden, he’d already turned back to his screen. She contemplated his posture. He appeared relaxed, reaching for the coffee cup next to him. Taking a sip, he set the cup back down.

Aiden had an almost humming alertness that he emitted, like a low band frequency. Even asleep, there was that odd vigilance about him. His limbs may be lax, but his mind wasn’t. He’d surprised her a few times, reacting to his phone’s alert by jumping out of bed with a speed that was startling considering he’d been asleep moments before.

She didn’t know how Aiden lived with the constant threat of danger. She knew what it was like to live in that heightened state. There were days when her team had been out in the field, hunting insurgents and catching mere minutes of sleep because they needed to constantly be on alert. But at the end of the day, she could return home and not feel that burning adrenaline if she went outside.

Aiden could never truly relax. He had a lot of enemies who would love to be ones who took him down. It had to be draining; that constant vigilance. It hardly showed, if he even felt the strain at all. So difficult to read in many respects, it frustrated Hayley enormously never knowing what Aiden felt. She’d love to know if her feelings were reciprocated.

Hayley stilled abruptly, felt the color drain from her face. Clarity sparked, fizzled too brightly like a light bulb before it died, sputtering into obscurity. In a dangerous moment of inattentiveness, she’d realized something which she’d tried desperately to keep hidden. Despite her best intentions, she had fallen for Aiden. Again? Still?

She silently berated herself for a fool, thinking she could control her emotions. Even tried to convince herself that sleeping with Aiden wouldn’t change anything. It was stupid of her to believe those old feelings wouldn’t surface, that spending time with him wouldn’t allow those feelings to grow.

“Jesus on a pogo stick, Collins just logged on to his computer.”
The moment dissipated abruptly when Ray interrupted her thoughts with his usual aplomb. Aiden immediately rose from his chair to pick his way around the cables. Hayley joined him, grateful for the distraction.

Settling himself in front of the spare chair at Ray’s rig, Aiden dragged a keyboard and mouse over. Hayley watched Aiden’s fingers fly over the keyboard. She gripped the back of Aiden’s chair, anticipation clawing at her.

“I’m setting up a trace. My programs use his connection so he can’t detect there are two different ports in use.”

Aiden nodded absently at Ray’s statement, intent on whatever he was trying to find in Julian’s system.

It was difficult not to be tempted by the lures of a hacker’s life. They could discover your darkest secrets with the push of a button, siphon money from accounts with the swipe of a thumb. Or in Aiden’s case, manipulate an entire city. That control and influence was addictive. Having had only a peripheral taste, she found herself enticed by it.

Ray let out an irritated rumble. “I can’t find the partition. He must have removed it. Too late now he’s shut the connection down.”

Gripping Aiden’s chair the plastic groaned under the pressure as she let out a groan of her own.

“Fucking fantastic. Now we have a partial download that we may or may not be able to decrypt.”

Silent for the space of a heartbeat, another thought occurred to her. “Why would he remove the partition? Is he just covering his tracks because there was a break in? Does he know we were in his computer?”

Aiden’s phone vibrated on the desk, the only answer to her questions. Before Aiden picked the phone up Hayley glance at the screen. Blocked number.

“Yeah.”

Irritation flashed over Aiden’s features. Removing the phone from his ear, he swiped the screen and allowed them to hear the other side of the conversation.

“…are in need of your assistance.”

Hayley rolled her eyes. DedSec. That electronic filter made them sound like teenagers playing with a new toy phone rather than adults running a secret hacker organization.

Aiden appeared to consider this request for a moment. “What do you want?” he asked disinterestedly.

“Our organization has been forced underground. We are being hunted. One of our members breached our network and is using the information they stole against us. Targeting our Council of Daves. A few weeks ago he successfully eliminated two Daves. Since that time he has killed three more. Most of us are in hiding and fear for our lives. We need your assistance in locating this rogue member.”

A scornful snort escaped before she could smother it. This was a bit rich. DedSec expecting Aiden to help them after their negligence sent fixers after them a few weeks ago.
Aiden settled back into the chair and sighed. He managed to convey boredom even in that small sound.

“Sounds like you have some internal problems. I don’t see why you’d think I’d agree to help. I’m busy. Hire fixers to find this guy.”

“You do not want us hiring anyone else for this job. This member managed to access the same files SoSueMe stole. It is how he managed to target us.”

Hayley shot a worried look at Aiden but all she saw was contempt on his face. Aiden hadn’t told her much about what happened with SoSueMe, but she got the impression the information he stole could be detrimental to Aiden.

“You know, for an organization full of so called hackers, you have a surprising amount of security leaks,” Aiden retorted scornfully.

“You are forgetting one important detail.”

Impatience crept into Aiden’s voice. “Yeah, what’s that?”

“SoSueMe stole our files on you. Our rogue member now has that data. Including information in regards to your family.”

Aiden dropped all pretence of indifference to the conversation. His expression tightened, anger sparking in his eyes.

“You know nothing about my family,” Aiden snapped.

Derision evident in his tone, Hayley nonetheless saw a flash of uncertainty in Aiden’s eyes. Maybe DedSec did know something about Nicky. As good as Aiden was, as methodical as he’d been hiding his sister’s location, Nicky could have unintentionally slipped up. She didn’t have the same brutal outlook as her brother, never quite understanding the danger she could be in.

“Is that a risk you’re willing to take?”

The neutral impassivity of the electronic filter couldn’t hide the faint taunting inflection behind the question. A deadly stillness settled over Aiden. In the loaded silence, Aiden’s anger compressed the room, saturating the air so it felt like a pulsating presence.

A snarl contorted Aiden’s lips, making his deep voice vibrate with an undeniable threat.

“If something happens to my family you’ll not have to worry about this rogue member coming after you. I’ll kill every fucking one of you myself.”

“It is why we have contacted you. It is in both of our interests to eliminate this threat.”

“I’ll find him. But be warned, if this guy endangered my family I’ll come for you.”

Silence greeted this statement. When the DedSec member answered, they made no mention of Aiden’s threat.

“We are currently tracking his movements. We will contact you when we have locked onto his location.”

Aiden ended the call but didn’t move. Tracing the contours of his phone, his eyes became unfocused. Ray eyed Aiden warily before shooting a quick, concerned look at Hayley. Aiden’s reaction
confirmed Hayley’s suspicions. Aiden didn’t know what information DedSec had on him. That uncertainty coupled with the underlying threat to his family meant he had to eliminate this rogue member.

Hayley hesitated, unsure how Aiden would react if she approached. Walking over she placed a tentative hand on his shoulder.

When Aiden whipped his head toward her Hayley flinched. His stare pierced right through her, pinning her in place. She felt the almost painful intensity in his gaze.

She’d seen Aiden’s anger before. It burnt hot and fast but never lasted. The iciness of his expression was different. It coated him like protective permafrost, isolating him from outside intervention.

It was pointless trying to reach him now; her well-meaning words would bounce off as effectively as rain on glass. Aiden shrugged her hand off and stalked towards the stairs. Hayley sighed when she heard the front door slam.

“That went off like a dress on prom night,” Ray deadpanned.

Hayley laughed, but it sounded hollow even to her own ears. She understood Aiden’s anger; his families’ safety was paramount. But his often instinctual reactions, lashing out at those closest to him, created distance. Intentional or not, Aiden made it very difficult for people to get close to him.

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The knife cut through flesh effortlessly, the dull thud as it continuously hit the wood a monotonous sound that was oddly soothing. Hayley used the knife to scrape the contents of the vegetables off the cutting board and into the saucepan.

Cooking was another outlet for her, although the process which normally soothed her now left her with too much time to think. She felt like invisible hooks had sunk under her skin, pulling her in different direction. DedSec. Nicky. Jacks. Julian. Bellwether. Klockwork. Danny. And Aiden. But she preferred the random worry for others rather than examine her feelings for him too closely.

A sharp pain distracted her. She swore quietly as she saw blood well from a cut on her finger. Not concentrating and she’d cut herself with a knife. The slight tang of copper rolled over her tongue as she sucked the injured finger into her mouth.

Turning around Hayley almost bit her finger in surprise when she found Aiden leaning against the opposite bench. She hadn’t even heard him come in. He was staring at her soundlessly, until his gaze dropped to her finger and lingered there.

Hayley’s own gaze was drawn down, watching as a small droplet of blood rolled down her finger to drop onto the floor. When she looked back up, Aiden had turned around, ignoring her in preference of the tumbler of alcohol.

Splashing a generous amount of liquid, he crossed to the refrigerator and dumped ice cubes into his glass. Turning around, Aiden leaned back into a cupboard and sipped his drink.

Now under the light, Hayley could just see the beginnings of a bruise on his face. Noticing her eyes lingering on the discoloration near his cheekbone, Aiden’s stare turned challenging. Questions hovered on the tip of her tongue.

He sipped the alcohol, eyes never leaving her face. The last traces of anger still lingered in his system. It was in the set of his shoulders, the slight mocking curl of his mouth. The air around him
still crackled with suppressed energy. An argument would burn the last traces out of his system.

Hayley didn’t want to indulge him, but found it very difficult to maintain her silence. Aiden wouldn’t go after random citizens to expend his anger. He’d use the Profiler to pick his targets, arguing that the people he went after were criminals. They deserved the justice he meted out.

Or, maybe it was just easier for Aiden to wrap all his excuses up in one big hazy ball of justification. Throw it at whatever target he preferred and let his fists speak for him.

Numerous arguments rolled around her brain, none that would adequately push home her point. Ultimately, she knew it wasn’t her place to question him. And he would certainly be quick to point that out. So Hayley didn’t comment. Just turned her back on him and allowed her silence to express what she couldn’t. Exasperation.

“If you’re done working out some of that aggression, I can let you know what I’ve found out,” Ray called out from the living room.

Aiden grumbled inaudibly behind her before walking out of the kitchen. Hayley followed, also interested in hearing what Ray had to say.

A little stiffly, Aiden sat in the chair opposite Ray and stared at him expectantly. Hayley wondered what other injuries he’d sustained in the hours he’d been gone.

Ray grabbed a screwdriver he’d left on the desk after assembling his rig. He rolled it in his palm, the bright orange handle catching the light to glitter like a faceted diamond.

“I’ve been trying for the last few hours to find out what’s been happening with DedSec. It’s been hard. No one wants to talk and it was almost impossible to find anyone who wants to be affiliated with them at the moment.”

Tossing the screwdriver up in the air, it flipped twice before Ray caught it neatly.

“What I did find out isn’t exactly encouraging. Three of the Daves have been killed. The same three I saved a few months ago in fact. I didn’t know back then who was trying to kill them.”

Aiden peered in the contents of his glass, swilling the amber liquid around as if it could provide some type of guidance.

“Why?”

Aiden’s cool gaze latched on to Ray as if he alone was the source of Aiden’s contention.

“Why….what?” Ray asked. His southern drawl clipped the last word. Frustration twisting his normally benign expression into a prominent frown.

“Why bother risking your life for DedSec?”

Aiden shrugged casually, as if the answer to his question was irrelevant. But that small movement jarred the carefully indifferent attitude he adopted, and his calm suddenly seemed like a mask held in place.

Ray made a growling sound, lasering Aiden with a glare of his own. He pointed the end of the screwdriver towards Aiden’s chest. Aiden glanced at it, clearly unimpressed.

“It’s called a conscience Aiden. You might want to try to find yours someday. How about this, the
next time there’s a murder plot I’ll conveniently leave my conscience at the door in case it might affect you somehow. How about that?” Ray asked, words dripping like battery acid.

“Fine with me,” Aiden replied.

He meant it too, it was apparent in his blank stare, which showed a callousness bordering on cruelty. Anyone who got in Aiden’s way, threatened those he loved, put an automatic target on their back. Collateral damage. It mattered little to Aiden. As long as he achieved his outcomes, that was all that mattered.

“Jesus you’re just a cold-hearted bastard” Ray muttered, shaking his head.

Ray turned back around to his screen, his posture stiff, anger evident in the rough keystrokes. Aiden swallowed the rest of the contents in his glass. He rolled the ice cubes around, contemplating Ray with carefully concealed disinterest.

When Aiden shifted in his chair, pain rippled over his face. The movement tore open that veil of indifference like a cracked fissure. His normal imperturbable expression flickered like a broken flashlight. What Hayley she saw in that unguarded moment was a bone deep weariness.

However, as quickly as the expression crossed Aiden’s face, it disappeared. Smoothed away to be covered by his normal impassivity. That stoic impenetrability Aiden projected was a careful defence against the intrusion of unnecessary emotions.

It wasn’t that he didn’t feel anything, he just hid it better than anyone else she knew. She imagined it made the loss of life, the hard decisions, the fear and doubt easier to contend because he’d detached himself so successful it barely mattered anymore.

It was a sad and lonely way to live, but Aiden had chosen his path in life and had accepted the consequences long ago. But it didn’t justify Aiden’s insensitive and callous disregard for others. He had people who cared about him, but the way he acted, it was so difficult to know if he felt the same.

Hayley had to be careful not to make excuses for Aiden. She’d done that in the past because of her feelings and didn’t like how it blinded her. So she watched Aiden with a kind of detached curiosity, waiting to see if he if cared enough to make amends with Ray.

Like nails on a chalkboard, the silence scraped painfully around them. Eventually, Aiden got up and placed his empty glass on the desk next to Ray, who didn’t look up.

“I do value your input T-Bone.”

It wasn’t exactly an apology. But coming from Aiden, it was the best you could expect.

Ray stopped typing and moved his head slightly. He didn’t look at Aiden and for a moment Hayley thought Ray might ignore Aiden’s rather pitiful attempt at an apology. Then Ray turned around and looked directly at Aiden.

“How about that?” Ray retorted sharply. But took the sting out of his words by baring his teeth in some semblance of a grin.

“Aiden huffed out an amused laugh. “When I go after this guy can you continue to decrypt the files?” Aiden asked.

“Of course.”
Hayley watched Aiden walk away, without a backward glance. Tried very hard to reign in her irritation. He’d made a half assed apology to Ray, but didn’t acknowledge her at all.

Hayley suspected that from Aiden’s point of view, Ray had a job to do. Aiden admitted he’d have difficulty decrypting the file without Ray. The act of contrition was most likely to keep Ray onside. Aiden probably didn’t even see his behavior towards her as hurtful, and if he did, dismissed it as inconsequential.

Hayley sighed. Klockwork would have to wait. She didn’t expect Aiden to focus on their investigation while his family was in danger. They’d deal with DedSec’s rogue member and then go after Julian.

_Dusk settled over the dockyards, the last of the sun's rays cosseted behind silver clouds. The metal containers took on a soft grey hue, blurring together like an old photograph. A cold breeze whipped past the containers, coming off the water it had a distinct salty essence. The metal creaked, groaning with the sudden gust of wind._

The place appeared deserted. It wasn’t unusual for this part of Brandon Docks. What was once a bustling part of town now had very few visitors. Those who did frequent the area after dark were looking to partake in unsavoury transactions.

Hayley followed the movement of young man walking briskly down the sidewalk. Using her phone, she zoomed in using ctOS’s camera feed. The Profiler identified him as: **Heathcock, Jared, 23, cashier, income (23,100), prescribed anti-anxiety medication.**

Connecting to another camera Hayley watched the young man, shoulders hunched against the cold or fear, probably both, until he disappeared from camera range.

DedSec had contacted Aiden earlier that day. They found their rogue member, finally tracking him to an abandoned building in Brandon Docks.

Earlier in the day Ray had hacked into ctOS’s feed so they could scope the place out. No one had come in or out of the building all day. DedSec could be wrong about where this guy was hiding, but Hayley didn’t think so. They wanted this guy found as much as Aiden did.

Profiler hadn’t picked up on any individuals which could be marked as suspicious. No one with criminal records or military training. Fixers weren’t the most scrupulous of individuals so brushes with the law were common. If this guy had ordered hits on other DedSec members, then he’d be working with fixers. Most likely hired them to protect him too.

Hayley completed a final scan of the area, feeling faintly apprehensive but unable to discern why. She’d picked nothing up which would normally concern her. Maybe it was the lack of _anything_ which made her think something else was in play here.

“Something doesn’t feel right,” Hayley remarked.

Aiden pocketed his phone and looked over at her, his Biometric Assault Rifle held in a loose grip. They were both well-armed. She had her Adaptive Combat Rifle, Glock, grenades and a knife.

Aiden shrugged at her. “If it bothers you so much, stay. No one’s forcing you to be here.”

Hayley froze at Aiden’s comment, disbelief warring with resentment for the dominant feeling. As she turned around to face him a strong gust of wind blew past them. It swirled around them, tousling
their hair, nipping at their clothes.

Her anger was quick to surge to the surface. But the wind strangely stole that emotion, bore it away in the breeze. All that was left was a kind of resigned disappointment.

“You’re right Aiden. No one’s forcing me,” she confirmed quietly.

She turned her back to stare unseeing at the rows of empty container, a silent rebuke less than he deserved. Hayley heard the heavy sigh as Aiden walked up behind her. Felt his hesitancy even if she couldn’t see it. When he placed a hand in the middle of her back, she stiffened at his touch.

She wanted to move away, but really had nowhere to go. And that wasn’t a realization which sat comfortably with her either. So she pushed it down like a lot of the other feelings she was uncomfortable with. Screwed the lid on tight and hoped those emotions didn’t surface. If there was one thing she knew how to do, it was burying unwanted feelings.

“I didn’t mean that. I appreciate you being here,” Aiden said voice sandpaper rough, the admission obviously difficult.

Hayley turned to stare at Aiden for a long time, trying to gauge the sincerity in his words. His carefully blank expression gave nothing away.

“I’m sure you do,” Hayley said.

Aiden narrowed his eyes. She’d deliberately made her meaning unclear. Her response could apply to either part of his sentence. He knew it too; Aiden was too perceptive not to detect the subtle connotation.

Irritation flickered in his eyes but he ignored the implication. Looking down to slip the safety off his BAR, when Aiden looked up at her, his expression had hardened.

“Ready?”

_/I_/ 

The building’s exterior building was rusted. What was once bright blue painted metal was now orange with thick bubbling rust. Graffiti tags added color and a surprising flourish to the dulled exterior. The name of the business was rubbed out by time and neglect. What should have been “Sonsoro’s Shipping” was now “So so ping”.

At any other time, Hayley might have chuckled at the name. Now, she barely even acknowledged the sign as her practised eye roamed over the perimeter. Looking for more prominent dangers than rust on a building.

Hayley edged cautiously around a metal container, rifle held in a loose grip. She and Aiden had spilt up as they’d entered the area. To make a larger sweep of the perimeter, assessing the blind spots. They were to work in a circular pattern around the building, making sure no surprises in the form of explosives or fixers lurked behind containers.

The perimeter was clear, but instead of allaying her fears, it just added to them. Whoever this rogue member was, he’d managed to take out five of DedSec’s inner council. That didn’t indicate they were dealing with an amateur. Not that she thought DedSec were professionals, but they were hackers. They knew how to hide their trail.

A vibration pulled Hayley out of her thoughts. That was Aiden’s signal. Unclipping a mask from her
belt, she fitted it to her face. She slung her rifle around on its strap so it sat snugly against her shoulder, and edged closer to the building. In quick succession, she pulled gas grenades from her pocket, pulled the clip and lobbed them into the broken windows on the first and second floor.

In Aiden’s stash of artillery, he had a number of toys which caused Hayley to raise an apperceive eyebrow. The least of which was a prototype gas grenade called TORNADO. They were designed for U.S. military and weren’t available to the public. Somehow, Aiden had gotten his hands on them.

The TORNADO was a gas-powered grenade made with the main objective of creating an omnidirectional blast radius. Something which other gas grenades didn’t achieve. The blast radius created a spherical pattern for full coverage of the area, regardless of the orientation of the grenade after it was thrown.

The wind picked up, carrying with it the faint sound of a breaking glass. Following the gas grenade, Aiden would launch his flashbangs. It was a two pronged attack. If someone inside the building managed to evade the gas, they’d have serious difficulty evading the flashbang. Upon detonation, the flashbang would emit an intensely loud bang and a blinding flash sufficient to cause immediate blindness and excruciating inner ear pain.

Climbing the outer staircase, Hayley reached the surrounding balcony and stood in front of the second story door. Feeling another vibration in her pocket, her signal to proceed, she burst inside. Hunching over, making as small a target of herself as possible, she skidded behind a large upturned desk.

Wisps of silver smoke danced their way through the air. Nothing stirred. No strangled sounds of coughing. No hasty retreat in the smouldering vapor. Just the unnerving silence.

Peeking around the corner Hayley saw that the entire floor was an unruly landscape of upturned chairs, scattered papers and leftover furniture. But there were no signs of any fixers. Just the residual tendrils of the gas floating restlessly through the air.

Moving from behind the desk, Hayley hugged the wall of the building. Remaining alert despite the rather obvious evidence that she was the only person on the second floor.

In a slow arc her gun moved, tracking any out of place movement. Hayley hadn’t heard any gunfire below, so Aiden had most likely encounter the same as her. Nothing.

A scraping noise cut through the silence. Hayley froze, finger hovering over the trigger. The automated rebreather made the air she sucked in taste slightly metallic. The taste intensified as her breathing increased, her blood pumping bubbles of adrenaline through her body.

She heard the scraping sound again, closer this time. Behind a large metal cabinet. Applying slight pressure to the trigger, Hayley approached the cabinet.

Stepping around the cabinet, her finger relaxed on the trigger when nothing jumped out at her. Moving forward Hayley stifled a yelp as a rat ran across her shoe. Drew her lip back in revulsion. She hated rats. There was that odd scratching sound again.

Hayley slung her rifle around on the strap until it sat at her back. Pulled the Glock out of her holster and levelled it at the closed cabinet door. Quickly lent in and opened the door, ready to shoot at the slightest provocation.

Hayley scrambled backwards when she saw a family of rats scurrying wildly away. This time Hayley did emit a garbled scream. Luckily, the sound was muffled by her mask.
Heartbeat returning to normal, Hayley scouted the entire second floor. After the scare from the rats, nothing else jumped out at her.

“Hayley,” Aiden called out sharply.

“I’m okay,” Hayley called back descending the stairs.

Pulling off her mask, Hayley shook out her sweat soaked hair. When she reached the first floor, she took a deep breath but screwed up her nose immediately. Seriously thought about putting her mask back on.

The stench was overpowering. Rats had made this building their home, their excrement plastered over furniture. As well as bird droppings and piles of rubbish. Squatters had lived here for a time, leaving their calling card in the form of suspicious smelling bundles.

Aiden was standing in the middle of the room. He’d removed his mask, so she could see the glittering anger in his green eyes.

“There’s nothing upstairs,” she reported.

Lingering smoke hung in the air, shifting like ghosts in the breeze. Hayley turned around, eyeing the first floor. A small cordoned off office stuck out in the far right.

“What about that office?” Hayley asked.

“Locked,” Aiden replied curtly. “Haven’t looked inside yet.”

Abruptly, Aiden set off towards the office. Hayley trailed after him, gaze skimming the room. Until a thought occurred to her.

“Wait,” she shouted, just as Aiden reached for the handle.

Stopping suddenly, fluidly, without faltering, Hayley was impressed with Aiden’s reflexes. Only his head swivelled in her direction.

“What?” Aiden asked irritably.

Hayley sighed. “Just let me check it first.”

Aiden emitted a breathy growl. He didn’t retreat but he also didn’t disregard her request. “Why?”

Hayley crossed her arms. “We may be in the wrong place. Or, we may not. But what if whoever was here booby-trapped that door? But if you want to lose a hand, go ahead,” Hayley said airily.

Aiden had said the same thing to her weeks ago when she’d gone to enter his safe house and he hadn’t deactivated his security measures.

Aiden stilled. Swung his head to look at the door handle, then back at her. Amusement flared briefly in his eyes, obviously remembering his own warning to her weeks ago. Taking a step back, Aiden swept his arm out, the gesture slightly mocking.

Hayley ignored him and what was most likely his injured pride. While not an expert, she did have explosives training. Insurgents often liked to have surprises waiting in the form of booby-trapped doors and windows.

Sliding her hands over the handle, under the door, around the exterior, she found no wires. It could
be rigged to explode when they opened the door but they’d need to have at least one wire connected to the outside handle.

Taking a few steps back Hayley shrugged. “It’s not rigged. You’ll have to pick the…”

Aiden didn’t wait for her to finish. He just whipped out his handgun and shot a hole in the lock. Hayley flinched instinctively, waiting for the blast.

When none came, she rounded on Aiden angrily. He’d already holstered his weapon and was stalking into the office. The reverberation from the shot bounced off the furniture, the echo slowly fading as Hayley stood there.

“Oh you could do that,” she muttered to herself, annoyance flowing through her at Aiden’s blatant disregard for safety.

Inside, the office was clean; no stray papers or rotting furniture. Just one metal desk. With a laptop perched unobtrusively in the middle.

Aiden stared at the laptop, unmoving. Hayley could practically feel the tension rippling around him, spreading out to scrape against her own nerve endings.

Finally, Aiden reached over, fingers glossing over the silver lid. Using his thumb, he cracked open the top, pushing it up until the screen flickered to life. An eerie white glow bathed the darkened room as the laptop started up.

Hayley took a step forward, unable to see the contents of the screen over Aiden’s shoulder. Glancing over at Aiden, the harsh light made the frown on his face appear sterner, more menacing.

The screen flickered, pulling Hayley’s attention away from Aiden. A start up button sat to the left of the screen. The only program she could see was a media application. Palming his phone, Aiden’s frown deepened as his fingers darted over the screen.

Shaking his head, he bared his teeth in a decisively agitated gesture. “I can’t get through the firewall with my phone alone.”

A question stuck in her throat when the media app shot up onto the screen. The play button enlarged until it covered almost the entire screen. Hayley saw Aiden hesitate, uncertainty evident in his flickering gaze.

Aiden looked over at her, shrugged. With feigned casualness, he pressed the enter key.

Immediately, words typed over the screen: WHAT DOES THE FOX SAY ….???

A cartoon fox bounced on the screen, galloped around the edges until it came to rest near the first letter. Opening its mouth, the fox pranced forward swallowing each successive word.

Music began to play. It sounded faintly familiar. And immensely irritating. The chorus repeated on loop, WHAT DOES THE FOX SAY?

The song cut off abruptly and words typed slowly across the screen.

WHAT DOES THE FOX SAY ? ? ?

... >>>

WHEN HE’S LURED OUT OF HIDING? ? ?
Hayley didn’t have time to think. Just react. After reading those words, she knew it was a trap, that the laptop was rigged. Aiden obviously realized the same thing because he grabbed her arm in a bruisingly hard grip and propelled her out of the office.

They just cleared the doorway when the laptop exploded. Like an invisible wave, the force of the blast pulsed around them, pushing them violently forward. Aiden stumbled and fell on top of her. She heard his painful grunt over her own.

Roaring was all she heard. The air smelt acrid, a cough tickled its way up her throat. Aiden scrambled off her and pulled her up.

It was a relatively small explosion, not designed to kill, but rather intimidate. A whispering sizzle, like a snake’s hiss, floated through the air, making her back further away from the fire. Sweat dribbled in a wet trail down her face.

She swallowed nervously, eyes involuntarily straying over the orange flames. The smoke wafted towards her, invading her senses. Immediately brought forth a flood of unsolicited memories.

Wrinkling her nose, she remembered the smell of her flesh burning. The oddly sweet scent of charcoal as flames seared through her skin. The scars on her shoulder blade tingled in response to the memory, the phantom pain an unwelcome reminder of her fear.

The crackling and popping of the fire caused her to flinch. She turned abruptly and walked outside, her feet carrying her away before she realized what was happening.

Dusk was slowly bleeding into night, creating a shimmery haze of shadows around her. She took big gulping breaths, trying desperately to get herself under control. Her traumatized mind never let her forget what happened in Iraq. It was her penance, for the mistakes she made, the lives lost under her command.

Catching a flicker of movement behind her, she turned around quickly to see Aiden hovering in the doorway. He wasn’t looking at her, but she could see the deep frown on his face as he concentrated on his phone. Even this far away she could sense his agitation.

Suddenly, she became aware of how exposed she was, standing out there by herself. Snicking the safety off her gun, she took a tentative step back towards the building. But after that her legs refused the command from her mind. Nothing could make her go back into that building.

Hayley looked around slowly as a crawling sensation, like a thousand ants scuttling over her skin, swept across her body. Something was wrong. She could feel it.

The eddying wind swirled around her, carrying it with the faintest sound. A motoric rumble, out of place in the abandoned shipping yard.

The wind’s invisible undercurrents carried the sound towards Aiden. His head snapped up, eyes seeking out the source. By the time her mind identified the sound, there was little she could do.

Four identical silver SUV’s sped up to the building, the smell of burnt rubber overpowering as they skidded to a sudden stop. Men in black tactical gear poured out of the car, each heavily armed.

Ice threaded through her veins, freezing her in place with one thought: Blume. These men weren’t Fixers. Their military grade combat gear gave them. Their movements were also precise, too well-rehearsed to be anything other than soldiers.

“Hayley move,” Aiden shouted at her.
The desperation in his voice ripped the immobility from her limbs and snapped her focus. Even as she turned towards Aiden, there was the briefest of hesitations. Out in the open she had nowhere else to go but towards the burning building.

Legs pumped fiercely she ran towards Aiden. At any moment, she expected a bullet in her back. Felt the strain in her muscles, the anticipation burning a desperate path through her sinews.

Despite the danger to himself, Aiden walked out of the safety of the doorway and opened fire on the vehicles. And the men unlucky enough to be congregated in front of them. The low thudding of bullets as they tore into the vehicles was soon overcome by the higher strains of pained groans as Aiden’s bullets hit home.

Aiden ejected an empty magazine and slammed a fresh clip in as she ran past him. He stepped back into cover and quickly closed the door. Bullets pinged against the metal.

“Is that Blume?” Hayley asked, panting.

Aiden pinned her with an agitated stare, shrugging irritably. They ducked instinctively as another volley of bullets peppered the building. The windows exploded in a spectacular display of shattering glass. Thousands of shards drifted like snow to the floor, catching the last rays of light to glimmer like a variegated glass storm.

Aiden grabbed her arm so hard she knew there would be a bruise later. “Get upstairs and cover the top floor. I’ll cover down here.”

She hesitated, fear hammering away with each thudding heartbeat. Aiden would be in the most danger downstairs. He’d take the brunt of the attack. Aiden growled in irritation and shoved her towards the stairs.

Aiden didn’t wait for her to comply, but turned around and ran to the door. He placed a Proximity IED on the door, before racing to the other side of the building.

Hayley sprinted off in the opposite direction. Smoke continued to billow from the office in an alarming rate. She spared a quick worried glance at the flames. The fire was smouldering in the office, bleaching the interior in a flickering auburn hue.

She climbed the stairs two at a time, rifle gripped in front of her. As she slid behind a fallen locker, a Proximity IED exploded. The foundation of the building groaned its irritation, the metal grinding under the force. The tortured screams of the men caught in the explosion were cut off abruptly by gunshots.

Hayley knelt near the edge of the locker, steadied her rifle and waited. From the outside, the soldiers could only enter the second floor from one door. In the frosted windows above the entrance, Hayley could just make out movement. She levelled her rifle. In tight formation, three soldiers entered the building.

She opened fire, her careful shots penetrating past their protective gear. Neck, legs, arms, hip; anything exposed and not covered by armor.

The soldiers’ bodies pirouetted around as bullets tore through flesh. Shock rippled through the other soldiers hovering in the doorway. She heard the shouted command as they withdrew from her continued assault.

Hayley heard gunfire below, stuttering bursts combined with the occasional gurgled scream. She had no idea if Aiden was still alive, or if it was his pained groans she could hear.
The soldiers attempted to get inside, but she was able to pick them off easily. Five men lay near the entrance, dead or unconscious she wasn’t sure. She could feel the frustration from the men outside, a coiling energy which was as dangerous as the fire below.

Hayley wondered why the soldiers continued their assault. If it were her, she’d withdraw, allow the fire to chase them out.

Likely, these soldiers had orders to confirm their kill. Blume wanted Aiden’s death confirmed, his body strung up for all to see. Not left as a possibility, which it might be if the soldiers withdrew from the building. It wasn’t like they could let him burn then compare his remains against any medical records.

Kneeling on the floorboards, Hayley could feel the heat emanating underneath. They needed to end this fight quickly. Not only was the building burning, but she didn’t know if they could win a fight against so many well equipped soldiers.

A flash of movement in the entrance snapped her attention, but no one entered again. She didn’t even see the grenade until it rolled closer to her position. The small oblong shaped device trundled across the floor like a demented pineapple.

Hayley watched with a fatalistic helplessness as the grenade wobbled precariously towards her position. It wasn’t the first time she’d had a grenade thrown at her, but every time felt like it would be the last. And this time was no exception.

But as usual her body could be counted on to adopt the right response, even if her mind would rather meander through past experiences.

She felt adrenaline course through her body. So fast she imagined she could taste the tartness of epinephrine in her saliva as it flooded her mouth. She made it halfway across the floor before the grenade exploded.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Smoke laced the air, long grey wisps curling with others that were much darker, some near black. The meandering tendrils floated restlessly through the building, unimpeded by the battle below, intent only on greedily consuming the oxygen it needed to survive.

Gunshots cracked through the air; semi-automatic weapons spliced together, their chattering a brutal communication between opposing munitions.

Ejecting a spent clip, Aiden discarded it absently on the floor. It bounced once before lying unerringly on top of the others.

Aiden groped around in his pocket for another clip. The pliable leather stretched as his hand dug deep, but didn’t produce what he was looking for. Quickly transferring the BAR to his other hand, he dug into another pocket. Let out a quick relieved breath when he felt the cold metal of another clip.

Bullets peppered against the metal lockers he used as cover. Jamming a fresh clip into the feed, Aiden leaned out, fired a few shots. Black outlines flitted through the smoky haze, an indistinct echo of movement between broken furniture.

Ammunition running low, Aiden fired two more shots to keep the men from converging. It would buy him time. Trapped in the far corner of the room, with an indeterminate number of soldiers circling his position, he didn’t know exactly, what he was buying time for.

Ducking back behind cover, Aiden palmed his phone. Fingers darted quickly over the screen as he kept a wary eye on the soldiers’ positions.

Aiden cursed, loudly, as another error message beeped mockingly at him. The soldiers weren’t carrying cell phones. The app he’d coded only work on GPS enabled phones so he couldn’t ping their position. They were carrying some other ctOS enabled tech, his phone told him that much.

Whatever devices they carried, along with their frequency, were encrypted. It looked vaguely familiar, most likely a movianCrypt encryption, common with military type PDA’s. He needed to get his hands on one. Right now, he didn’t have the time to decode a 128 bit encryption.

He sensed a change in the rhythm of the gunfire. Small concentrated bursts towards his position. They were laying down covering fire.

Dropping his phone back in his pocket, Aiden couched down and settled his shoulder against the locker.

Identifying a lull in the firing, he swung out of cover. The timing, although unintentional, was entirely propitious. Two soldiers had broken from cover and were making a mad dash towards his position.

One of them faltered when they saw him. Tried skidding to a stop but his boots slipped on something. Fear warped his expression as he tried to balance himself but failed.

Taking aim, he didn’t hesitate. Aiden assisted his fall to the ground by placing a carefully aimed
bullet through his forehead. The guys’ head jerked back roughly, body convulsing as he toppled over.

Quickly, he adjusted his aim, shot the other soldier in the thigh and groin before he could react to his companion’s demise. He fell to the floor in an inelegant heap, screaming as he clutched his groin.

The office was billowing smoke at an alarming rate. Fire licked through the doorway, desperate to get out and wreak havoc on those inside.

Why the soldiers didn’t send a grenade his way, just blow him up and be done with it he didn’t know. Blume probably thought he’d give up some of his secrets under torture.

Aiden growled quietly at the thought of being held indefinitely by Blume. He’d rather go down in a hail of gunfire than be at their mercy.

Aiden tried accessing the cameras again, his frustration mounting when his phone refused the command to connect. They’d jammed the cameras, deprived him of sight outside the building.

It was difficult to tell how many soldiers were out there. He’d killed some with the Proximity IED’s, but he had no idea how many had managed to get in after.

Leaning out, Aiden fired a few more blind shots. In the thickening haze, he could just make out the willowy movements of the soldiers as they scrambled for cover.

The smoke made it stiflingly uncomfortable to breathe without noticing a burn in his throat. The tickle in his lungs made him uncomfortably aware of the possible effects of smoke inhalation. It wouldn’t be long before the heat and smoke drove him out of the building.

A muted blast upstairs ripped through building, the distinctly familiar sound of an exploding grenade retorting sharply over the popping gunfire. Aiden scrambled to his feet abruptly, eyes drawn to the second level.

The ceiling appeared to sag upon detonation, the roof making an ominous groaning sound under the pressure. A sinister crack reverberated around the building. Small particles of plaster drifted down slowly, the swirling white specks floating peacefully through the air like snow.

The chattering gunfire ceased. Aiden took advantage of the soldier’s distraction, downing another before they dove into cover.

Unexpectedly, the ceiling fissured, cracks splintering in a randomly jagged direction. Aiden watched with a mixture of horror and awe as clefts opened up in the ceiling, raining large chunks of plaster down on the floor.

Startled shouts from the soldiers coiled around the room, alarm penetrating through the men like a wave. Thinking the soldiers panic was a result of the cracking ceiling, it took Aiden a moment to understand what was happening. The men weren’t running away from the cracks opening up in the ceiling, but were actually running underneath it.

Leaning further out of cover, he understood why. The office’s wooden panels jostled in agitation. The timber fractured, stretching to capacity. An impressive roar resonated within the office, smoke and fire swelling out of the doorway.

With a final heaving creak, the entire office exploded. Breathtakingly fast, the splintered wooden panels speared through the air, piercing the soldiers unlucky enough to be near the office. Aiden launched himself back into cover, hearing the dull thud as wooden projectiles impaled the lockers.
Picking himself up quickly, Aiden leaned cautiously around the corner. One soldier was screaming, trying to grab onto a piece of wood impaled in his face. His headgear wobbled when he pulled the piece out.

Aiden swallowed his disgust when he saw the soldier's face, one eye was missing. The skin on his cheek flapped open, revealing the stark whiteness of bone underneath.

Sequestered in the far corner, Aiden barely had time to appreciate his safe position before chaos erupted. The building gave one last heaving groan, a prelude to its death, before part of the second story collapsed.

Aiden covered his eyes when a rolling heat gushed through the building. It felt scalding, even under his clothes he could feel the singe.

The fire, no longer contained by the office, shimmered almost in triumph before roaring its fury and engulfing the nearby soldiers. Orange flames reached out greedily, scorching the men, their screams a wailing cry as their bodies were burnt beyond recognition.

Alarm seized his chest, the tightness not a result of the cloying black smoke bellowing from the rubble, but from the realization that Hayley might now be buried under it.

Aiden glanced quickly around the floor, but he needn’t have bothered. None of the soldiers had survived.

The cavernous hole in the middle of the second floor was raining dust and plaster. Blackened, powdery ash danced amidst the debris, thrown up by currents of hot air where flames continued to smoulder.

The stairs near where the office used to be were dangled precariously, sawed off in the explosion and swaying gently in the hot breeze. Aiden took off towards the other end of building, heading for the other staircase which was surprisingly untouched by the second floor collapse.

Aiden ignored the searing heat, watering eyes, and hacking breaths as he ran towards the stairs. He refused to acknowledge the fear hammering away with each resounding heartbeat.

He’d barely made it up three stairs before movement at the top snapped his gun up, finger a quarter an inch from pulling the trigger. In the shimmering grey haze, the figure whipped their hands up.

Hayley’s eyes snapped open abruptly. Disorientation pressed in around her, making it difficult to focus. Blinking a few times, the disjointed haze receded enough for her to think. Her ears were ringing painfully, as if someone had clapped a cymbal inside her skull.

The rough surface of the concrete floor felt etched against her cheek. The chill seeped across her face, coalescing in her mind, chasing away the confusion.

Hayley was deliberating the merits of moving when sound finally permeated the bubble surrounding her mind. It sounded like a she was in a warzone.

The tortured screams, hiss and sputter of fire, the booming reverberation of the guns were all too familiar. Her groggy mind plucked past remembrances, meshed them together with the present until the timelines became indistinguishable.
Hayley pushed herself up from the floor and stood up inelegantly, wincing as her body protested this movement. Standing upright proved more difficult than she’d expected. Black flittered around the edges of her vision. Her legs wobbled, almost gave way until she reached out blindly and grabbed an upturned table.

The back of her neck prickled, a warning she had learnt never to ignore. Hayley dropped down instantly behind the table. Her vision swam uncertainly from the sudden movement.

She ignored the dizziness, peeked around the woefully inadequate cover. Soldiers had entered the second floor, were fanning out around the room.

Hayley looked frantically around for her weapon. Cursed quietly when she couldn’t find it. The soldier’s semi-automatic rifles glinted mockingly at her. Withdrawing her Glock, she flipped the safety off unenthusiastically. A handgun against a dozen semi-automatics.

*Only seemed fair,* Hayley thought sourly.

She had perhaps a few seconds, at best, before they realized she wasn’t a gooey mess on the ground.

A thick haze of smoke drifted lazily up the staircase near the men. That worked to her advantage. It impeded their vision. Gave her a few extra moments.

Indecisiveness rooted her to the spot. Move and the soldiers would spot her immediately. She could run like a lunatic and hope they didn’t notice a mysteriously retreating figure. Alternatively, stay still, use her Glock against well-trained soldiers and pretend the table would hold, not shatter instantly under concentrated gunfire. Two good choices.

“Fuck this,” Hayley muttered to herself.

In the moment she got up to run, she heard a sinister cracking underneath her feet. It didn’t stop her, in fact it spurred her on.

The soldiers shouted, she heard the command to shoot but didn’t care. She just kept running. Pandemonium erupted seconds later. It was like running in a dream, her legs were moving, but the stairs didn’t appear to get any closer.

The floor felt like it was rippling underneath her feet, causing Hayley to stumble. Clumsily, she tried to right herself, but her body refused to cooperate and she went down. Her arms snapped out to cushion her fall. Grunting, she ignored the sudden pain in her hands as they grazed the concrete.

Quickly she flipped over, but didn’t get up. Hayley tensed, closed her eyes in fatalistic acceptance of the bullet that would end her life.

A thunderously loud crack forced her eyes open. Swirling grey dust erupted underneath the feet of the soldiers, pulsing like a concrete volcano. Covered in chalky remnants, the soldiers’ fear and confusion was palpable.

The soldiers had no forewarning. The floor just collapsed, pulling them under like Hell was calling them back. In the ashen cloud, with fire licking up from the hole it looked like the Perdition she’d imagined.

It became clear to Hayley very quickly that the building could collapse. The structure was grinding, threatening to crumble around her. It stimulated her limbs; she was up and running to the stairs before she realized she’d moved.
Hayley had no idea *how* she had survived the grenade or the second story collapse. Why she survived while others perished around her she didn’t know. It was a too familiar scenario, her being the sole survivor. One she couldn’t fathom enduring *again*.

Aiden’s sudden appearance at the bottom of the stairs startled her. Especially since he looked a mirage, with the smoke floating around him, creating a flickering outline. Reality soon crashed down on her hard when she saw his gun pointed at her.

Hayley quickly put her hands up, opened her mouth, nothing came out besides an indistinct croak. Aiden lowered his gun. He stared at her, something lurking in his gaze which she couldn’t quite name but nonetheless had a significance she couldn’t dismiss.

Hayley ran down the stairs, saw the blackened soot on Aiden’s face and the nasty cut above his eyebrow. The blood dripped in an unsteady flow down his temple and cheek. Hayley grabbed Aiden’s arm as soon as she could touch him. A tremble shook her body, a rush of relief.

Running out of the building, the cold air hit her hard. Made the aches in her tired and sore muscles more noticeable. Aiden leaned over on his knees and coughed, sounded like he was hacking out part of his lung.

Thick smoke curled out the windows, filling the sky with grey clouds. They stood there together shoulders almost touching; watching the building burn.

Neither seemed to have the energy or the compulsion to move. Tiredness pulled at her limbs, made everything around her feel inconsequential.

A groan filtered through the crackling of the fire. In an unerringly parallel action, with Aiden a fraction faster, both whipped their guns out, arms snapping towards the sound.

The flickering light from the fire spilled out across the containers, dancing menacing shadows. The four SUV’s stood abandoned, silently sentinel in the wake of the destruction their owners wrought. The lambent gleam from a nearby lamppost glittered against the silver SUV, allowed Hayley to spot movement.

Aiden swung his BAR around on the strap, removed his handgun and stalked towards the vehicles. The bodies of the soldier’s Aiden shot earlier sprawled like a line of Dominoes. Another lamppost flickered sporadically, its patchy light emphasizing the gory scene like some macabre stage play.

Aiden paused long enough beside each soldier to make sure of his deceased status. Hayley’s eyes roamed aberrantly over the bodies, their blank stares matching the void she felt looking at them.

The surviving soldier’s breathing became increasingly labored as Aiden approached. Quick gulping breaths that he obviously had trouble regulating.

Flicking the safety off, Aiden holstered his weapon. As Hayley approached, she understood why. Slumped against the tyre, the grievously wounded soldier was no threat. A bullet had ripped apart the soldier’s knee, another had torn through his upper thigh.

While unpleasant, those wounds wouldn’t kill him. It was likely the bullet which had pierced his neck that would.

The soldier had to be in a tremendous amount of pain. His eyes were glassy, most likely a result of blood loss. Despite his unhealthy grey pallor, defiance burned in his eyes as he returned Aiden’s silent stare.
The soldier’s breath hitched as she approached, surprise flitting over his face. Blume hadn’t expected her, didn’t know she’d be there with Aiden. That element of surprise probably saved both their lives.

The soldier dropped his gaze, eyes darting frantically around before stopping on a discarded M16. The weapon was a body’s length away from the soldier. But it might as well have been on the other side of Chicago for the good it would do him. It was obvious he couldn’t move but that didn’t stop him trying.

Pain contorted the soldier’s expression as he shifted, arm reaching for the gun. He didn’t get far before a tremor went through him. Leaning back against the vehicle, he gave a wet groan. Panting heavily, blood dribbled out the corner of his mouth.

In one fluid movement, Aiden lowered himself down on his haunches. The soldier flinched in response, scowled at Aiden, hiding his reaction behind an ineffective glare.

It was difficult to tell what angered Aiden the most. Blume’s interference, DedSec’s betrayal or the threat on his own life.

The muscles in Aiden’s jaw clenched, the only visible sign of his anger. Until you looked into his eyes. She saw temptation there. To instil fear and satiate his need for retaliation in a random soldier who sought his destruction.

“I’m beginning to take this crusade against me personally,” Aiden remarked suddenly.

The smoke he’d inhaled only served to emphasize the naturally gravelly undertones of his voice. The malice in his voice was unmistakable; it matched the fury she could feel coming off him in waves.

Sighing, in what sounded to her like mock sadness, he looked back at the soldier.

“So much unnecessary bloodshed. If you’d just leave me alone, this,” Aiden waved vaguely towards the building, “wouldn’t happen. Now I have to make an example out of Blume. I can’t let this go.”

Confusion clouded the soldier’s expression. He shook his head, opened his mouth and tried to speak. All that came out was a distorted croak. More blood leaked out the corner of his mouth.

Ignoring his attempt at speech, Aiden leaned across and patted the soldier’s combat vest. The soldier tried to shift away from Aiden as he opened up pockets, but groaned and fell back to his original position.

Aiden let out a satisfied grunt and stood up. Hayley saw a device in his hand. Palming his phone, Aiden frowned as his eyes darted between the two screens.

A groan flowed through the soldiers lips, ending on harsh exhale. His head rolled back, eyes fluttering shut as he fought with consciousness.

Slowly bleeding out, the soldier wouldn’t survive much longer. Part of her, the ingrained medic, wanted to help. She knew it was futile, not only would intervention prolong his suffering, but it wouldn’t save him.

Hayley turned away, instead concentrated on scanning the area. They needed to move, she didn’t like being out in the open like this. Digging into her pockets, she grabbed her phone and tried accessing the cameras. It refused to connect.

“My access to the cameras is being blocked.”
Aiden barely glanced at her. “I know,” he replied absently.

Infuriatingly he didn’t provide any enlightening reason as to why this didn’t concern him. When it became clear Aiden wasn’t planning on moving until he’d discovered whatever he was looking for in the device, Hayley decided to speak up.

“I really think we should leave,” she remarked, agitation making her voice sharp.

Glancing up, annoyance pulled his mouth up in a scowl. Aiden’s phone vibrated, he sighed when he put the phone to his ear. Aiden listened with exaggerated patience before he interrupted the caller.

“I know T-Bone. I know you’ve left a dozen messages but I’ve been a little busy … Yeah I know the cameras are offline … T-BONE … Stop. Take a deep breath. Tap into my phone. I have this PDA, I need you to crack this encryption. I don’t have time now,” Aiden turned, glared at her after this last sentence.

Hayley bared her teeth at him in agitation but he’d already turned away.

“Get back to me when you find something.”

Aiden ended the phone call and walked towards the nearest SUV. He walked around the vehicle once, fingers glossing over the bullet holes. Evidently, the vehicle passed his test because Aiden got in and a few moments later, the ignition roared to life.

“I hope you’re not waiting for me to open the door for you?” Aiden called out the open window sarcastically.

“God forbid,” Hayley replied sourly, loud enough for him to hear.

Hayley stalked towards the car, jumped into the seat and closed the door slightly harder than necessary. Aiden spared a brief glance at her but otherwise didn’t comment.

A quarter of an hour later Aiden’s phone vibrated. He glanced at it before answering, hitting the speaker button so she could hear.

“What did you find?”

“Well, for a start, it wasn’t Blume who were after you. This time anyway,” Ray tacked on.

Silence greeted this statement. Aiden stepped on the brakes and pulled the vehicle over to the side of the road.

“What? These guys weren’t fixers. They were trained soldiers. Who else has their own private security? “I don’t..” Aiden coughed a few times before wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Clearing his throat, he continued. “I don’t know another company with that type of backing. Who is it T-Bone?”

“Umeni.”

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A few streets away, Hayley used her phone to angle the cameras until she found what she was looking for. Zooming in she saw the house was boarded up, slabs of wood hammered haphazardly across windows. The white picket fence surrounding the property was missing posts and now resembled an old man’s toothy grin.
It appeared abandoned. But appearances were deceiving. Despite the dilapidated exterior there was someone inside. No traps this time. No assault teams. Just them and the mysterious rogue DedSec member. If that’s who he even was.

The PDA yielded a surprising amount of data. Including the location of their elusive hacker. He’d made a mistake contacting the Umeni soldiers before their assault. It had allowed Ray to trace his location to an abandoned section of The Wards.

The stationary Amargosa Turbo GT-R model sports car stood out parked in the deserted street. It wasn’t the pristine exterior or the banana yellow color. It stood out because it actually had all its original parts. Every other car they’d passed was jacked up on concrete slabs, wheels missing, doors open and nary a screw remaining. Just the sad and rusted outer shell.

Aiden had boosted the car after ditching the SUV. It was too conspicuous; the bullet holes would have caused too much attention.

Looking to her left, Hayley saw that Aiden had propped his elbow up, arm outstretched, allowing his fingers to slide slowly over the steering wheel. A gentle caress. But it wasn’t calming. Wasn’t a random movement while he concentrated. It carried with it a threat, a promise of retribution.

The streetlight above them was broken, so the only illumination came from Aiden’s phone. Which he held loosely in his right hand, thumb scrolling over the screen. The shadows draped over his face made his expression difficult to decipher.

She couldn’t see the dried blood, scratches and soot on his face, but she knew they were they. Knew whoever had caused them would be repaid in kind. And then some. The steady rise and fall of his chest was deceiving. She knew that beneath that calm smouldered a lethal rage.

The expensive leather car seat barely made a sound as Hayley shifted restlessly. Her body ached. A headache was pounding behind her eyes. She was used to pain. Knew the different shades, the diverse waves. This pain was nothing too extreme. She just wanted this over.

Nothing added up for her. She didn’t know anything about Umeni, or what Aiden had done to piss them off. How DedSec were involved, she didn’t know either. Aiden, as usual, hadn’t been forthcoming with any information.

“Why is Umeni after you?” Hayley asked.

Aiden looked up at her sharply, anger rippling across his face in a quick, contorted wave. Irritation flickered in his eyes as his expression hardened.

Her question hung in the air, like the suspended moment before a falling glass shattered on the ground.

“They tried to kill me too. I deserve to know,” she pointed out when it became apparent he wasn’t going to answer her.

Hayley was becoming increasingly exasperated with Aiden’s almost pathological need for secrecy. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her exactly, Aiden just didn’t trust anyone. But that just wasn’t good enough.

It wasn’t just that they were sleeping together and she believed that afforded her automatic insight into his life. She didn’t think that way at all. It was they’d been through so much in the last few months that she deserved his respect and that meant answers to simple questions.
“I don’t know why,” Aiden replied.

Despite his steady voice and carefully blank face, dishonesty colored his words. The lie snapped like a bowstring, disappointment hitting her hard.

Hayley looked away from Aiden, a disbelieving scoff escaping. He didn’t acknowledge her, just started the car, and swiped a thumb over his phone.

The blackout was instantaneous. No slow flickering of streetlights, the buttery yellow hue they threw off wavering peacefully into oblivion. Just complete darkness.

Connecting to ctOS’s power grid, Aiden temporarily disabled the electrical grid for the area. It wouldn’t last, ctOS would reboot the system within a few minutes. But it was enough to achieve their aim.

This guy would not see them coming. Literally. The blackout would dismantle his security system, if he had one, but most importantly they’d cut off his access to ctOS.

The throaty engine gave a final rumble as Aiden parked outside the house. Getting out, Hayley glanced up at the night sky. It spread like an inky canopy of darkness, freckled only by the fewest of stars. Her night vision adjusted quickly, sharpening the world around her, the shadows no longer wavering threats but clear outlines.

This guy would have been alerted the moment Aiden instigated the blackout. Know something was wrong. Keeping low, they jogged towards the house, separating once they got to the front.

Hayley watched Aiden take a running leap, grab the top of the two-meter high wooden fence and easily clear the top.

Walking towards the front door, gun in hand, the slapping footsteps and crunching gravel was the only sound she heard. Nothing else stirred. Even the wind was absent, a rarity for Chicago. Hayley tried the door handle. Locked. Her phone buzzed, Aiden was ready at the back door.

She used Aiden’s way of dealing with locked doors; just squeezed the trigger of her Glock, blasting away the metal component. She shoved her shoulder into the door. It swung open dramatically, slamming against the wall, hinges protesting.

Floorboards creaked as Hayley stepped over the threshold. Tensed, expecting resistance, she was surprised when all she encountered was silence. Straining to hear, the only sound which filtered through was that of her own ragged breathing.

The solid beam of the flashlight on her phone cut a streak through the cloying darkness. Every room she passed was shut, wood nailed across the doors. Frustration clawed its way through her mind. Had this guy escaped?

Scraping. Did she hear that? Stopping, she pocketed the phone and waited. Louder this time, the scraping sound persisted, followed by the sound of running. Felt her legs carry her forward despite her brain screaming danger.

Using her shoulder, she careened into a door. Stopped in what looked like a kitchen. Several things happened simultaneously. The lights flickered back on, illuminating the violent scene in front of her. Aiden was in the process of swinging his baton in a downward arc towards a man already slumped over on the floor.

The man raised his arm to ward off the attack, not that it would do much good. The viciousness of
the swing, the strength and anger behind it meant that something would be broken.

Besides the feral snarl curving his lip, Aiden’s face was utterly devoid of emotion as he smashed the baton down. The dull thud as it hit flesh reverberated around the room.

The man’s scream slithered through the silence, wrapping around her. Cradling his arm the shrieks stuttered to a halt when Aiden raised the baton again, slamming it against the back of the guy’s neck.

Aiden stood over the slumped figure, not moving. Arm up, baton still extended, his grip tightening around the baton. In Aiden’s eyes, she could see the almost undeniable urge to just keep hitting.

Hayley stood motionless. Words clawed their way up her throat only to lodge there. What was she going to say? Could she even stop Aiden if he decided to keep going?

Another thought thrust through the haze of uncertainty. Increased her heart rate until she felt the painful thudding in her chest. Did she want to stop him? No. The word whispered through her mind.

The thought slithered past her defences. Grabbed on like a snake’s fangs, injecting the poisonous realization that she liked the violence in Aiden. It called out to her, her baser instincts wanting that approbation for the violence she knew she was also capable of.

Seconds dragged by but Aiden didn’t move. Statue still, only his eyes betrayed his inner turmoil. Much like lightning on a pitch-black night, emotions flashed in rapid succession across his face, too fast to decipher. Eventually, Aiden appeared to calm himself because he lowered the baton, used his hip to slide it into its sheath. Pocketed it absently.

Aiden grabbed the guy by the collar and roughly pulled him up. Walked a few paces and threw him into a ratty sofa. It skidded across the floorboards until it hit a wall.

Hayley walked over to stand next to Aiden who was silently regarding the hunched figure. Limp, greasy black hair obscured the face from her view. When he looked up, and the hair fell away, Hayley started. He was young, in late teens. She expected him to be older.

Aiden pulled out his phone, angled it towards the young man. Scrolled down the screen, eyes darting over the information provided by the Profiler.

“Ethan Malley,” Aiden acknowledged, tilting his head towards the young man in a definitive mocking gesture.

Blue eyes glared up at Aiden through strands of straggly hair. Ethan cradled his injured arm, pain contorting his expression. Eyeing Aiden speculatively, Ethan slowly bent forward. Stopped midway and shot Aiden a nervous look. When Aiden made no move to stop him, Ethan pulled himself up further, groaning as he sat back into the sofa.

Scrolling down the data on his phone, Aiden read out the information provided by the Profiler.

“Member of DedSec since 2013 … unemployed … age 19 … unfilled prescription for Seroquel … Mother deceased … Hmm this is interesting … Father, Connor Malley, 47, Charity Director, ties to Chicago South Club.”

Aiden’s cool gaze raked over Ethan, expression betraying nothing more than mild interest. Ethan stared back defiantly, reminding Hayley of a blustering cub. Mewling rebelliously but with little to back up his posturing.

The rogue DedSec member wasn’t able to hold Aiden’s unwavering stare for long. Ethan’s
confidence fizzled, bubbling away ineffectively, until he dropped his gaze.

Needing to reassert his dominance, Ethan’s eyes crawled along the floor until they rested on her feet. Impudently, Ethan’s eyes roved up over her body, lingering indecently on her breasts despite the combat vest she wore.

Hayley didn’t react, didn’t give the little creep the satisfaction of a response. Instead, she merely stared at him, affecting a bored expression. Aiden shifted, didn’t say anything. He’d noticed the direction of Ethan’s gaze but didn’t react.

“Why are Umeni after me, and how do you fit in this whole fucked up scenario?” Aiden asked, gravelly undertones highlighting the threat behind calm he affected.

A contemptuously sagacious grin split across Ethan’s face. “Who’s this whore?” he asked, ignoring Aiden’s question.

A few seconds passed while Hayley processed this. Anger coursed through her, but before she could open her mouth to respond, Aiden reacted. So quickly, she wasn’t even sure what happened at first. There was a blur of movement in front of her, she heard a distinct fleshy crack and then saw blood pouring from Ethan’s nose.

When Hayley turned to Aiden, he stood impassively next to her, in the same position as before. Almost as if, he hadn’t moved at all. The only evidence of his reaction was the blood pouring from Ethan’s fingers as he cupped his nose. It was scary at just how fast he was.

The air around Aiden crackled dangerous, the undercurrents of violence swirling around him, ready to be swept up and used again if necessary. If she touched him, Hayley imagined Aiden would feel like lightening, sizzling with an intense energy that couldn’t be contained.

Turning back to Ethan, Hayley curled her lip in distaste as she watched him writhe in pain. She didn’t need Aiden to defend her sensibilities; she could do that well enough herself.

“You broke my fucking nose,” Ethan moaned, the sound muffled by the hand held over his face.

Aiden regarded him silently before shrugging. “Let’s try this again. Why are Umeni after me, and how do you fit in this whole fucked up scenario?” Aiden asked again.

Head held back to stem the bleeding Ethan chose to once again ignore Aiden’s question. Hayley stifled a sighed. This kid was either incredibly brave, or incredibly stupid. The latter most likely.

Blood dripped down Ethan’s face, flowing over his neck to drop onto his shirt. Each drop ticked the seconds away as Aiden waited for Ethan to respond. Tucking his phone away, Aiden put a hand in the pocket of his jacket. A casual stance that did not fool Hayley.

Distracted by his broken nose, Ethan didn’t see the baton smashing against his knee. The accompanying howl of pain wasn’t unexpected but it made Hayley wince all the same.

Strangely, watching Aiden use this kind of physical persuasion, Hayley could only muster up a feeling of indifference. Even this realization only caused a vague concern. Like her brain refused to turn the cogs to spit out thoughts, because it knew she wouldn’t like them.

Torture was something she’d never have thought she’d condone. But here she was almost wanting to spur Aiden on.

Ethan’s aggrieved gasps lessened as Aiden gave him time to recover. “Why are Umeni after me, and
how do you fit in this whole fucked up scenario?” Aiden repeated. A third time.

This time Ethan didn’t ignore Aiden. “Umeni wants revenge. DedSec compromised their systems, installed a virus on their servers which annihilated a lot of their data. Years of research. Gone.”

Hayley vaguely knew about Umeni, a tech corporation who had some bad press because a few of their engineers went to prison. They took a backseat when Blume came on the scene.


Ethan stilled when Aiden gripped the baton, but all he did was slide it closed. Aiden didn’t pocket it but held it in one hand. It was a subtle threat, a reminder.

“Yeah I was DedSec,” Ethan confirmed, mouth pulled into a manic grin. His blue eyes took on odd sheen, tinged with a kind of controlled insanity.

“Why did you betray them?” Aiden asked.

“They didn’t listen to me,” Ethan screamed, spittle flying from his mouth in an unattractive display of indignance.

After this shrill announcement, Ethan looked down at the floor. Cradled his arm and began rocking gently. A vague sense of unease passed over Hayley. Ethan was not in total control of his faculties. If murdering members of DedSec hadn’t proven that already, his sudden unhinged display did.

Ethan stopped rocking suddenly, titling his head to look back up at Aiden.

“I told DedSec they needed to be militarized. Blume was getting close; they wouldn’t just let DedSec continue their campaign without consequences. They didn’t listen. Now most of their council is gone because they didn’t listen to me,” Ethan reiterated, in a calmer tone but no less menacing.

A few more rocking movements before Ethan looked back up at Aiden. “I managed to prove my point though, didn’t I?” Ethan shrugged in a self-aggrandizing way.

Aiden appeared completely unimpressed with this announcement. Hayley felt ill. DedSec members may have overinflated egos with ideals of grandeur but they didn’t deserve the fate Ethan dished out.

“Ameni knew I had potential. More than Blume would ever acknowledge,” Ethan related to them, looking up at Aiden. Now that Ethan was talking, he appeared eager to explain his actions.


Ethan laughed, a thin, hollow sound with tinges of madness sliding through. “Maybe they knew my needs weren’t being met,” he sneered.

Aiden lent forward, barely even an inch, but he made his point because Ethan flinched. Minus a sneer this time, Ethan answered Aiden’s earlier question without further prompting.

“I don’t know. Some guys approached me. They somehow knew of my dissention within DedSec. I agreed to be their man on the inside. I was to access DedSec’s network. Find out exactly who was responsible for installing the virus. Imagine my surprise when I came across the main on-the-ground instigator. The famous Vigilante. If it wasn’t for you DedSec could never have infiltrated Umeni’s servers. They didn’t know how to bypass their physical security.”
Hayley slanted an aggravated glare Aiden’s way but he ignored her. She knew he’d lied, that he knew the reasons for Umeni’s attack. But again, providing her with any illuminating information was beyond him. Much better to keep her in the dark, trailing behind him like a lost puppy.

“So I take it you were the one who rung me a few days ago pretending to represent DedSec? SoSueMe’s data never leaked, that was just to draw me out,” Aiden deducted, anger beginning to shade his words.

Ethan emitted a low chuckle, “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

This time Hayley was ready for Aiden’s reaction, but it didn’t make it any less startling. When Aiden stepped forward, alarm flashed across Ethan’s face. His eyes darted around fearfully, realizing he’d made an erroneous decision taunting Aiden.

Grabbing his neck in a stranglehold with one hand, Aiden placed his other arm over Ethan’s chest to keep him in place. Ethan struggled wildly, feet kicking out, trying to find purchase on something. His body bucked madly but he was no match for Aiden’s strength. As Aiden continued to strangle him, Ethan’s face turned a puce color, his struggles becoming nothing more than ineffectual pawing.

The light bled out of Ethan’s eyes, dimming slowly with each choked gasp. Hayley took a step forward, stopped abruptly when she felt the force of Aiden’s rage. Brushing up against it felt like the fire licking against her skin, it was that intense.

Death wasn’t new to Hayley. Having been so close to it herself, it didn’t hold the same fear as it did others. But witnessing death being dealt so carelessly by the same hands she was intimately familiar with, was somehow more unsettling than death itself.

With an animalistic snarl, Aiden let Ethan go. Ethan’s eyes rolled back as he shuddered for breath. Stepping back Aiden crossed his arms and watched Ethan dispassionately.

“Do you have information about my family?” Aiden asked, voice raspy from his recent exertion.

Rubbing his neck, Ethan shook his head in the negative. While Ethan’s eyes were oddly devoid of emotion, he had a slight curl to his lip, like he found nearly being strangled to death amusing.

Aiden wasn’t far from snapping completely, the slightest provocation and he might just finish what he started. Despite Ethan’s crimes, Hayley disliked the thought of Aiden killing this kid in cold blood.

Although maybe she was being deliberately naïve. Tracking Ethan and infiltrating his house wasn’t just to give the kid a lecture about the follies of tangling with Aiden.

“If I find evidence on your computer that you do, I won’t stop next time,” Aiden growled in warning.

“Watch him,” Aiden ordered her curtly, walking over to Ethan’s computers.

Minutes ticked by as Aiden’s fingers flew over the keyboard while Ethan sniffled. Both sounds were equally aggravating. Hayley glanced away when Ethan started rocking again, disturbed by his instability.

“Find anything?” Hayley asked.

Silence greeted her question. When Aiden became focused on something, you’d be lucky if he acknowledged you.
A few minutes later Aiden turned to Ethan. “Do you actually know anything about my family?”

Ethan stopped rocking and put his feet on the ground. “Just what DedSec had on you. They knew your sister and her kid’s name. That’s all. They’re oddly obsessed with you. Wanted to know as much about you in case you become a ‘problem’. Whatever the fuck that means,” Ethan muttered.

Aiden grunted. “But you gave Umeni this information.”

Ethan bared his teeth. “For what good it did. Umeni tried finding your family. They found no traces. No credit card transactions, a car registered to them. Nothing.”

Ethan hummed quietly to himself, then smiled blandly at Aiden. “Umeni thought I’d provided them with false information. But I’d read the file DedSec had on you. So, I knew if we threatened your family you’d come out from whatever rock you’d been hiding under. Try and find the ‘leaked’ file to protect them.”

Ethan rolled his head slowly from side to side. “And I was right,” he chortled.

Aiden narrowed his eyes at Ethan. “Then you know what I do to people who threaten my family.”

Ethan smiled, strangely unperturbed by this threat. Hayley glanced sharply at Aiden, the implication of his words clear. Shaking her head, Aiden turned his gaze on her, clearly annoyed.

“He doesn’t know anything,” Hayley pointed out.

Aiden snorted. “He knows enough. And now he knows I’m working with you. You don’t think he’d tell Umeni about you. If they’re so bent on revenge to use my family, they’d certainly use you to get to me.”

“But he doesn’t know who I am,” Hayley replied.

Aiden gave her a disparaging look and didn’t even bother to answer her. She knew it was a weak argument; Ethan was a hacker, there was every possibility he’d find out.

The threads of Ethan’s life felt like they were unravelling between her fingers. Despite what Ethan had done, putting a bullet in his brain right now was murder. She didn’t know how to convince Aiden to let him go. This was different to the soldiers who’d come after them. It wouldn’t be self-defence.

Turning away from Aiden, Hayley watched Ethan put his head back in an attempt to stem the flow of blood from his nose. It had run down his shirt, over his hands, onto his lap. He appeared completely harmless.

So Hayley took a few small steps towards Aiden. Thinking to talk to him, convince him that Ethan needed psychiatric help, not a bullet.

It was a mistake. She should never have taken her eyes off Ethan. Recovering from Aiden’s recent strangulation, with an injured arm and broken nose, Hayley didn’t think Ethan was a threat.

Maybe she was also confident in her own ability to react quick enough to subvert any move he made.

She didn’t count on his desperation. Ethan was obviously a troubled young man; she’d seen the instability in his eyes. He was willing to take risks on the slight chance they’d turn out. After all, the risks he’d taken so far had panned out. He’d managed to kill most of DedSec’s inner council. He’d
fooled Aiden, succeeded in drawing him out.

So it shouldn’t have surprised her that Ethan might make a last ditch effort, a calculated risk that he’d succeed.

Hayley didn’t hear anything, no whisper of cloth, the sofa sliding on the floor. She felt the tug at her back, the combat knife she carried sliding out of its sheath.

She only had time to turn slightly. That manoeuvre probably saved her life. If she hadn’t turned her neck would have caught the knife instead of her shoulder.

Time crawled to a stop, allowing Hayley a brief but uninhibited view of what she thought would be her last moments. She took in small inconsequential details. Ethan’s blue eyes staring out of a face covered in bright red blood. An intense frown forming as his unruly hair whipped around his face.

Ethan’s desperation cast a strange omnipresent web over her, trapping her in place. Saliva dripped from the snarl that formed his mouth. The glint of silver flashed stunningly and lethally bright seconds before time sped up again.

All Hayley could do was jerk forward, try to get out of range of the knife. She wasn’t quick enough, felt her flesh being sliced open. The knife carved over her shoulder, sliding down her trapezius muscle. A scream tore its way up her throat. The knife hit her combat vest, stuttered to a stop.

The force of Ethan’s attack meant that she was propelled forward. Into a small table. Feet unwilling to cooperate to stop her fall, Hayley could do nothing but bring her arm up instinctively to shield her eyes. Despite this movement her cheek still struck the edge.

The world titled, black and red flashing like phantom fire firetrucks. Distantly heard a struggle, a shot. Maybe. The pain collected her scattered thoughts. Bundled them away until there was nothing but the feeling of a terrible ache sitting stark in her mind. It had an oozing unpleasantness to it.

Aware that Ethan was behind her and that any second he could stab her again, Hayley rolled over. Took a sharp intake of breath as the pain in her shoulder sharpened. A sibilant hiss make its way up her throat as dizziness scraped at the edge of her vision.

A wavering figure stood over her. Ethan. Hayley blinked rapidly, trying to clear her vision. That didn’t work, everything was still blurry. So when the figure reached down, panic filtered through the haze.

Her limbs reacted instinctively to the threat. Kicking her feet out, Hayley heard a satisfying grunt.

“Fuck,” a voice hissed.

The figure approached again. Her heart felt like it was going to explode in her chest as it pumped wildly in response to her fear.

“Hayley.”

She knew that voice. Blinking, her vision finally crystallised when Aiden squatted next to her. Concern burned in his eyes as he reached out tentatively, grabbing her arm.

“Ethan…” Hayley croaked, unable to find the words to ask. Concerned he was lurking somewhere in the background.
“Dead,” Aiden confirmed immediately. That one word retorting faster than a snapped rubber band.

Taking a deep breath, Hayley closed her eyes as she felt the relief at this statement. She’d been so against his death minutes ago. Now, she didn’t feel anything but grateful.

Laying her head back down, Hayley was surprised at how sleepy she felt. Closing her eyes, she may have even managed to drift off for a few seconds. A rough shake jolted her unpleasantly awake. Opening a bleary eye, Hayley was startled to see Aiden’s face hovering above her.

“You can’t sleep. You probably have a concussion. And you’re bleeding,” Aiden informed her brusquely.

Hayley stared at him uncomprehendingly, pain beginning to gnaw through the haze. Aiden sighed, swiped a hand on the floor near her shoulder. Waved his fingertips near her face. Hayley grimaced when she saw they were tinged with blood. Her blood.

Clenching her jaw, she braced herself against the onrush of pain she knew would come. Rolled towards Aiden and attempted to sit up. A groan broke through her clenched teeth as the pain threatened to overwhelm her. Closed her eyes against the swirling dizziness. Thought she’d fall back until Aiden’s hard grip on her arm steadied her.

Breathing slowly, the nausea gradually passed. When Hayley opened her eyes, she noticed Aiden hadn’t let go of her. His grip was firm but not unpleasantly so.

The concern in Aiden’s eyes felt like a blanket settling comfortably over her. Unexpectedly warm. Soothing. Made her want to wrap it around her and curl up next to him. Despite his lies, manipulations, and stubbornness, she did feel safe with him.

The pain in her shoulder felt like gnashing teeth. She knew it had to be attended to. Swallowing was made difficult by the dryness in her throat.

“I’m okay,” Hayley croaked, nodding to convince herself.

Aiden made a dubious sound, obviously not agreeing with her assessment. He helped her up, and out the corner of her eye, she saw a pool of blood, tried to ignore the figure next to it.

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Despite the anaesthetic, Hayley still felt the tug as the needle slid through her flesh. It wasn’t painful, just felt peculiar.

She felt like a buoy in the ocean, mindlessly bobbing along with the current in no specific direction, but being pulled along nonetheless. The nausea working its way up her throat certainly felt like she was on boat rocking in the ocean.

The white chrome tiles of the bathroom blurred together until her eyes focused. Hayley was reasonably certain she had a concussion. She’d need to tell Aiden not to let her sleep.

Gauze, dressing and towels lay scattered around the bathroom floor. Hayley looked around absently, eyes roaming over the blood imprinted on the supplies. It was an impressive amount.

Shuddering, she remembered Ethan’s body, the bullet hole in his neck. His blood had flowed freely, congealing in pools around him. It had soaked into the battered wooden floorboards to create a red outline like some garish Halloween display.
Paper crackled behind her, adhesive stuck to her skin as Aiden placed a bandage over the wound. Hayley winced as his warm fingers pressed around the site.

“I’m done,” Aiden said.

The words didn’t register at first. She couldn’t muster up the energy to translate the letters into coherent sentences.

“Hayley. I’m done,” Aiden repeated.

She blinked, nodded inattentively as his words finally filtered through.

Hayley would have been incredibly self-conscious if anyone besides Aiden had stitched her up. Most of her lower torso and half of her back was covered in scar tissue. Burns, lacerations, surgeries, all butchered her body until it became almost unrecognizable to her.

She’d avoided her reflection, didn’t want to see how damaged she was. The Army Psychiatrist had left her alone in a room one time with a mirror. It took three hours to gather the courage to stand in front of it.

When she saw herself in that mirror, she’d just stood there, tears pouring down her face because she couldn’t identify herself. Felt like she’d become a stranger in her own body.

With Aiden, it was different. He honestly didn’t seem to care that she looked like a Frankenstein reject. Despite his initial surprise when he’d first encountered her scars, he made her feel like they were the least significant part of her. His indifference had in fact, allowed her to heal, to see herself differently.

The chair scraping against the floor startled. Aiden positioned himself in front of her, reached up and traced his thumb lightly over where she’d hit her cheek. It was aching and there would no doubt be a bruise later. Barely skimming the surface of her skin, his touch was feather light. Gentle even.

“Don’t let me sleep.”

A small smile flickered around Aiden’s mouth as he shook his head. “I won’t.”

“Are you okay?” Aiden asked.

Sighing, she shrugged, winced when the stitches pulled. “No. Yes. I don’t know,” she countered.

His eyebrow rose in question, the rationality of her wildly altering edict obviously making no sense to him.

“Over in Iraq,” she began, sounding out the words, the realization she’d come to. “While I was recovering, I used to think death would have been easier. When I woke every morning, I was disappointed. Had hoped I’d drifted away in the night. I would have gladly traded my life for those of my team.”

The last word caught over the hard lump of sorrow in her throat. Looking over at Aiden, he was watching her, a strange expression on his face. His eyes had softened and she saw something that might have been empathy.

Swallowing she continued, “Tonight, I thought I was going to die. I should have. But I didn’t want to. It’s the first time I’ve actually wanted to survive.”
Aiden’s outline blurred and Hayley realized it wasn’t because of her concussion, but because tears had obscured her vision. The tears made wet tracks down her face and dripped from her chin. Looking down, they splattered onto her knee, melting unseen into the cloth.

Not saying anything, Aiden just pulled her chair towards him and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against his chest. Allowed her to cry, small hiccupping breaths as she purged some of the darkness which had plagued her.

She didn’t know how long they sat there like that, but the weight of his arms, his warmth and familiarity, relaxed her. It helped to rebuild her composure which had cracked so unexpectedly.

Hayley looked up at Aiden, met his gaze, waited for him to speak. His gaze dug into her, little slivers under her skin. He always seemed to get under her skin. Whenever she was around him, the equanimity she prided herself on shattered into tiny pieces she couldn’t pick up.

“Why did you intervene?” Hayley asked softly. Suddenly.

The words escaped before she had a chance to stop them. The comfortable lethargy she wanted to burrow into moments ago had vanished.

“Months ago. After I met Danny in Prison,” she amended when she saw confusion flicker in his eyes.

Aiden pulled back from her. She felt the shift, the distance which crawled between.

“You were in trouble,” Aiden replied, careful to keep any inflection from his voice.

It wasn’t a real answer. Or an honest one. Irritation curled her hands into a fist. Noticing the movement, Aiden flicked his eyes down but didn’t comment.

Back to hiding his thoughts behind that damn imperturbable expression, Hayley felt something inside her snap. The brittle edges of control crumbled, fell away until all she wanted to do was lash out. Find something that would crack that smooth glassed expression so she could watch his control shatter.

“Do you regret it?”

Shocked silence expanded around the room like a balloon, the pressure mounting, ready to burst.

Aiden’s expression sharpened in irritation as his eyes closed into angry slits. “Of course not. Why would you even ask that?” he asked.

“Because you give nothing away,” she exploded, launching herself from her chair to stand over him. It wasn’t a particularly effective strategy given she barely had the height to look down on him. Aiden raised his head in a lazy way, blank expression rendered inconsequential by the anger still sparking behind his eyes.

Their relationship was like a mirage. Hazy, indistinct, something best not looked at too closely because the reality of it wasn’t tangible. Like colliding comets, they crashed together, creating huge sparks but in the process, ran the very real risk of destroying each other.

“I’ve never asked. Never wanted to know really. Am I just tolerated? Backup or cannon fodder? Or someone convenient to have around when you’re feeling amorous?”
Aiden’s arms shot out, gripped her elbows and pulled her in to him. She tried to hide her flinch as her body reminded her of the various pains.

Aiden’s pupils flared, and Hayley could feel his aggrieved breaths against her neck.

“If that’s what you really think, then why stay?” Aiden asked mockingly.

His voice was pitched low in an effort to hide the strain she could feel through his fingers as they dug into her skin.

“You know exactly why. Don’t tell me you don’t. I won’t say the words. I won’t make myself vulnerable. Again,” Hayley hissed.

The taught line of muscles in his arms flexed as Aiden tightened his grip. The pain sharpened everything, made the flimsy excuses he used grate abrasively against her thoughts until they fragmented.

“I don’t want to take anything from you Aiden. You can have your secrets. I don’t need anything. No, an acknowledgement. That’s all. That I’m not the only one who cares. Can you give me that small concession? Are Nicky and Jacks the only people you’re able to admit you care about? Or are you just completely incapable of caring for anyone?"

Aiden sucked in a ragged breath, the muscles in his jaw twitching in agitation. Suddenly, he yanked her forward, pressed their mouths together. Their teeth clashed briefly and he bit her lip. She tasted her blood on his tongue.

The pent-up emotion scalded them, sizzling like lava and with the same erosive affects. Hayley kissed him back with the same dizzying intensity. Just as abruptly, he pulled back, held her away from him. Face flushed, his chest rose and fell in quick succession.

“I won’t say the words either. Doesn’t mean I’m incapable,” he growled.

A tension Hayley wasn’t aware she’d been carrying deflated her shoulders. To most people that was barely an acknowledgement. Would seem like a half-assed attempt at placating her.

But Hayley knew better. Aiden wasn’t lying. This time. She could feel the truth in his kiss, the significance in the physicality of his actions.

Both were so aware of their individual vulnerabilities, they went to great pains to avoid situations which made them feel exposed. And because she knew this, those words were enough.

Exhaustion crept over her as Hayley sat back in the chair. They stared at each other, a cessation of hostilities obvious in the calm of both their expressions.

/A_I/

Aiden stared at the screen, the contrasting fragments of code felt like it clogged the gears of his mind. His finger beat a violent rhythm against the keyboard, matching the whirring spin of the CPU cooler fan.

Ethan’s computer held a veritable minefield of information on DedSec, Blume and Umeni. He’d found the information DedSec had on him and it wasn’t much. He set about plugging the holes anyway, now that he had some access to their network.

The kid was bat shit crazy. Some of his ideas were extreme. Wanting DedSec to become terrorists,
essentially, by hacking into the Treasury department and causing a market crash. And that wasn’t even his most extreme idea.

He’d returned to the house and taken all of Ethan’s computer and hard drives. He couldn’t risk disposing them, he’d need to destroy them completely. Unlike Ethan who he’d dealt with very quickly by paying a fixer handsomely to dispose of his body.

An email alert pinged him. The flourish of his fingers faltered over the keyboard. Irritated, he almost ignored it. Seeing the sender, he frowned. Looking over his shoulder, he called out.

“Come take a look at this.”

When Hayley and T-Bone walked over to stand beside him, he clicked on the email.

To: Aiden Pearce
From: DedSec

Message: We value your assistance in resolving a problem we had with an errant member of our organization. We owe you. Consider this part of our payment. We know who you seek and believe this may be of interest to you.

Attached to the email was a JPEG file. Opening the file, the three of them leaned toward the screen in an unrehearsed but peculiarly simultaneous movement.

The photo was blurry but distinguishable. What held their attention were the two men in the photograph. One was Julian Collins. His sharply defined features were instantly recognizable despite the slight pixilation.

The second man looked familiar, it took but a moment for Aiden to place him. Hayley bent towards the screen and narrowed her eyes.

“Is that Michael ...”

“Quinn. Lucky Quinn’s grandson,” Aiden confirmed.

Chapter End Notes

1. In Act IV, mission 7, Aiden is required to hack into the Merlaut and locate Lucky Quinn. Onstage Mayor Rushmore is giving a (drunk) speech. If you run Profiler over the man standing on the stairs next to him, you will find the Connor Malley I’ve refer to. Profiler provides the information that his son is a member of DedSec. I took some liberties with his son’s identification for the purposes of my story.

2. Seroquel is a common drug used to treat Schizophrenia
3. Umeni – not the last you’ve seen of them.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The soft whirring of the two computer rigs filled the living room, competing against the violent beating of fingers against a keyboard. The different sounds flittered around the room, bouncing against the walls as if trying to create some type of esoteric language for computers.

Leaning a shoulder against the glass, Hayley looked out the window and watched the trees sway in the strengthening gust, surrendering the last of their leaves without a fight. Clusters of twigs extended, gnarled and twisted, ready to catch the first snowflakes of the season. Autumn’s crisp chill had been replaced with a bitter cold, an icy wind and a brittle frost covering most surfaces.

Distractedly, she massaged her bicep, over the area of an old gunshot wound. The muscle had healed, but it always ached in the cold, extremely sensitive to changes in temperature.

“I’m almost ready,” Ray announced.

Hayley turned away from the window, gaze traveling over the chaotically linked cables and up to the bank of monitors. The biggest screen flickered to life, the cursor hovering over the start-up menu.

As she sat on a chair between the two rigs, a low crackle of thunder filled the silence. Dark clouds rolled across the sky to the sound of pattering raindrops on the roof.

“Okay kiddies, I can present my findings now,” Ray chortled.

The computer screen obscured the older hacker’s face, but Hayley was able to see his deadlocks moving as he bent towards the screen, looking like some strange computerized Medusa.

As Ray tapped on the keyboard, Hayley watched files open. Ray clicked through them until he found what he was looking for, then angled his chair towards a centralized monitor hooked up to both Aiden and Ray’s computers.

“While you two were off playing soldier …” Ray began.

“Playing soldier?” Aiden interrupted in a mildly irritated tone.

Twisting her body to look at Aiden, her gaze skimmed over the new scar on his forehead. Courtesy of the Umeni assault team. Yeah, that was an especially touchy subject for Aiden.

Ray clucked his tongue impatiently and glared at Aiden. “Take that stick out of your ass, I was just messing with you.”

Rolling his eyes, Ray continued. “It took some time to decrypt the files from Collin’s computer. I could only extract a minimal amount of data from the partial download. The problem was, the data wasn’t corrupted. If that was the case, I could have easily used a data recovery program. In and out quicker than a sailor on leave. But we didn’t have the data to begin with, so some files were unreadable.”

Holding up his finger Ray grinned, the white of his teeth flashing quickly, a stark contrast to his grey beard.
“So I reformatted the unstable files using a number of different programs to skim any usable data. I used a process called File Carving, which is good for when the metadata is missing, like ours was. The program places the fragmented files in the correct sequence to reproduce the file’s original content.”

Hayley blinked a few times, her mind whirring like the computers in front of her, albeit slower and with far less success. Ray looked at her expectantly when she failed to comment on his methods.

“But that only partially worked?” she guessed.

“Partially yes,” Ray echoed. “The Klockwork file was interesting. I wish we had the whole download because there’s some incomplete code I’m very interested in. However, one name kept cropping up in a lot of the files. GeneTech.”

“What’s GeneTech?” Aiden asked over his shoulder as he walked to the kitchen.

Hayley heard glass tinkle before he walked back out with three beers. Aiden handed one to her and tossed the other to Ray. Catching the beer, Ray eyed the label critically, grunting in appreciation.

“That’s what I wanted to know. So I did some digging. GeneTech is a biotech corporation. But they’re a subsidiary company,” Ray replied, popping the cap.

Titling his head back, Ray swigged the beer enthusiastically. Banging the half-empty bottle on the desk, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, emitting a hum of approval.

“So what does this biotech company do?” Aiden asked.

Ray shook his head. “Wrong question. Ask me who the holding company is.”

Aiden crossed his arms, looking sharply at the middled-aged hacker. “Owned by whom?”

Sighing, Ray tapped on a few keys. The controlling company flashed up on the screen. White, black and red splashed across the monitor, the colors mocking in their distinctiveness. A corrosive laugh climbed up her throat, spilling over into a sharp bark of sardonic amusement.

The growl in Aiden’s voice pulled the word from his throat with subdued menace.

“Umeni.”

Hayley scrubbed a hand over her face. “Let me get this straight. Umeni owns a company called GeneTech. GeneTech are somehow involved with Klockwork. We have no idea what Klockwork actually is. And somehow Blume’s CIO is involved?”

Ray gave a dreadlocked nod. “I know, seems like only dead fish can go with the flow on this.”

Raising an eyebrow, Hayley glanced over at Ray, but he’d turned away to concentrate on the screen. Amusement bubbled to the surface. Ray had the oddest sayings.

“So … Umeni,” Hayley remarked after a final amused look at Ray, before shifting to face Aiden. “That’s an unexpected development.”

Cocking his head, a brittle smile snapped over Aiden’s face. “Isn’t it?” he acknowledged.

Absently flicking the edges of the beer label, Aiden stared at the screen. At Umeni’s logo, A screensaver clicked on beside him, the flickering shadows edging across his face, highlighting Aiden’s expression as it hardened into a granite-like visage.
“Okay,” Hayley began, mind awhirl, trying to sort out the links. “What does GeneTech do?”

“Like I said, they’re a biotech corporation. They were the original designers of the electroencephalography headset, or EEG for short,” Ray replied, the natural crinkles around his eyes the only traces of humor left on his face.

“What the hell is an EEG headset?” Hayley asked.

Ray beamed at her. “I’m glad you asked. The marketed name for the headset is Emotiv. Rolls off the tongue marginally better. Anyway, let me demonstrate.”

With an unnecessary hand flourish and a scoff from Aiden, Ray clicked on the mouse.

An automated voice filtered through the speakers. Hayley watched a presentation while a voice-over explained the technicalities.

“Emotiv is the new wearable for your brain. This revolutionary technology is a wireless headset which records your brainwaves and translates them into meaningful data you can understand. Designed for everyday use, Emotiv has advanced electronics that are fully optimized to produce strong signals anywhere.”

“Emotiv’s full head motion-detection system is Bluetooth capable. It’s wirelessly linked to control outputs for various applications such as head tracking, camera and motion control in real and virtual environments.”

“Our detection algorithms enable Emotiv Brainwear to interpret signals measured as mental commands, facial expressions and brain performance metrics.”

“The downloadable app available on your phone, tablet or computer will analyze your brainwaves. It evaluates stages of decision-making and motivation while synchronizing eye tracking and EEG data. You can then use these result to optimize your cognitive performance.”

Placed above the ear, polymer handles wrapped around the head, from ear to ear, like a white chrome headband. In the video, a smiling woman detached the headset and the camera panned in on the futuristic-looking tech. Tinkling music signalled the end of the video.

“So you wear it, looking like a Star Trek reject and it actually measures your brainwaves and provides readings. Sounds a bit farfetched,” Hayley remarked, unable to keep the skepticism out of her voice.

Making a face at the woman grinning on-screen wearing the odd-looking headgear, Ray turned to look at her.

“It’s not actually,” he replied earnestly. “There’s Fitbit, Apple watches, virtual eyewear. The natural progression is brain wearables. The EEG headset works. It helped a lot of disabled people handle tech they previously couldn’t by syncing the headset to, say, a tablet. A quadriplegic could use the headset, which would interpret their brainwave commands, and they could use the tablet without assistance.”

Turning his back on them, Aiden tapped away on his rig. The screen changed and a news article popped up. Aiden swung his chair around and pointed at the screen.

“I remember when Emotiv was released. Everyone lined up like drones to purchase one, but a few months after its release, it was pulled from the market. Some tech savvy guys discovered that the data recorded by the Emotiv app was being streamed back to the company. The device was pulled from
the stores and I haven’t heard anything since. The company claimed it was a glitch and they’ve ‘deleted’ the data.”

Ray clicked his fingers. “Yeah, I thought that was bullshit too.”

“Recorded for what purpose?” Hayley asked.

Tapping on the desk, Ray considered her. “That’s what I’d like to know.”

“How did you find out GeneTech was owned by Umeni?” Aiden asked.

With a casual wave of his hand, Ray answered. “Every time I tried to dig into this company I kept hitting dead ends. GeneTech’s Sales Tax License wasn’t registered correctly. How this company pays taxes, I don’t know. So I tried finding permits, financials, intellectual property. But that just led to dummy corporations, false leads, offshores accounts. Umeni have deliberately put as much distance between themselves and this company as possible?”

Hayley frowned. “Why would they do that?”

Aiden snorted derisively. “Because Umeni aren’t credible anymore. The lawsuit against their engineers and their subsequent prison sentence meant people didn’t trust their tech. But they’re still around. I’ve always wondered how they’ve kept afloat while their sales and stocks plummeted. Now I know, they’ve put all their resources into another company,” Aiden remarked, the contempt in his voice unmistakable.

Hayley frowned as she watched the open hostility carve itself out on Aiden’s face. She knew Aiden would retaliate against Umeni. It wasn’t a question of if, but when. Shaking herself from those thoughts, Hayley turned back to Ray.

“So you couldn’t find anything?” she asked. Disappointment settled around her with the same brittle texture of the frost outside. Another dead end.

Ray shook his head, dreadlocks whipping around his face. “No, I didn’t say that. A company can’t be hidden, no matter what Umeni try to do. In this digital age, everything leaves a trace. You just have to know how to find it. Umeni’s name kept popping up in conjunction with GeneTech, but I could never find definitive evidence they were linked.”

Pausing, Ray lifted his legs to settle them on the desk.

“Then I remembered that wackadoodle, Ethan Malley. I used the information he’d accumulated to access their network. Once I hacked in, it was easy to find the link between GeneTech and Umeni. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to find out much more than that.”

Anger ignited, like the spark from a flint, when Ray mentioned Ethan’s name. The scar on her shoulder tingled in response. It was a psychosomatic reaction, but felt real enough for Hayley to unconsciously rub the area.

Her hand dropped away abruptly when she glanced up and saw Aiden watching her. His gaze travelled over her face, taking in whatever he saw. Antagonism most likely. He raised an eyebrow, a silent question. Hayley gave an irritable shrug and turned away, taking a long swallow of beer.

If Aiden hadn’t reacted so quickly, Hayley doubted she’d be alive. She was angry at herself, that she’d allowed a kid to come so close to killing her when an IED, a warzone, fixers and assault teams hadn’t. But, Ethan was dead, she was still here.
“I tracked down GeneTech’s physical premises,” Ray continued. “They’re here in Chicago. A few months ago, GeneTech reported a break-in. Security personnel caught two men on their premises trying to hack into their servers. One was shot when he tried to flee. Another escaped. Police set up roadblocks but he managed to circumvent them. Turns out the guy who escaped was a GeneTech security guard.”


Snorting, Ray nodded. “I searched for the escaped Security Guard. Didn’t have to look too far though. Take a look,” Ray said, indicating the monitor.

Crime scene reports popped up on screen. Ray scrolled down, stopping on photos depicting the body of a man stashed behind a dumpster. Brown eyes stared sightlessly out of a pale face. Lying sprawled on his back, blood dried like flaking rust around the gaping hole in his neck.

A banana peel and candy wrappers were scattered haphazardly over his brown fighter-pilot’s jacket. A black beanie was lifted partially off his head, exposing the man’s long sideburns and shaved head.

“That’s the Security Guard? He was murdered,” Hayley observed.

Ray nodded. “His body was found the day after the botched heist.”

There was something deliberately undignified about the way the man’s body was so carelessly thrown behind the dumpster. As if his killer didn’t care if he was found; no longer useful in life, his death was more convenient.

Out the corner of her eye, Hayley saw Aiden frown and move closer to the screen.

“What was the Security Guard’s name?” Aiden asked.

Hayley looked over at Aiden sharply. There was something in his voice, a studied casualness that had Hayley’s interest piqued.

“Neil Corrado,” Ray confirmed after scrolling down the report. “His body was found in an alleyway in The Loop.”

“Enlarge the picture,” Aiden demanded.

Ray shrugged and did as Aiden asked. The enlargement only intensified the ignominy of death. The man’s skin was a pallid, grey tone, while the milky film covering the man’s eyes couldn’t disguise the total lack of life within the depths. Hayley turned her head away from the screen, she’d seen enough death.

The shadows clinging to Aiden’s expression dropped away when he tilted his head towards the monitor. A slow frown formed as he continued to stare at the dead man’s face. The artificial glow from the screens highlighted the contours of his face, making the reaction as it snapped across his expression immediately discernible.

Aiden turned and grabbed his phone, looking quickly back up at the monitor. Hayley waited for Aiden to say something, acknowledge the recognition she saw in his eyes.

“You knew him,” Hayley accused.

Swinging his head in her direction, Hayley saw the denial form on his lips. Watched Aiden’s abortive efforts to arrange his face into the impassivity which would convince her of his deception.
“No, I really didn’t,” Aiden answered, expression settling into a careful mask of defiance.

Tension crawled between them, the falsehood of Aiden’s statement uncurling slowly like old leather.

“Don’t fucking lie to me, I saw your face. You recognized him.”

Giving a careless shrug, Aiden inclined his head. “Recognized, yes. Knew him, no.”

Ray shifted uncomfortably next to her, shooting glances between them, obviously not wishing to be part of this quarrel.

“Semantics Aiden,” Hayley snapped through a jaw clenched tight. Holding back what she’d like to say without Ray watching their exchange like a tennis match.

Briefly tightening his hand around his phone, Aiden carefully placed it on the desk next to him, his expression nothing but a strained calm.

“How did you recognize him?” Hayley sneered, deliberate emphasis on the word.

Her expression tightened until it felt like it would crack. She wouldn’t take a bullshit lie this time, this was too important for Aiden to keep his damn secrets.

“I can leave the room if you guys want to work this out?” Ray volunteered hesitantly.

Crossing her arms, Hayley shook her head. “No,” she snapped. Blowing out a breath, she corrected her tone. “Sorry, no. What Aiden knows affects all of us.”

Hayley looked over and met Aiden’s gaze. She could feel the force of his irritation in that sharp stare, could almost cut herself on it. But she didn’t look away, felt her own frustration rise with the curling of her lip. Silence spanned between them as they stared at each other, the length of time and the lack of acknowledgement becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

In a battle of wills, Hayley always knew Aiden would win. But she was sick of the recurring theme in their relationship; Aiden’s deception. Whether inadvertently excluding information or wilfully refusing to enlighten her, Hayley was finding it increasingly difficult to tolerate Aiden’s condescending approach to imparting information.

“For fuck’s sake, I’m not asking you for access to your network. If you knew this guy maybe that might help us actually get somewhere with this Klockwork file,” Hayley reasoned.

Exasperation took the edge in her voice and sharpened it enough to slice through Aiden’s impermeable silence.

Folding his legs in front of him, Aiden gave a lazy shrug of a shoulder, the mocking curl to his mouth making Hayley want to slap him. Everything was a battle for supremacy with Aiden. The need to emerge from any encounter with an advantage overrode every other desire.

“Like I said, I don’t know him,” Aiden shot her a pointed look. “I recognized him because I was the driver who helped him escape the Police road blocks.”

Hayley opened her mouth, the words formed then died on her lips. Clamping her mouth shut, Hayley shook her head. That was certainly not what she’d been expecting Aiden to admit.

“You were in on the theft?” she asked, disbelief causing a shrill tone she was unable to prevent.

Immediately realized the foolishness of the question as annoyance rippled over Aiden’s expression.
“No. Give me some credit, I don’t work with idiots. A Fixer called me, asked me to do a job for him. Some guy was holed up in a storage locker after a botched robbery. I had no idea what he’d stolen and I didn’t particularly care. My job was to get him past the blockades and I did.”

Hayley considered Aiden carefully, wondering if she dared ask the question hovering on the tip of her tongue. Found she had to know anyway.

“Did you kill him?” Hayley asked with an irrelevance she didn’t feel.

Hayley could never claim to completely understand Aiden, or his motivations. Couldn’t comprehend how his life had been shaped by a physically abusive Father, the violence of a gang infested neighborhood, and the responsibility as a young boy to take care of his family.

Each of those experiences would have left a deep groove on the notch of his character. She wouldn’t judge Aiden for his actions. Or mistakes. She’d made too many herself, the scars, both physical and emotional, imprinting too deep to dislodge without tearing out a part of herself. So no, she wouldn’t critique him for a life moulded by circumstance and built on when he found a niche in the shadowy world of criminal enterprise.

But there was also a point in life where you had to learn from your mistakes. The resonance of Aiden’s choices echoed out like a ripple effect, the consequences of his actions inevitably affecting others. So what were the consequences of Aiden assisting Neil’s escape? There was a certain irony in the whole situation. Some things really did come full circle to bite you in the ass.

Aiden shook his head. “No, I didn’t kill him.”

There was an echo of truth to his words, but it was also distorted with a shadow of equivocation. There was something else he wasn’t telling her.

“Do you know what happened to him?” Ray asked, startling Hayley. So intent on Aiden she’d momentarily forgotten the other hacker was there.

Letting out a heavy sigh, Aiden answered, “Unfortunately, I do. Lucky Quinn happened. As soon as the kid handed over the stolen laptop, Quinn killed him.”

“He stole a laptop. What was in it?” Ray asked, swinging his chair around to face Aiden.

Making a displeased noise in the back of his throat, Aiden shrugged. “I don’t know T-Bone. I was a little busy escaping the cops to take a look.”

Ray’s face tightened into a scowl but he didn’t comment.

“Just as well Quinn didn’t decide you knew too much and killed you too,” Hayley pointed out.

Aiden didn’t answer her, just let a faint smile touch his lips, pulling the smirk up along his face until it touched his eyes. In those green depths, she saw the mock amusement bleed out to contain all the warmth of a predator. Hayley glanced away, shifting uncomfortably in her chair. Sometimes she forgot, or rather deliberately overlooked, what a ruthlessly efficient killer the man she was sleeping with was.

“What was so invaluable inside that laptop that a mob boss had to be there to collect it?” Hayley asked.

Her question hung in the air, the gentle hum of the computers the only response. Churning an inconceivable amount of data but unable to provide insight into the questions they wanted answered.
“That’s something we need to find out,” Ray acknowledged.

Hayley tapped her foot on the floor irritably, suspecting she wouldn’t be keen on how they’d go about finding out that information.

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The nondescript three-story building was set a few blocks back from the main road in a relatively quiet section of Brandon Docks. There was nothing to set this particular building apart from the dozens of others sprawled around it. Steel, glass and concrete blended seamlessly, a clever subterfuge to disguise the inner workings of a company which on paper, didn’t even exist.

Stamping her feet, Hayley put both gloved hands under her armpits in an attempt to get warm. It didn’t work. Exhaling deeply, her breath whorled around her like white vapor. Aiden grunted quietly, pulling Hayley’s attention away from the buildings.

“Hand me the clamp,” Aiden demanded as he held his gloved hand out without looking at her.

Please, Hayley wanted to say. Instead, she just sighed and dug into the kit next to Aiden and handed it to him.

“Not the red one,” Ray warned in their ear-piece. “You’ll have the Cops there before you even enter the building.”

In front of the junction box, Aiden’s shoulders hunched inwards. “This isn’t my first rodeo T-Bone.”

“I find it ironic that red, white and blue stand for freedom, until they’re flashing behind you,” Hayley deadpanned.

The acerbic quip was unable to hide the reluctance unwinding in her voice like a loose spool of cotton. Ray’s bark of laughter was too loud in her earpiece, making her wince.

Hayley grimaced as she adjusted the scarf Aiden had given, fingers pulling at the strap of cloth sitting uncomfortably around her neck. It occurred to her that she rarely did anything these days that wasn’t illegal.

Hayley swallowed with difficulty, thinking of the crimes she’d committed. Trespassing, manslaughter, grand theft auto, vandalism. Not to mention being an accessory to whatever law Aiden decided to disregard.

In trying to find evidence against her brother’s wrongful imprisonment, Hayley was disconcerted to discover she’d assimilated surprisingly effortlessly into the violent and lawless world Aiden inhabited.

Returning to Chicago, and civilian life, the steely resolve she adopted in an effort to detach herself from any form of violence was a distant memory. Slowly, she felt herself being absorbed into an existence of insecurity, violence and crime. She came back home to pick up the pieces of her damaged psyche, not be embroiled in a corporate corruption scandal or be intimately involved with Chicago’s most wanted criminal.

Her convictions were shaking loose, blowing away like the last leaves on a winter tree. Hayley felt like she was losing herself, like every act, every crime was moulding the core of who she was into something she didn’t recognize.

Even her determination to preserve any kind of objectivity in regards to her feelings for Aiden felt
like a perfunctory protest. A way to convince herself she’d attempted to prevent their pairing, even if it was inevitable.

Exposing Blume’s corruption gave her a purpose, a reason, to brush aside any lingering doubts and actually be with Aiden. But once she got her brother out of prison, Hayley didn’t know if continuing her relationship with Aiden was a viable option. So where did that leave her?

Aiden startled her by shutting the junction box, the loud sound scattering her thoughts. They unraveled like a wayward ball of yarn, too complicated for her to even want to pull the threads back together. And now certainly wasn’t the time to be contemplating her conscience.

“You seeing through the V.B okay?” Aiden asked Ray.

The V.B, or Video Badge, was a body worn wireless video system. The tech was a recent prototype, originally only available to U.S Marines. Hayley had ceased speculating how Aiden acquired any of the illegal weapons or tech. It gave her too much of a headache.

Attached to the clothing near the user’s collarbone for best visual acuity, the V.B was the width and breadth of an I.D card. Its wire-free design made it extremely versatile. The audio and video, of amazing quality, were encrypted during the frequency, making it very difficult to hack.

“Oh yeah. I could see the hair on a duck’s nuts through this.”

Aiden raised an amused eyebrow. “What about inside?” he asked.

GeneTech had improved their security system since the attempted robbery months ago. The latest system, a newly designed integrated I.P network, operated autonomously from GeneTech’s internal servers.

“I’m completely inside their systems. There’s three security guards on the first floor. Two patrolling the perimeter. May not seem like a lot but they’ve invested big bucks in their new system and they seem overconfident that it’ll stop another physical break in.”

Both hackers had attempted to access GeneTech’s internal servers. They’d spent hours trying different approaches with no success; accessing staff email, circumventing firewalls, reconfiguring routers. GeneTech servers appeared to be protected by a Faraday cage. Since the cage used specially coated metallic shielding material which prevented connectivity to cellular networks, Wi-Fi or Bluetooth, nothing either hacker did could permit them entry.

To gain access, they’d have to physically connect by breaking into the facility. It was a risk, they weren’t even certain how, or if, GeneTech was connected to Klockwork. But they had no other leads. Without knowing what Klockwork was, they couldn’t prevent whatever Blume’s CIO was doing.

Ironically, by creating an off-site security network GeneTech had actually made their systems compromisable. If the security system had remained on GeneTech’s impenetrable centralized servers, they might not have been able to get into the building.

Aiden packed away his kit, stashing it in some bushes. He glanced at the camera down the street, then looked back at his phone.

“The first level will be the hardest to negotiate. T-Bone you’ll have to be our eyes and ears,” Aiden relayed.

“It’s a thankless job, but I’ve got a lot of Karma to burn off.”
A high chain-link fence topped with barbed-wire loops surrounded the entire perimeter. A viciously cold burst of wind tore around the building, tugging on the white metal sign attached to the fence.

Spaced around the perimeter, placards warned intruders against approaching. The entire fence was electrified with a high-voltage current. Touching it wouldn’t kill you, but it would set someone back on their ass. And set off an alarm.

GeneTech solved the quandary of circumventing the electric fences. Originally, they’d presumed the fence’s electrical system was located on-site, the only way to bypass it would be to cause a blackout. And that wasn’t an option.

After some research, Aiden discovered that the fence’s electrical system was actually connected to ctOS’s power grid. A new legislation, pushed through by Blume, required any new connecting electrical leads to be installed on ctOS’s power grid. Despite GeneTech having solar power and back-up generators, they were required to adhere to new legislation.

When Aiden accessed ctOS’s records, he discovered GeneTech had lodged petitions to request the new leads be installed on their premises. They argued the design was a flaw in their security plan. By using an off-site power source, potential law-breakers could suppress their electric fences. Which is exactly what they did.

“There,” Hayley pointed when she saw movement.

Aiden shifted next to her, squinting in the darkness as he followed the line of her finger. Large oak trees dotting the property swayed in the wind, draping shadows over the building. A few seconds passed before a guard emerged from the darkness.

In an alleyway across the street, they were making a final assessment GeneTech’s security measures, both physical and electronic. Hayley watched the guard walk the fenceline before turning towards the large loading dock. A gust of wind blew past, making Hayley wrinkle her nose in disgust. It was hard to ignore the roiling stench of litter dumped amongst the sprawling rot of the lane.

The light from Aiden’s phone momentarily pulled Hayley’s attention away from the building. Looking across, Hayley watched his thumb flick over the screen, cycling through the building’s exterior cameras.

Entering from the front of the property wasn’t feasible. The area was too exposed. The rear entrance presented similar problems. Hayley eyed the powerful security lights over the back entrance’s automated gate. Fortunately, there were two other access doors installed around the perimeter fence which were far less exposed.

“We’ve got a little under three minutes between each guard’s sweep. That will give us enough time to get in, get past the loading bay and access the rear building’s door,” Aiden explained.

The scant light available stretched across the lane, sketching the solidity of Aiden’s darkened outline. Even in the shadows, without form or expression, Aiden exuded a calm confidence. Hayley found that aspect of Aiden’s character alluring, almost like her own doubts dropped away and she could feel herself absorbing some of that self-assurance.

“As long as one the guards doesn’t decide to hasten his pace,” she corrected.

Aiden grunted, a dubious sound which managed to convey how unimpressed he was with her reservations. He pulled his scarf up over his mouth, and after a brief hesitation, Hayley did the same.
Turning, Aiden walked back down the lane. Hayley followed, the gravel crunching under her feet slowly giving way to a sludgy consistency as they approached the side alley of another building. Directly opposite the access gate, they lingered in the shadows, waiting for the guard to pass.

“Cameras angled away from your position. You’re good to go,” Ray confirmed in her earpiece.

Jogging across the road, they approached the property. A RFID card reader flashed a steady rhythm of red.

A few days prior, Aiden had visited GeneTech at the end of a shift. When the flood of employees exited the building, Aiden was outside. Using his phone like a long-range card reader, he managed to steal dozens of RFID codes from the cards of passing GeneTech workers.

Watching Aiden swipe his thumb over the screen, Hayley held her breath as the light on the console ceased its continuous pulse of red. When it flashed green, she blew out a relieved breath.

“You’re positive the fence is off?” Hayley whispered as Aiden reached out to open the door.

The whisper clung to the cloth covering her mouth, muffling her words but not the diffidence of her statement. Pausing, Aiden looked over at her and cocked his head in a sardonic slant. He stared at Hayley for the space of a heartbeat before turning away, allowing his silence to answer her question.

Opening the gate, they slipped inside the compound, gliding silently between the shadows. Jogging through the large span of oak trees, the wind wove through the branches above. The boughs groaned in rue as hundreds of leaves rustled, sounding like the hacking cough of an old man.

Security lights cast an artificial glow onto the loading bay, illuminating the area in a garish yellow radiance. Ramps sloped upwards towards galvanized steel roller-shutter doors. Hayley climbed up after Aiden onto the concrete landing, blinking in the glare from the superfluously bright security lights.

“Guard number two has just reached the northern edge of the property,” Ray informed them.

An icy burst of wind skirted around the building, slapping against her face, making Hayley’s eyes water. Aiden disregarded the closed roller-doors, headed instead for the alcove at the end of the loading bay. The alcove opened up to a paved courtyard. It was obviously a space GeneTech workers used for their breaks. Benches lined the small area while the steel cylinder of cigarette trays twinkled in the light. Cigarette butts stuck up in the trays like an orange ash forest.

A steel door prevented their entry into the building, another RFID card reader cycled through a tempo of red. Buttery light singed the edges of the alcove, their presence a mere whisper on the periphery of the loading bay.

Hand on the doorhandle, Aiden didn’t immediately enter the building, instead flicked a thumb across his phone. A frown wedged between his eyes as he stared at the screen. Hayley cast a worried glance behind her before inching closer to Aiden. Looking down at the screen, she watched three red dots move around the on-screen schematics.

After accessing GeneTech’s security network, Aiden discovered each guard carried a PDA. The PDA, wirelessly connected to the security network, tracked and logged each guard’s route. Every half hour, the network provided a prompt to input an update into the device. If the guard failed to do so, another guard was dispatched to their last position. If the second guard failed to report in, or they
discovered any suspicious activity, the entire building went into lockdown. Including the servers they were trying to access. So Aiden installed a GPS tracker onto the PDA’s to make tracking their movements easier.

“The second guard’s almost made his loop,” Ray warned, worry edging into his voice.

Aiden still hadn’t opened the door, Hayley could feel irritation leaking out of his still form.

“What’s the problem? Open the door so we can get in,” she hissed.

Aiden let out an irritated rumble. He glared at Hayley, agitation bleeding into his eyes.

“I can’t. A guard is standing too close to the door.”

Hayley looked down at Aiden’s phone. Tapping on the screen, Aiden enlarged the schematics. On the other side of the door, one small red dot hovered perilously close to where they needed to enter.

Casting her eyes towards the far edge of the lot, Hayley saw a guard emerge from the darkness. The angle of the lights near the perimeter warped his shadow until it became a distorted menace of black preceding his gait.

A sharp intake of breath, held in without conscious thought, as the guard ambled along the fence. His back to them, the guard didn’t even look towards their position. She’d studied the guard’s route, knew he walked to the outer edge of the fence. Once he reached the junction, he turned towards the loading bay. They had perhaps a minute or less before that happened.

Adrenaline surged through her system like a flood of cold water. The brief period between detection and concealment a sinuous moment in time, dependant only on Aiden’s skill with his phone.

“…imbedding the nearest PDA device with a false reading,” Aiden said to Ray.

“Yeah. It’ll generate a fabricated GPS signal. That’ll direct the guard away from your position to investigate a different area.”

A quick look at the guard confirmed he’d almost reached the edge of the property. The small red dot was stationary, the guard hadn’t moved. Time became a pliable entity, the seconds straining until something had to snap.

Looking back down at the screen, Hayley blew out a relieved breath as the red dot moved away from their position. Closing the tracking app, Aiden bypassed the RFID card reader. Grabbing her arm, Aiden shoved her inside the door. A flicker at the edge of her vision, Hayley was just able to see the guard turn towards their position.

“We’re in T-Bone,” Aiden confirmed quietly, the deeper rasp of his voice a result of the adrenaline rush.

The first floor of GeneTech was an industrialized computing factory. It was like walking into a strange monochromatic jungle. A clinical space, this modern technology factory was the antithesis of the slick marketing image Umeni portrayed to the world.

The lighting was dimmed, the harsh glare of the above fluorescents softened to a pallid temperance. It did nothing to assuage the harsh edges of silvered metal glinting off every surface. It felt like they’d walked into a titanium enforced maze, with wires, stations and equipment sprawled around the length of the entire room.
“Move to the far left, stop at the end of the row,” Ray instructed.

Aiden moved to the left, shooting a quick look over his shoulder to make sure she followed. Rows of glass stalls, interspersed with large machinery and equipment, flashed out the corner of her eye, appearing to stretch for miles.

At the end of the row, Aiden crouched down, darting a look around the corner. The deactivated equipment stood sentinel, like rows of steel tombstones. A low droning hum threaded through the room, the culmination of hundreds of cooling fans whirring simultaneously. A harsh chemical scent suffused the air, combined with a faint but indistinguishable metallic aftertaste.

“There’s a guard two rows over from you. When he nears the end, he’ll loop around another aisle right near you. Be ready to move.”

Without Ray controlling GeneTech’s security system, Hayley doubted they’d be able to traverse the veritable minefield of security measures.

Ray and Aiden spent over a week familiarizing themselves with the system. An off-site security specialist monitored GeneTech’s electronic security systems. Ray could have easily disabled most security protocols if the system wasn’t being physically monitored.

As it was, Ray had to tread carefully. He needed to stay ahead of regular systems sweeps. He also couldn’t disable the cameras without the person monitoring the system detecting the anomaly.

To complicate matters, Ray discovered an Intelligent Video Analytical system was being used to fortify physical security. Based on Artificial Intelligence algorithms, the IVA processed live video in real time and sent alerts to the guard’s PDA when it recognized suspect events or behaviour.

There was no way they could navigate the building while the program was running. So to subvert it, Ray inserted malware into the network. With the IVA software disabled, they only had to contend with the guards and cameras. Not an uncomplicated plan but at least achievable. They hoped.

“Now,” Ray barked. “Move down the aisle until you reach that big black pole … thingy.”

Keeping low, Hayley trailed behind Aiden until they came to what she hoped was their destination. The ‘black pole thingy’ wasn’t very specific.

It was an uneasy feeling being completely reliant on Ray to manoeuvre past the guards. Since disabling the cameras would trip an alarm, the only other approach was for Ray to manipulate the camera angles so they never appeared on the footage.

The task was assiduously difficult because he had to direct them past the continuously patrolling guards while also guiding the cameras away from them. It was why they wore Video Badges, so Ray could physically see their position without using GeneTech’s cameras.

“Stay there,” Ray ordered, agitation making his voice sharp.

Kneeling next to Aiden, the polished concrete floor stole every lick of heat from her knees. Yellow and black hazard lines were sketched into the aisle, starkly bright against the scuffed floors. A guard’s radio crackled static in the next aisle. It split open the silence, drained the background humming noise of the machines until the slap of the guard’s shoes sounded thunderously loud.

“Do not move. The guard is in the next aisle. He’s deviated from his path.”

The apprehension in Ray’s voice fused with the sudden tension annexing her limbs. Aiden pulled his
phone out of his pocket, fingers darting over the screen. Hayley heard three sharp beeps. Slowly, she
drew out her head, found a gap in the machinery, was just able to discern a dark khaki uniform. A
heavy sigh followed by a muttered expletive preceded the guard’s retreat.

Hayley let out a small sigh of her own, the release of tension a palpable emanation. Aiden turned to
her, the curve of his hat combined with the scarf over his mouth shaded most of his face. But the
passivity of his featureless expression was betrayed by the exhilaration lurking in his eyes.

Even without seeing his face, Hayley felt the almost tangible physicality of the thrill of danger
settling over him. Saw the truth of it in his pupils, blown wide with a dark desire she wasn’t even
sure she could identify.

She was always slightly troubled by Aiden’s need for danger in his life. It was an almost self-
destructive urge, the need to test limits, to pit himself against perilous situations and opponents of
different skills for the buzz it gave him.

“Move to the end of the aisle.”

Despite the level of difficulty involved with evading the patrolling guards and cameras, Ray
navigated them through without further incident. Three guards weren’t enough to patrol such a huge
building. Ray was right, GeneTech were overconfident their electronic security measures were
enough to deter potential intruders.

“I’ve opened the electronic locks on the stairwell door.”

Reaching the end of the row, Aiden opened the door, ushering her inside the stairwell.

“Okay T-Bone, loop the video feed,” Aiden relayed, as he jogged up the stairwell.

Compared to the first floor, the security on the subsequent levels was relatively lax. For some
unfathomable reason, guards only patrolled the ground floor. So the only other security measures
they had to contend with were the cameras.

On the subsequent floors, it was easier for Ray to manipulate the camera feed without the
complication of patrolling guards. By intercepting the surveillance stream, and using a software hack,
Ray was able to create a loop from the video feed.

They considered using a looped feed on the first floor, but decided they couldn’t risk it. They had no
way of knowing how closely the off-site specialist monitored the camera feeds, if they’d notice the
guards route didn’t correlate with their PDA positions. And looping the feed meant that Ray couldn’t
access the cameras in real time. It was far too risky.

On the second and third floors, the security specialist analyzing the feed would only see the looped
version. Ray even clipped out the time stamp from the live feed and pasted it over the looped clip so
that it would appear as if the camera was recording in real time.

“The loop is running. You’re good to go.”

“I’ll contact you again when we get to the servers,” Aiden said as he opened the door to the second
floor.

Hayley reached down and flicked the Video Badge off. They didn’t need it anymore and Aiden
didn’t want to chance the frequency being intercepted. Even if it was unlikely.

When she stepped onto the second floor, Hayley’s gaze was immediately drawn to the labyrinth of
office cubicles sprawled around the room. The second floor of GeneTech contained only office space. She wondered if the machines downstairs could be heard on the second floor.

The silence was eerily unnatural, lingering in the air, thick and heavy, like a dawn devoid of birdsong. Trailing behind Aiden, the silence followed her, an almost portentous presence.

Only a few overhead lights were left on, casting shadows into the corners, spilling under desks and over top of cubicles. Furniture melded into distorted grey shadows as Aiden steered them through the network of partitions to a stairwell, locked by another RFID card reader.

It wasn’t a surprise access the third floor was restricted, it was where their servers were located. Hayley waited next to Aiden while he bypassed the card reader. The doors clicked open sluggishly, reluctantly allowing them entry.

The third floor was very different to the second. There was one long hallway lined with spacious offices on either side. No small workstations could be seen on this level. It was obviously meant for GeneTech’s executives.

At the end of the hallway, Aiden turned left towards the server room, disappearing behind an office. Hayley didn’t follow him. She stopped mid-stride, twisted her head to the right. Out the corner of her eye, a flicker of movement caught her attention behind a partially closed office door.

She stilled, squinting into the dark room. Nothing moved. Glancing down the hallway, Hayley hesitated, unsure whether to investigate or continue after Aiden. Doubt tethered her in place. There was something wrong, she just couldn’t place it.

Looking back at the open outline of the door, Hayley identified the irregularity in the otherwise incongruous looking hallway. Sweeping her gaze down the passage confirmed it. None of the other doors were open, card readers flashed red next to each door.

Hayley walked towards the open door and edged slowly into the office. The moon’s milky rays bathed the office in an ambient light. Her gaze roamed over the couches, cabinets, bookcases, before settling on the desk to her right. A laptop was open, the screen saver bouncing around the display. Hayley froze as her eyes sought out the aberration.

Darkness draped across an outline, slowly coalescing into the distinctive figure of a man standing hunched over a desk. His back was to her, so he hadn’t seen her yet. Shock filtered through her brain like a laboriously slow hourglass, trickling through her body, sending small bolts of awareness through her synapses.

She felt a miniscule change in the frequency of the air. Subtle, but perceptible, the slight alteration in his stance alerted Hayley that the stranger knew he was no longer alone.

Slowly, the man swivelled his head to look over his shoulder. Moonlight caught the edge of his expression, chased away the shadows to reveal the sharp planes of his face. Her gaze touched on his crooked nose, lingered on the prominent scar on his left cheek.

Her memory flipped over like an old rolodex, trying to identify the man who looked vaguely familiar. When he turned towards her, recognition surged to the surface, mind finally grappling with the stranger’s identity.

In his usual meticulous approach, Aiden completed a background check on all of GeneTech’s security staff. The guards were hired from a private security firm, most with some type of Military background. The only person Aiden marked as potentially dangerous was Andrew Clarke, Former
Delta Force Captain, now GeneTech’s Chief Security Officer.

So Hayley knew that Clarke was the man standing in front of her. But she also knew Clarke wasn’t supposed to be there, he should have left hours ago.

For the span of a few heartbeats, Clarke’s shock was suspended, his expression washed away with a kind of blank confusion. Then his eyes narrowed until they slitted almost closed, the dark orbs barely visible. It was like looking into the lidded stare of a predator.

When Clarke reached behind his back, the moment of inertia snapped, recoiling with the same brutal energy as a discharged gun.

Without conscious thought, Hayley leapt forward. She hadn’t seen a weapon, too busy concentrating on his face, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t armed. She had a brief moment of gratification when she saw his hardened expression peel back to expose an unprepared moment of surprise.

Only a few body lengths between them, she closed the distance with adrenaline inducing speed. As she got closer, Hayley was struck by the sheer size of the man. Bulky with muscle, his arms bulged, stretching the thin cotton shirt to capacity. He was tall too, at least a few inches over Aiden’s height.

Angling her body towards him, she smashed her fist into his jaw. The punch had her whole momentum behind it, she felt the pain in her knuckles, jarring right up to her shoulder. But Clarke just grunted, stepped back and absorbed the blow.

Hayley hadn’t set herself up properly, was off-balance and didn’t expect Clarke to recover so quickly. She saw the fist coming, was just fast enough to duck under it. The underside of his arm clipped her head as he threw his punch. Hayley staggered backwards, legs working frantically to keep upright.

She felt something at her back, heard the rebounding sound as the door slammed shut, echoing ominously around the room.

Taking advantage of her instability, Clarke grabbed her combat vest and slammed her into the door. She grunted as her head snapped back. She realized what Clarke was trying to do, but she was slightly dazed and wasn’t fast enough to grab him again. Hayley heard the distinct snick as her gun was pulled from its holster on her hip. Clarke raised the weapon towards her chest.

Pivoting quickly to the left, out of the gun’s line of fire, Hayley’s left hand shot out to wrap around Clarke’s wrist. When her right hand came up to grasp the barrel, it felt like the cold steel seeped through her gloves, fusing to her skin.

Snapping his elbow straight, Clarke tried to angle the barrel towards her torso. Despite the two-handed grip she had on Clarke and the gun, Hayley struggled against the bigger man’s strength.

Abruptly, Hayley wrenched Clarke toward her. Surprise worked in her favor. Not anticipating the move, he was forced to concede ground in an attempt to stabilize himself or risk falling over. For such a large man, Clarke’s agility surprised her, righting himself with one step. Clarke let out a growl, a rumbling sound full of menace, resonating threateningly in the space between them.

Right hand on the barrel, Hayley tried to force the gun towards Clarke’s chest. She felt Clarke attempt to pull back, obviously recognizing the disarming move she was trying to implement. To stop him from pulling away, Hayley dug her fingers into a pressure point on the inside of his wrist.

For a moment, nothing happened and Hayley worried her gloves might reduce the effectiveness of the manoeuver. Then, she felt the answering shudder in his arm. Pinching the nerve would cause
pain and persistent numbness from wrist to elbow.

With his arm temporarily weakened, Hayley forced the gun towards his chest. Finger wrapped around the trigger, Clarke had no option but to release the weapon or have his finger snapped. Hayley felt a surge of triumph when she disengaged the gun from Clarke’s grip.

Without warning, a fist smashed into her temple. Her precarious grip on the pistol weakened and she felt it drop, hit the side of her knee and skitter away. Hayley staggered to the side, trying desperately to keep upright as a white haze contracted around her vision.

Like a hulk of black menace, Clarke stalked towards her. Shadows flittered at the edge of her sight, obscuring the next punch. A strangled groan worked up her throat as Clarke’s fist connected with her face. Pain burned a path along her cheek. Off-balance, she lurched sideways, shoulder connecting with a bookcase.

Books tumbled over the side, but Hayley ignored them. Her vision blurred slightly as she grabbed a shelf and pushed into a standing position.

Her vision cleared enough to see the next punch. She ducked the fist coming at her head. Parried the next blow, bringing her knee up into his groin. Clarke moved at the last moment. Her knee collided with the inside of his thigh instead of her intended target. She heard him grunt and twist inward.

Breathing heavily, Hayley backed away, out of Clarke’s reach. Didn’t use the opportunity to land a few punches to his unprotected head, not entirely convinced he wouldn’t recover quickly and turn her offensive manoeuvre against her.

Her cheek ached, her mind felt sluggish, her body lagging behind, unable to predict the other man’s movements well enough to implement any type of offense.

Something brushed her hip. Distracted, her gaze immediately dropped down to identify the object. A pot plant. Hayley realized her mistake before she looked back up. Expecting the punch to come at her head, she flexed her arm up, protecting her face.

Ignoring her head, Clarke instead stepped in close to her body and delivered two gruelling punches to her stomach. The air was pushed up through her lungs, bile rising like acid along her throat. The combat vest absorbed some of the impact, but it didn’t stop the nausea from scratching up her throat.

Clarke stepped towards her, eyes blazing, lip curled. Grabbing her vest, he yanked her towards him then curled his fingers around her neck. Hayley struggled as he tightened his hands around her throat, cutting off her air supply. She knew how to get out of the hold but her reaction time lagged. If felt like the oxygen was being squeezed out of every pore as she raised her hands in a kind of detached, insensible manner and tried to implement a defensive manoeuvre.

As darkness edged into her vision, Hayley heard the door open behind her with such force it smashed into the wall. Clarke’s eyes flicked up in surprise, his grip loosening. Before Hayley could react, Aiden shoved her roughly to the side and barrelled into Clarke.

Shoulder colliding with the wall, she slid down, dazed and gulping for breath. Hayley reached up, fingers scrabbling against the scarf. Already short on breath, panic scraped in the periphery of her mind, before she found release by pulling down the stifling material around her mouth.

Her heartbeat thundered in her chest, moving like a liquid beat through her body. Hayley blinked rapidly, trying to clear away the persistent blurriness in her vision. When she looked up, shadows clung to both men, melding their movements until it looked like they’d become a single combative
Aiden drew his sidearm, trying to angle it towards Clarke. The other man grabbed Aiden’s wrist, smashing it once, twice against the nearest cabinet. Aiden grunted, let go of the gun, which clattered to the ground. Before Clarke could reach down, Aiden kicked the gun away.

In a blur of movement, Aiden reached under his coat, pulled the baton out and swung it towards Clarke. It didn’t expand completely, only glancing off the side of the other man’s head. There was still enough power behind the swing for Clarke to lurch sideways, stumbling until he bumped into a chair.

Wincing, Aiden rubbed his wrist, looking around for the gun. He didn’t spend much time searching before snapping his gaze back up to Clarke, who’d steadied himself against a chair.

There was an infinitesimal pause as both men locked eyes, the violence building up with the same enmity and power of a thunderstorm. Aiden’s green eyes glittered like the sharp edge of a cut emerald, the cold rage emanating from him as brittle as shattered glass.

Then, like a pair of dancers in a meticulously rehearsed ballet of violence, they launched at each other.

Even in that moment, hearing the dull thuds as both men scored hits against each other, it was difficult not to admire Aiden’s skill. His brutally sinuous fighting style was beautiful to watch. He used his baton and fists interchangeably, with ruthless adaptable efficiency.

She’d seen Aiden fight before, watched him dispatch men using viciously effective techniques. Maiming, disabling, killing, it didn’t matter how he incapacitated them as long as they stayed down. Most opponents couldn’t get near enough to take down Aiden, less had the skill to last during a prolonged attack. But GeneTech’s Security Chief Officer certainly had the skill, and most likely the training to take on Aiden.

The brawl bounced the two men against furniture and walls. Pot plants shattered, book spilled over shelves, every object was used as a potential weapon. The large room appeared smaller as the energy compressed into the space around the two men.

Using the wall to push herself up, Hayley hovered on the fringe of the fight. Frustration churned unpleasantly with the nausea in her gut. She wanted to help, but any intervention might distract Aiden rather than assist him.

Hayley looked around for her gun. A glint caught her eye. Hayley sent a wary look over her shoulder before quickly sidling over to scoop up the weapon. The shape alone told her it was Aiden’s gun. She wouldn’t chance using it, not willing to risk accidentally shooting Aiden. But if Aiden couldn’t subdue Clarke, she would.

Aiden flexed his arm up, blocking a punch, then immediately lifted the baton shoulder height and swung it down in an arc. Clarke’s arm shot out quickly, deflecting the baton before it could reach his head. Hayley heard the muted thump as it connected with Clarke’s arm.

Lighting fast, Clarke’s fist shot out, knuckles stuttering across Aiden’s jaw. It pulled a grunt from Aiden as he stumbled to the side. Trying to bring the baton around, it snagged against a filing cabinet and Aiden lost his hold.

Taking advantage of the misstep, Clarke pushed in close to Aiden, momentarily blocking Hayley’s view of him. Making a sweep with his leg, Clarke tried to trip Aiden. It only partially worked. Aiden
stumbled, fell against a cabinet, but with the ease of a fighter, righted himself with an audible growl.

In the scuffle, Aiden’s mask must have been pulled down because it was now sitting around his throat. Lips pulled back in a rictus of a snarl, the savage ferocity in Aiden’s expression was made all the more poignant by the blood dripping down the side of his face.

Clarke stepped towards him, but Aiden snapped a vicious right cross towards Clarke’s face. His fist connected, jerked Clarke’s head to the side. Not giving the other man time to recover, Aiden delivered three successive punches to Clarke’s mid-section.

Stumbling backwards, Clarke threw an ungainly arm out towards Aiden’s neck. Darting under the clumsy attempt, Aiden grabbed Clarke and threw him into a bookcase. Hayley heard a rending crunch as the shelves gave way under Clarke’s weight.

Clarke pushed himself against the broken bookshelves and launched at Aiden. Neatly sidestepping, Aiden hacked an elbow into Clarke’s face. His head snapped back, the sickening crack told Hayley Aiden had just broken Clarke’s nose.

Not waiting for Clarke to recover, Aiden smashed his fist into Clarke’s eye socket. The bigger man staggered back with a pained grunt. Capitalizing on his instability, Aiden wrapped both hands around his neck.

Aiden snarled, low and guttural, all wild animal rage as he squeezed Clarke’s throat. Without warning Aiden shoved Clarke towards the wall with such force that his head struck the surface and actually bounced from the impact.

Grabbing his shirt, Aiden brought his leg up and slammed his knee into Clarke’s groin. Clarke hunched over instinctively, exposing his back. Aiden slammed an elbow into the fleshy part of his neck, sending him sprawling forward onto the floor.

Aiden stepped over to Clarke, but Hayley got to him first. Clarke rose to his knees, but before he could get up, Hayley smashed the stock of Aiden’s gun into the cervical vertebrae at the base of Clarke’s skull. Clarke shuddered and dropped face first to the floor. He didn’t get back up again.

Panting, Aiden looked over at her, the lashing sting from his rage still present in his gaze, hostility and aggression smouldering beneath the surface. Blood trickled from a cut just above his eyebrow, adding a fierce intensity to his already penetrating presence.

Dropping his gaze, Aiden stepped over to Clarke. Twitching, Clarke let out a strained groan as Aiden dropped down, dug his knee into the middle of his spine. Roughly grabbing his arms, Aiden yanked them around, withdrew a pair of Flexicuffs from his pocket and clamped them over Clarke’s wrists.

Aiden grabbed hold of Clarke’s hair and slammed his forehead into the carpet. Once, twice. The feeling of Clarke’s fingers wrapped around her throat delayed Hayley’s reaction as she fleetingly shared in Aiden’s anger. Then reason returned, jarring her into intervening, overcoming any transitory lapse of judgement.

Settling a hand on Aiden’s shoulder, Hayley dug her fingers in. She was ready for his reaction, steeled herself against the tide of anger she felt in a body tense enough to shatter under her fingers.

Turning, Aiden stared at her silently, and although his face was expressionless, she could see the play of emotion in his gaze. The sparks in his eyes kindled with the uncontrollable fire of his baser instincts, razing to the ground any restraint he might be inclined to place on his natural propensity for
Looking back down, Aiden shrugged her hand off and let go of Clarke with a disdainful scoff. Patting him down revealed a phone, but no weapons. Aiden purposefully dug his knee into Clarke’s back as he got up. GeneTech’s Chief Security Officer twitched on the ground, reminding Hayley of a convulsing fish out of water.

Looking around, Aiden walked over to the door and flipped a light on. Hayley blinked and looked around at the carnage. Broken pot plants and shelves, books scattered, furniture in disarray.

“What did you do to him?” Aiden asked, voice rough from his recent exertion.

Hayley swallowed with difficulty, feeling the strain in her vocal chords as she spoke.

“Cervical vertebrae pressure point. Induces crippling pain along the spine and temporary paralysis,” she rasped.

Being a woman in the Army was difficult, especially in combat situations. She’d learnt that disarming men without any combat experience was easy. However, trained soldiers presented an altogether different problem. Hayley knew her limits, knew that compared to men she was smaller and weaker.

So she’d learnt pressure point combat to compete in her male dominated profession. It didn’t matter the size or strength, inflicting certain pressure points on any man would tip the fight in her favor.

Snorting, a small smile lifted the corner of Aiden’s mouth, a tinge of respect in his expression. The smile dropped abruptly when Aiden took a step towards her. Reaching out, he took her chin in his hand and gently moved her face so he could study her cheek.

“Are you okay?” Aiden asked.

She tried to smile, but it was a shaky unconvincing effort, only serving to remind her of the ache in her cheek. Adrenaline was slowly ebbing, leaving the shaky aftereffects of the rush in her system.

Hayley shook her head. “Are you okay?” she countered.

Reaching up, Aiden absently wiped near his eye. His jaw tightened in anger when his finger came away with blood.

Aiden pinned her with an agitated stare. “What the hell happened? You were behind me, then you just disappeared.”

Crossing her arms, Hayley met Aiden’s stare, felt the heat of it scorching her face.

“I saw something in this room, thought I better have a look. How did I know he was going to be in here? It’s just as well I did investigate,” Hayley retorted, motioning to Clarke.

Aiden made a non-committal sound in his throat, staring at her with a fractious arch to his brow.

“What are you going to do about him?” Hayley asked, shifting to look at Clarke.

Aiden briefly looked over his shoulder, face solidifying from slightly irritated into careful blankness. Without answering her, Aiden walked over to the desk, removed a flash drive from his pocket and inserted it into the laptop. Removing his phone from his pocket, Aiden looked up at her.

“I’m going to the server rooms, I need to set up a connection for T-Bone. I won’t be long. Are you
okay to watch him until I get back?” Aiden asked, gaze shooting to Clarke, before settling back on her.

“I think I can handle him, unconscious and restrained as he is,” Hayley remarked, unable to hide her irritation.

Granted the last time Aiden asked her to watch over someone she’d ended up with a knife slicing open her shoulder blade. But Hayley wouldn’t make the mistake of misjudging Clarke. Aiden didn’t comment, just stared at her steadily, absorbing her sarcasm in silence.

“Cover your face,” Aiden ordered, lasering her with an immutable stare.

Turning abruptly, Aiden walked out of the room. Clenching her teeth, Hayley pulled the scarf up. She wasn’t opposed to taking commands, she was a soldier. But Aiden’s directives were often shaded with that annoying arrogance which made the ‘suggestion’ harder to accept.

Hayley found her own gun wedged in a corner. Holstering it, she walked over to stand a few feet away from Clarke. A headache pounded behind her eyes, sending pulses of pain spiked with worry through her mind. Clarke was an added complication they didn’t need. Their plan of slipping in and out of GeneTech undetected was no longer viable. So what would they do about Clarke?

Aiden had patched into Ray again to discuss the technical aspects of connecting to GeneTech’s servers. Hayley was only vaguely listening to their chatter in her earpiece. When Aiden returned, he spared a brief look at Clarke before returning to the laptop.

“There’s a shit load of information here. Give me some time to run a search,” Ray requested.

Aiden grunted in acknowledgment. The drumming of keys pattered against the strained silence as Aiden delved into GeneTech’s servers.

Clarke groaned and stirred, then jerked suddenly when he encountered his restraints. Lifting his head, Clarke tried to look around the room, but lying on his stomach, facing away from them, he couldn’t crane his neck far enough to see much of anything. Aiden glanced over when Clarke awakened but otherwise ignored him.

“Sweet screaming monkeys,” Ray exclaimed, triumph echoing clearly through her earpiece. “The search returned results. I’m downloading everything even remotely related to the data I reconstructed. When you guys get back I’ll have more of an idea of what I’m looking at.”

Letting out a slow breath, relief trickled through a mind riddled with uncertainty. It was a risk, entering GeneTech without knowing if they’d actually find anything. Maybe she could find some consolation in knowing she hadn’t committed numerous felonies with nothing to show for it.

“Thanks T-Bone,” Aiden replied absently as he scrolled through the data on the laptop.

Hayley tapped her foot edgily, shooting glances at Clarke. He was conscious but hadn’t spoken. Looking back at Aiden, she watched a frown form as his eyes darted over the screen. Then a smirk crawled across Aiden’s face, chasing away his usual expression of mild irritation.

“I’ll be damned. Digital Trips,” Aiden muttered, satisfaction salting each word.

“What? What do you mean?” Hayley asked.

“Umeni, or more specifically GeneTech, created Digital Trips.”
Hayley stared at Aiden, not quite understanding the significance. “So….”

Aiden made an impatient noise. “The government are in the process of banning Digital Trips. There’s been a few instances of people requiring hospitalization because of extreme reactions. The government are looking to take legal action against the original distributor. But since no one knows who created the tech, they’re not able to prosecute anyone. I imagine relevant government officials would be very interested in this information.”

Drumming her fingers on the table, understanding crystallized in her mind with all the subtleness of a sledgehammer.

“You’re going to leak the information.”

A ruthless smile spread across Aiden’s face, the savage glitter shining in his gaze making his green eyes spark brightly in the wan light. When Aiden turned back to the screen, Hayley scrubbed a hand over her face, processing the implications of such a move.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Hayley asked.

Aiden flicked his eyes over to her, his expression unreadable. “T-Bone, I need you to leave a trail leading towards the Digital Trip files. If we can make it look like those were the files we’re after, their little I.T drones might not discover we’ve been snooping elsewhere.”

Ray grunted. “Sure. No problem. But what are you going to do about the guy tied up in the office?”

A hostile grin spread across Aiden’s face. “Lay a false trail.”

Removing the flash drive, Aiden pocketed it. When he walked past her, Hayley grabbed his arm. Stopping, Aiden narrowed his eyes and looked pointedly at her hand.

“What are you doing? He’ll see your face,” she hissed. The cloth covering her mouth dampened her uneasiness, rendered her concern invalid.

“Exactly,” he answered, baring his teeth in a harsh parody of amusement.

Aiden liked to operate in a series of checks and balances; if someone attacked him, he came back at them, only twice as hard.

Having to continually reinforce that almost allegorical reputation as the Vigilante meant projecting an invincibility no one was inclined to test. Hayley had witnessed the fear Aiden instilled in others. Using coercion, manipulation and scare tactics was often more effective than his fists. As Hayley was finding out, fear often did more to intimidate an enemy than any physical threat.

If Aiden’s enemies lost that fear because they thought he was a blunt instrument, then he’d lose power and momentum. It was essentially how the U.S Army operated. By becoming such a renowned world power, very few countries were inclined to go against their Military force for fear of retaliation. Aiden operated under a very similar edict. If he didn’t retaliate against Umeni, it might set a dangerous precedence.

She’d been immersed in Aiden’s world long enough to know how he operated. It wasn’t just about revenge, although that also played a part. It was about ensuring others would know the consequences if they challenged him. Even if Aiden’s actions were unlawful, and he went about correcting power imbalances using less than scrupulous methods, he did help people. Aiden didn’t exist in a power vacuum, he’d earnt his place in Chicago’s hierarchy, for better or worse.
Hayley stepped back. Aiden gave her a bemused look, lingering even after she’d freed her hand. Then he shrugged, rearranging his face into his usual implacable expression.

On his stomach, Clarke peered up at Aiden when he walked in front of him. Dropping down on his haunches, Aiden silently contemplated the other man. Without warning, Aiden’s hand whipped out, grabbing Clarke’s hair to roughly wrench his head up.

“I know who you are,” Clarke identified.

Clarke’s speech was slightly distorted, but that was a result of the angle of his head and the pressure on his vocal chords. Despite his restraints, and the discomfort of his broken nose, Clarke sounded surprisingly composed.

“I know who you are,” Clarke reiterated. “Pearce right?”

Aiden let go of Clarke’s head, answering his question with a condescending quirk of his mouth.

Clarke shifted on his stomach, tried to look across at her. Grabbing the top of Clarke’s hair, Aiden forced his neck back until Hayley thought Aiden might actually snap it. The muscles in Clarke’s neck convulsed as he tried to swallow, an involuntary groan escaping as Aiden continued to apply pressure.

“Keep your eyes on me or I will snap your neck,” Aiden advised, the threat sliding neatly behind words said in a remarkably level tone.

Letting go abruptly, Clarke gasped as his head fell forward. Aiden got up, took a few leisurely steps back and settled his shoulder against the wall.

“I shouldn’t be surprised you found this facility. Or maybe I’m not giving you enough credit. If killing an entire assault team wasn’t enough, you have to break into our company to satiate your self-aggrandizing need to put an end to perceived injustices,” Clarke intoned, the sneer obvious in his voice.

The insult rolled off Aiden’s impenetrable form, he neither moved nor acknowledged Clarke’s obvious attempt to bait him. Silence stretched between the two men as they stared at each other. Aiden cocked his head to the side, cool amusement bleeding out to encompass an altogether provoking countenance.

“So you send a team to kill me, then blame me for defending myself?” Aiden asked mildly.

“What did you expect? You compromised our systems,” Clarke snapped.

Aiden shrugged, unconcerned.

“You know,” Clarke began, craning his neck to look up at Aiden who stared back at him impassively. “I watched the feed we recovered from the assault team. The images were blurred, but there was enough footage to see someone helped you during that attack.”

Clarke shrugged, more a jerk of his shoulder because of his restraints. “And here you are, again with your mysterious ally. Or is she so mysterious?” Clarke needled with a nod of his head in Hayley’s direction.

Trepidation settled over Hayley, a black tar-pit of dread churning noxiously in her stomach. Hayley was under no illusions, if someone identified her, she’d never be able to return to a normal life. She’d be hunted by Fixers and Blume alike, trying to get to Aiden.
Until now, Hayley had pushed the threat of exposure to the back of her mind, convinced herself it was unlikely to transpire. But faced with possible detection, Hayley realized how recklessly she’d jeopardized her future. She’d deliberately deceived herself into believing her association with Aiden would go unnoticed.

Aiden didn’t comment, just allowed his eyes to wander until they settled on the laptop. Hayley rolled her shoulders irritably. Clarke didn’t know her identity, he’d do more than taunt Aiden if he did.

“I found some interesting data on your servers,” Aiden remarked suddenly.

For an inscrutable second, tension ran the length of Clarke’s body, bunching his already strained muscles.

“Have you tried them? Digital Trips,” Aiden clarified.

“Fuck you,” Clarke growled.

“It’s a remarkable app. I always wondered who programmed them,” Aiden mused. “But now the government is trying to regulate distribution. Seems too many people have had bad experiences using them,” Aiden relayed, mock sadness in the tilt of his head.

The sudden influx of anger saturated the room, contorting the atmosphere until it felt densely oppressive. The rage emanating from Clarke was obvious in his posture, tensely coiled like a rattlesnake.

“Do you get off knowing you destroy lives? Is that the only way you can get hard, seeing the destruction you wrought?” Clarke asked, voice vibrating with resentment.

The question was met a mirthless chuckle and a careless shrug. “You wouldn’t be so worried if you had nothing to hide.”

Pushing off the wall, Aiden walked past Clarke, ignoring his uttered curses.

“We’ll find you again,” Clarke threatened.

Aiden stopped, turned his head towards Clarke, a smile ghosting his lips. “Perhaps. But I’d wager by the time the media and the government are done with their blitz on Digital Trips, there’ll be nothing left of Umeni. Sorry, GeneTech. Good luck paying mercenaries from the bankrupt company slush fund.”

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Graphite grey clouds spread like a nuclear fallout across the sky. The early morning sun attempted to push through, but all it could manage were weak, stilted rays. A gritty tiredness clung to Hayley’s mind, made the pain in her cheek more pronounced than the other aches in her body.

Escaping GeneTech proved far easier than entering the premises. They’d left Clarke tied up in the office where someone would find him in the morning. Now, they were waiting on Ray to interpret the mounds of data.

“What’s Gnaural?” Aiden asked.

Hayley blinked a few times and stifled a yawn. Giving her chair a small shove, she turned away from the window to concentrate on their findings.
“Think of it as Satan’s version of Digital Trips,” Ray replied.

“What does Digital Trips have to do with anything?” Hayley asked.

“Okay,” Ray began, settling his shoulders against the back of the chair. “What do you know about Digital Trips?”

Hayley shrugged. “They were made by GeneTech.”

Her answer really wasn’t meant to be flippant, but it came out slightly more mordant than she’d intended.

“Not anymore,” Aiden remarked, the slightest tinge of humor shading his response.

Tapping a slow rhythm on the keyboard with his fingers, Ray stared at them in irritation.

“Sorry, continue,” Hayley apologized, waving a hand towards the screen.

“Basically, Digital Trips are binaural beats used to induce mild visual hallucinations. They’re mostly harmless. Depends on the app, some are used to induce relaxed or energized states. Recently, some people have had severe reactions requiring hospitalization. Which has, in rare cases, led to psychosis. There’s speculation Digital Trips are actually drugs.”

“Are they? Drugs I mean,” she clarified.

“Not really. They do alter cognitive states, although not on the same level as opioids.”

Aiden rumbled intolerantly beside her. “I know all this T-Bone. Quit with the history lesson and tell me what you found.”

“I’m getting to that,” Ray said on the crest of a long-suffering sigh. “Remember I told you about the Emotiv headgear, and how the data was being streamed back to GeneTech? Well that data wasn’t used for benign purposes.”

“What do you mean?” Hayley asked warily.

“The Emotiv headgear operated on a neurological level by monitoring brainwaves and cognitive functions. GeneTech used the data produced by the headgear to research how brainwaves responded to certain stimuli. They’d already created a successful product in Digital Trips. From what I’m reading here,” Ray tapped the screen, “they wanted to expand, delve into areas that would produce different results.”

Ray paused, blew out an aggrieved breath, and scrolled down the screen.

“They’ve successfully created digital dopamine. The app works in similar ways to Digital Trips. Testing found that it flooded the brain with similar levels of dopamine illicit drug user’s experience. It’s basically tricking the brain into thinking it’s getting the same neurochemical reward as a heroin high. And the genius of the app is, it’s temporary. It’ll disappear from the user’s phone as soon as the high wears off. So they can’t just buy one and have the app forever. Like a habitual drug user, they’d
have to pay and load the app every time they sought out a high.”

There was a kind of stunned, disbelieving silence following this revelation. Aiden put both hands on the desk and leaned forward. Jaw tightening, Aiden’s expression darkened, something truly frightening flickering in the depths of his eyes.

“And this Digital Drug really works? Why the hell would a company create this type of app?” Hayley asked.

Ray nodded. “I don’t think they set out to, they just stumbled on the find. And to answer your other question, unfortunately, it does work. When they tested the app, it became apparent quite quickly that it had a different affect than Digital Trips.”

Crossing his legs, Aiden’s face took on a contemplative expression. Most likely pulling all the strands of their recent find together with enviable speed. Aiden’s mind worked much like a game of chess. He had remarkable skill in seeing strategies and moving often two to three steps ahead of most people.

“So The Club and Blume’s CIO were after Digital Drugs. But if they have this app, why haven’t they used it? We would have heard of something like that being introduced. The Club peddle drugs all the time. It’s their bread and butter. That and human cargo. This new drug would be right up their alley,” Aiden pointed out.

Ray made a kind of growling sound. “Maybe those kids who were hospitalized were given this Gnaural instead of a Digital Trip. You flood the market with a product and the authorities are bound to look closely. Introduce it slowly, and by the time the authorities realize it’s a problem, they’ll have trouble identifying a distribution point.”

“Possibly,” Aiden acknowledged but he didn’t sound convinced.

Shifting around in her chair, Hayley’s gaze came to rest on the large screen alight with WKZ News chatter. Uploading the leaked information to WKZTV about GeneTech’s creation of Digital Trips had the desired effect: controversy.

Hayley stared at the screen, listening to the newscaster’s prattle. The story had broken an hour ago, but they kept repeating the same information, albeit from different sources.

Aiden had uploaded the ‘anonymous’ tip to a number of sources. WKZ TV, certain government departments and SystemsLeak. Even if one source was shut down, the information was too widespread to contain.

She’d been skeptical about Aiden’s decision to expose GeneTech’s role in Digital Trip technology. But after discovering what they’d been experimenting with, Hayley felt nothing but satisfaction watching GeneTech attempt to prevaricate their role in the technology.

GeneTech would likely be too busy dodging reporters and government officials to look too closely at their real reason for breaking into their systems. Not that their intrusion was reported. That’d be further embarrassment for a company already suffering media scrutiny and possible prosecution.

While they’d discovered what Julian Collins was after, it was still unclear what Klockwork really was. They didn’t know how he was going to use the tech, or how they were going to stop him.

Chapter End Notes
Author’s Note:

1. In Act 1, Mission 4 (Backseat Driver) Jordi asks Aiden to drive fugitive (Neil Corrado) away from the Police blockade after an unsuccessful heist. Aiden takes Neil to Lucky Quinn, who shoots him after he hands over the laptop. Profiler provides information on Neil: he’s a security guard with the company he stole from. For the purposes on my story, I altered the company Neil worked for, making him a GeneTech security guard.

2. Emotiv is a real technology being used today. If you’re interested visit (https://emotiv.com/) to learn more about it.

3. Binaural beats are auditory brainstem responses which result from the interaction of two different auditory impulses. There’s scientific evidence which supports the phenomenon, making the idea of Digital Trips quite possible. There are some interesting websites out there about binaural beats. Interestingly, some websites even allow you to create your own binaural beats.
Hayley woke suddenly, fragments of a dream pulsating behind her eyelids like a bright echo of light. As her eyes snapped open, indistinct silhouettes wavered uncertainly until her vision sharpened almost painfully. A soft grey hue spread across the room, the slight opaqueness an indication dawn wasn’t far away.

Mind swimming indistinctly from the departing dream, Hayley’s chest contracted as her heartbeat returned to its normal rhythm. The heavy comforter trapped the heat, made the sheet stick uncomfortably to her skin.

Her body twitched, uneasiness invading her limbs, plying them with a restless energy too insistent to ignore. Peeling back the covers, she cautiously sat up on the edge of the bed, looking over her shoulder to check Aiden was still asleep. He hadn’t moved, the sound of his breathing was still deep and even.

The early morning was bitingly cold, nipping at her exposed skin and chilling legs clammy with sweat. Hayley frowned, trying to recall the dream. It had felt vividly real but upon waking, had faded quickly. The more she tried to pull the threads together, the faster it evaporated. The wispy strands floating away until all she was left with was a lingering sense of unease.

Pushing up from the bed, she grabbed a sweater, and when it fell past her hips, realized it was Aiden’s. Padding over to the far edge of the window, she pulled the curtain aside sightly and stared out.

Hayley felt a shiver spark as she rested her head against the cold glass to watch the first rays break in the distance. The black coat of night began to lift as the steel blue of a cold dawn lazily peeked over the horizon. Variant tones of orange gently spread into the sky, struggling to seep through the deeper indigo hues.

The last few days she’d watched the unfolding drama of GeneTech’s involvement in the Digital Trip controversy very closely. Felt like her breath had been sucked in, waiting for her name to crop up in the media. She was rapidly running out of oxygen, her brain presenting all kinds of asphyxiated induced paranoia and images of a life on the run.

But it was a baseless fear, the media was intent only on covering the fallout. Her name never came up, she could breathe again. Their venture inside the facility had remained, if not undetected, then definitely unsubstantiated.

But Clarke’s taunting words continued to haunt her.

“And here you are, again with your mysterious ally. Or is she so mysterious?”

While recognizing Clarke was only trying to provoke Aiden, those words had left the echo of an imprint on her mind. A sliver of doubt wedged into her thoughts, allowing her ruminations to take on a definitively suspicious outlook.

She hadn’t considered what would happen if Aiden’s enemies discovered she was working with him. Now that she was reluctantly reflecting on the subject, Hayley realized that too many people had seen her face. Angela Balik, Andrew Clarke, Umeni’s assault team, Ethan. Granted half of the
people on that list were dead, but it was still too many who knew of her association with Aiden. The scrambler was only effective against cameras, there was nothing she could do to stop observant eyes from remembering her face. Or trying to find out who she was.

But it wasn’t like she could walk away because suddenly things felt too real. She just wasn’t fond of the large spotlight shining down on her, emphasizing the consequences of her actions. Her brother was in prison, she had to get him out. Unlike the last time he was imprisoned, he didn’t deserve to be there, he was only trying to help his girlfriend’s family. And since Danny was her only family left, Hayley knew she would do anything to help him. Including jeopardizing her future. It wasn’t just about helping her brother though, Hayley also wanted to expose Blume’s corrupt CIO.

Aiden mumbled something in his sleep, snapping Hayley’s gaze back to the bed. He rolled over and stretched an arm towards her side of the bed. Face turned away, he lay on his stomach, other arm slung carelessly across the pillow. Muscles relaxed, there was no indication of the tension she was so used to seeing in the set of his body.

In only a few months, she’d slotted herself into the rhythms of Aiden’s life, to the ebb and flow of his moods and actions. Had become accustomed to the warmth of his body pressed into her back while she slept, liked the familiarity of his hands and mouth in the cocooned intimacy they created.

Hayley sighed quietly turned to stare out the window. The future loomed like a portentous raincloud, sprinkling drops of doubt and indecision on her. Despite their current lack of leads, they were closing in on Klockwork. And that meant Hayley was forced to consider her options. No longer indistinct, the future held its own shape, something she could carve out for herself.

But that required her to seriously consider the future of her relationship with Aiden. She needed to make a decision. No more vacillating between uncertainties. She would either choose to be with him, knowing the risks, accepting his faults and the secrets he kept. Or walk away.

Leaning her cheek against the glass, Hayley reveled in the chill as it seeped across her face, chasing away the cobwebs of her thoughts. She watched the sharp shadows of night slowly fade from the landscape, diluted by the watery sunshine of a new day.

“Are you okay?”

She banged her forehead against the glass in surprise, cursed and whipped her head towards the voice. Deep in thought, she didn’t hear Aiden get up. He could be remarkably light-footed when he chose to be. And now he stood behind her, arching a brow at her, amusement flaring in his eyes.

Heart thumping painfully in her chest, Hayley swallowed past the dry lump in her throat as Aiden’s gaze skimmed over her face. Effortlessly plucking information from her expression with the same ease he skimmed data from a screen.

She shifted uncomfortably, let her own gaze wander away from Aiden’s scrutiny. Watched the grey shadows morph into elongated shapes as the angle of the sun changed, chasing away the opacity clinging to the room.

Aiden scrubbed a hand over his face, drawing her eyes back to him. Hayley could almost hear the rasp as his hand scraped over the stubble on his cheek. The early morning light spilled across Aiden’s face as he cocked his head and frowned at her.

“I couldn’t sleep. I …” Hayley tapered off, felt the thread of conversation disentangle to pool around her feet.
“Had a nightmare,” he finished for her.

Hayley didn’t answer him, just shrugged, the movement snapping the moment and counteracting her darkening mood. Aiden frowned, but it was brief, barely even noticeable before his expression returned to its normal passivity. Barely an arm’s length away from her, hesitancy flowed in the air around him. Hayley understood his wariness; after a nightmare, she usually couldn’t stand physical contact.

Today felt different. Hayley found she wanted him to touch her, craved the feeling of Aiden’s hard body pressed against her in that unyielding way of his. Needed his warmth to engulf her, scorching away her uncertainties.

Stepping away from the window, a small shiver ran down her spine as her shoulders shuddered involuntarily. Aiden didn’t move, just watched her with cautionary interest. She looked into Aiden’s eyes for a long moment, weighing and dismissing what to say. His sharp gaze sunk into her, peeling back layers until it was entirely possible he could read her thoughts.

“I was thinking about Clarke,” she said, voice sliding into something intractable.

“What about him?” Aiden asked sharply, the sleepiness clinging to his face falling away as his expression hardened.

The sun broke over the horizon, shimmering rays slanting through the window to disperse some of the iciness in the room. The seconds crawled by, filling the space between them with a dense silence. Hayley considered dropping the subject, but Aiden’s tone had her hackles rising.

“About what he said. His insinuation about knowing … who I was,” Hayley finished lamely.

The implication spanned the gap between them, pulling as taught as a tightrope cable.

Aiden scoffed, the grating sound full of cynicism. “He had no idea who you were.”

“I know that,” she snapped. Now, she didn’t add.

“It just made me think about the repercussions if someone did identify me,” Hayley said quietly.

The words settled like cold ash on her tongue. She could taste the grainy texture, as unpleasant as the reality of the words. Hayley looked up at Aiden, lifted her shoulder in a half-shrug. She let it drop almost immediately, frustrated at her inability to express how she felt.

Aiden fixed her with an unwavering stare, jaw hardening resolutely. “No one has so far. I’ve made sure of it. And no one will.”

Clenching her teeth, Hayley rode the wave of anger cresting over her at Aiden’s careless dismissal of her fears and the overwhelming arrogance of his statement.

“Is that Aiden Pearce’s stamp of guarantee?” she sniped.

Aiden stood immobile, muscles rigid enough he could be carved out of stone. Only his eyes betrayed any emotion, flickering with resentment.

There always seemed to be a simmering tension between them, and like a flint, their anger was quick to spark at the barest provocation. And right now, Hayley’s emotions were close to the surface, felt like they were pushing tight against her skin, scraping to get out.
Taking a deep breath she tried to mitigate some of the frustration she felt. It didn’t work.

“I spent eight years in the Army, knowing that my future was planned out. It didn’t matter what mission or what country I was sent to, I carried out my orders. I always knew there would be another target to take down, another location to infiltrate. It gave my life meaning. My team were my family and that’s where I belonged. Until I was injured, I never thought about having a life outside the Army. Now I have to shape my own future, and I have no idea how.”

Hayley shook her head and laughed, the bitterness of the sound overriding any cadence of amusement.

“I came back to Chicago without any plans, just to see the only family I have left. I didn’t anticipate ever seeing you again Aiden. But I’m thankful I did because you’ve helped me heal. And what we’re doing has given me a purpose, something I’d thought never to experience again. But, that doesn’t mean I don’t think about the consequences. Or what the Cops, Blume or any number of Fixers would do if they learnt we were together. I don’t know what I’m going to do with my life, but I don’t want to be branded a criminal and hunted. I don’t even know what you want from me Aiden. If you want me to stay...”

Hayley stopped abruptly, a dry lump forming in her throat. She hadn’t intended to talk about the future of their relationship, but she hated this uncertainty in her life. Needed to know what Aiden wanted from her, if she was to plan a future with or without him.

When Hayley looked up at Aiden, the anger sizzling in the back of his gaze was tempered by the surprise she saw briefly flit across his face. Aiden’s expression slid into something contemplative as he stared at her, the silence swallowing her words until it felt like she hadn’t spoke at all.

Aiden stepped forward until he crowded her space, towering over her. Hayley felt her lip curl into a snarl, in equal measure aggravated and enticed by his proximity.

Hayley could feel the heat of him as she reached up and placed her hands on his chest, intending to push him back. Instead, felt the twitch of muscle under her fingertips as she dug her nails into his bare skin. The warmth from his body sizzled through her palms, scattering the biting cold and sending an answering wave of heat through her. Her irritation sputtered to a halt, morphing into something more primal.

Desire ignited in his green eyes, swirling with his anger to create a whirlwind of potent emotion as she trailed a hand down his chest. Hayley rubbed against an old scar, dipping into the crest to feel the softness of the cicatrisation. It was about need, beyond naked lust, a reaffirmation of what she felt through physical means.

Reaching down, Aiden grabbed her wrist, stilling her movements. Hayley craned her head to look up at him, saw the untamed hunger shape his expression into something uninhibited. Holding her wrist, Aiden cocked his head, gaze travelling over her face.

“Do you really want to stay with me then, knowing the risks?” Aiden asked, the low growl in his voice carrying a faint mocking inflection.

Aiden tightened his hold on her wrist almost painfully. Something dark stirred within the depths of his gaze, a challenge or provocation, Hayley wasn’t sure. It flickered out before she could really identify the emotion.

“No,” Hayley snapped, the utterance contorting into more of a growl than any kind of word. “You don’t get to do that. Tell me what you want Aiden. I’m not guessing. I need something more
She saw the shift in his eyes, that tiny rent in Aiden’s armor opening as his determination wavered. Superficially, both appeared to accept the irresoluteness of their relationship, but they were both waiting. Waiting to see whose fuse burned out quicker.

Aiden stepped even closer, the movement pressing the warmth of his body into hers. Lust flared like a lit match, hot and fierce, burning the oxygen from her lungs.

“I can’t promise you a different outcome,” Aiden stated, a faint smile touching his lips. “I don’t want that life for you. It’s why I’ve never asked.”

Whatever response she’d been about to utter stuck in her throat, scattering the unspoken words. The decision to stay with Aiden really was hers to make. She needed to decide if she could live with the risks. If she could accept Aiden’s secrecy and criminal inclinations.

Because that was the pressure point for her, knowing he kept things from her almost obsessively. But, the time she’d spent with Aiden had been eye opening on many levels. It had allowed her a window into his life, to see the sacrifices he made, to know the good he did even through unscrupulous methods. Unlike the last time they were together, her time in the Army meant that she truly understood what life balanced on a knife’s edge felt like. Connected by their past, bonded by their present circumstances, they may have been forced together but there was nothing involuntary about her decision to create a future with Aiden.

After they dealt with Klockwork, she could build a life for herself. But it didn’t mean she had to continue his crusades. She could find a job, go back to her apartment. But she’d need to separate herself. Hayley knew she’d changed in the last few months. If she was to retain a semblance of herself she’d need to have her own life. Otherwise she’d resent Aiden. Whether any of that was possible, Hayley wasn’t certain, but Aiden meant too much to her to just walk away. But he still needed to voice that desire, make her believe that she wanted this as much as he did.

“I need you to ask. Tell me you want to be with me,” Hayley whispered.

The hesitation was almost imperceptible, but she caught the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. Placing her hands back on his chest, Hayley waited for him to comment. The tension in Aiden’s body made her fingers feel like they’d sunk deep into concrete, wedged like steel-edged poles with no possibility of escape.

The long moment of indecision pooled around them, crawling around the room to lodge in the corners. It expanded until the silence felt suffocating. Hayley was about to pull away, the tips of her fingers trailing down his chest as she found her answer in the silence between the words.

A rumble worked up Aiden’s chest, vibrating under her fingertips as he grabbed her wrist.

“Wait,” he commanded. A shiver rolled down her spine as the potency in his voice stilled her.

“Stay,” he demanded, the rough cadences of his voice causing the word to come out more like a growl.

Her gaze snapped up to Aiden’s face, seeking verification of the truth of his words. He stared down at her, immobile, expression brittle enough she thought it might shattered if he moved.

“Stay,” he repeated, the force behind that one word pitched low enough she felt it like a pulsing presence inside her.
Did he really want her to stay? Or was it that he couldn’t find the resolve to let her go? Perhaps it didn’t matter. Maybe all that mattered was that he’d asked.

When Aiden let go of her wrist, Hayley let her fingers rove over his chest, dipping lower to trail over the ridges of his abdomen, letting the physicality of her actions speak for her.

As she dipped into his boxer shorts, she felt the tickle along her cheek with Aiden’s quick intake of breath. Hayley stopped her exploration, hand hovering inside the elastic. Her gaze swept up to Aiden’s face, watching sparks of arousal pulse in the bottomless black of his pupils.

Sliding her hand into his boxer shorts, her lips curved as she felt him hardening under her touch. Slow strokes had Aiden’s jaw flexing. He bared his teeth, a hiss escaping as his eyes flickered closed before he snapped them open. Hayley felt the doubts and worries fall away as the passion entwined around them, binding them together like a helix.

Abruptly, Aiden yanked her towards him and clashed their mouths together, the rough strokes of his tongue a welcome distraction. The slight pain as he pushed her back into the wall only enhanced the shiver of arousal pulsing through her.

Aiden’s impenetrable, muscular form towered over her, the heat from his body pulsating around her like a live entity, stealing her breath away as he ground his hips into hers.

The sweater was roughly shoved up as Aiden’s hands trailed up either side of her ribs, the material meeting no resistance as she raised her hands above her head. Tugging the sweater off, Aiden tossed it away, the indistinct shape a brief grey smudge before it disappeared from sight.

The cold caressed her skin, hardening her nipples and sending frissons of icy awareness jolting down her spine. Aiden grabbed her hips, his warm fingers digging into flesh as he pulled her against him. Their bodies moulded together perfectly, the significance not lost on Hayley.

Aiden’s mouth skimmed along her jaw, nipping gently, his lips and tongue unfurling a ribbon of pleasure through her body. He dropped his head to her neck and pressed a line of kisses downward. Hayley squirmed as he grazed his teeth over her skin, and Aiden let out a growling laugh. The sound created a vibration with his lips, which her skin absorbed like a shock of electricity and conducted to every inch of her body.

Hayley groaned in frustration, used her nails to scratch along his back, imagining the red welts forming under her fingers. Aiden let out a groan of his own as his shoulders flexed, the muscles contorting under her fingers as she dug them in harder.

“Aiden. Fuck, just…” she groaned, voice catching as she tried to move her hips, urging him into action.

A laugh escaped Aiden, the husky sound rolling over her, arousing as much as his touches.

“Just what?” he asked, voice vibrating with a dark amusement.

Without warning, he bit down on her shoulder, hard enough that he’d leave a mark. Dragging his teeth over her collarbone, he moved towards her breast, tongue leaving a wet trail to freeze on her exposed skin. His teeth scraped against her sensitive nipple, too hard and not hard enough. Hayley cried out, surprised the sound was tinged with more pleasure than pain.

With every suck and nip her sensations were heightened, piercing her mind with the same intensity Aiden’s teeth abraded her skin. It set alight a low burning sizzle, edging over her body like wildfire every time he touched her.
Aiden pulled back, flicked a thumb over her nipple before sliding a hand down her stomach, fingers leaving a scorching path over her skin. A wicked grin spread over his face, he didn’t give her time to react before he pushed two fingers up inside her. She bit her lip as the spike in sensation crashed over her. Rocking forward, she hissed at the friction, tiny sparks too quick to be called pleasurable.

He let out a low, breathy laugh when she dug her fingers into his shoulder. Hard. Couldn’t stop her hips from grinding against his hand. Crooking his fingers, Aiden’s lips parted into a feral smile as each stroke brought a small moan to her lips.

Turning her head, Hayley captured Aiden’s mouth and kissed him, hard and quick, before deliberately biting down on his lip. As Aiden gasped and pulled back, Hayley tasted the slight tang of his blood on her tongue.

Aiden licked the blood off his lip, eyes flaring in recognition of her silent challenge. It wasn’t rational, but in that moment she’d felt an animalistic need to mark him, if for no other reason to leave her own imprint on his skin.

Aiden always seemed to sense her needs, know instinctively when she wanted something more. So Hayley wasn’t surprised when Aiden thrust his fingers further inside her, hitting all the right spots, the smirk curling his mouth daring her not to respond. Hayley tried to curtail her body’s natural response, scrape back some control. But she was fighting a losing battle, something she’d always known anyway.

She was close, her body shuddered as the pleasure sparked below like high voltage. A low moan tumbled from her lips as Aiden kept up his relentless pace, but added a new dimension of pleasure by flicking his thumb over nerve endings, sending bolts of white-hot electricity through her. She choked out a moan as liquid heat poured over her body like lava, sizzling with unrestrained intensity.

Her hips twitched, spasms of pleasure petering out as Aiden withdrew his fingers from her and stepped back. Breathing hard, Hayley leaned against the wall, closing her eyes and allowing her head to roll back languorously.

Hayley’s eyes snapped open when Aiden snaked a hand around the back of her neck, tugging lightly at her hair, pulling her head up so he could kiss her again. She felt his lust, raw and unbidden, transferring to her with just the slightest touch of his tongue.

Reaching down, Aiden skated a hand over her thigh, grabbed the back of her knee and lifted it to tuck under the crook of his elbow. Then, with a slow, sensual smile, he pushed into her.

Aiden set the rhythm, a slow grind, rolling his hips to torment her. Or maybe just felt like it. The multitude of sensations was almost overwhelming. Cold tingled against her skin, the wall chafed against her back, everything else in the room blurred until all she could concentrate on was the heat of Aiden’s body.

Aiden flicked his tongue over the edge of her jaw, leaving a wet trail which dried like ice water in the cold air. Dipping lower, he scraped his teeth lightly over her neck, adding more pressure the further his mouth traced along her skin. His teeth latched onto the sensitive flesh, adding a hint of stinging pain to the pleasure.

His entire body rubbed along the length of hers, skin chafing satisfyingly with each thrust. A flush worked up her neck, spreading across her face as her body trembled. The room became a hazy distortion as her body clenched around him. Aiden groaned against her neck, the vibration of his voice soaking into her skin as his hips jerked a few more times before he stopped completely.
Aiden didn’t move for a few long moments, Hayley could almost feel the force of his heartbeat through her chest. When Hayley sighed in contentment, Aiden chuckled near her ear. The sound pulsed through her, sending pleasurable little aftershocks pinging through her body. Grabbing the hair on the back of his head, she pulled sharply. Aiden rumbled incoherently near her ear, stubble scraping against her cheek as his head pulled back.

With his face so close, she could see his pupils were blown wide, but not enough to hide that electric green as his gaze held hers in an iron grip.

“Do you really think we can be together?” Hayley asked.

Gently, Aiden withdrew from her and set her leg down. His gaze passed over her face, regarding her in silence much longer than she expected. Tension crawled through her body, seeping into her bones as she waited for his answer.

Aiden let out a low rumble of irritation when his phone beeped. He shot a look towards the bed, but turned his head back towards her, lingering, seemingly on the verge of saying something. Hayley wondered what narrative was playing out in his head. Whether he’d been resigned to let her go, or she’d broken his resolve to allow her to stay.

“We can try,” he responded, tone carefully neutral.

Something darker unpinned his statement, Hayley wasn’t sure what it was; hesitation, reluctance, uncertainty. Maybe a combination. Or it was possible he was so used to pushing people away, that he had no idea how to keep them close.

The phone beeped again and Aiden let out a quiet sigh. For a moment, there was a look of sadness on his face, but he chased it away with a smile as he tucked a stray hair behind her ear and kissed her.

When Aiden turned away to walk towards his phone, Hayley tracked her gaze down his body, admiring his physique. He looked like a jungle cat, all lean muscle and predatory grace. Just as silent and deadly.

Hayley sighed and headed towards the shower. Despite the doubts still chipping away at the back of her mind, and knowing the risks she still faced, Hayley knew that life was far too short to live in fear. Or with regret. The last man she’d been with had died before she told how she felt. She regretted that every single day.

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Like distant thunder, the low rumble of the L-Train tumbled toward them, spreading out into the night as the untamed power of the shuttle reverberated across buildings. Hayley propped her shoulder against the cold metal scaffolding, feeling the increasing vibration through her body as the train approached.

The tracks shook as the train thundered overhead, the sound of the moving carriage feeling almost physical as it passed overhead like a strong gust of wind. As the train sped away, the pulsing echo it left in its wake softened almost to a melody as it disappeared into the night.

Palming her phone, Hayley read the email Aiden received, requesting a meeting from a purported DedSec member. She knew the contents well enough to not actually need to see it on the screen. She’d read it over a dozen times, and each time it left the faintly bitter aftertaste of uneasiness on her tongue.
To: Aiden Pearce

Sender: DedSec

Subject: Julian Collins

We have information you may be interested in. We need to meet. Tomorrow night. Dot Connexion – 12:30. Room 12.

The email was sent from the same address which had provided the JPG image of Julian Collins and Michael Quinn a few weeks ago. Aiden had attempted to trace the email back to its source but that had proved impossible. Whoever had sent it had covered their tracks.

Prior to that email, they were unaware of the connection between Collins and the Quinn family. That email was an important breakthrough. Indirectly, it had led them to GeneTech, and allowed them to discover what Quinn was after; Gnaural, the new digital drug. But it still felt like they were chasing their tails, with no real leads and no idea how Gnaural or Klockwork tied together.

“When did the Ambrose turn into a shitty techno-dance club?” Hayley asked, pulling the jacket tighter as the wind whipped around her.

Aiden looked up at her briefly, a small smile tugging on the corner of his mouth, before his gaze settled back on the screen.

“A while ago,” he answered distractedly.

Hayley grunted, but the wind caught the sound and whisked it away. The jacket she wore barely held the cold at bay; standing outside for so long, she was starting to really feel the harsh bite of the icy wind.

The DedSec member had given Aiden less than 24-hour’s notice of the meeting. Aiden had responded by demanding another time and meeting place, but he’d received no reply.

It was a clever strategy on DedSec’s part. More than Hayley was inclined to give them credit for, if she was being honest. The meeting place was public, full of people. Easy to remain anonymous. It was also a place where a potential ambush could so cunningly be set. The nightclub could be full of Fixers, Cops, or Blume security, artfully blending in as club-goers. And ctOS, while able to have cameras inside, were unlikely to have audio due to the music. So the dance club was the perfect place to have a clandestine meeting without the risk of being overheard.

Despite recently intervening in what could only be called a ‘cleansing’ of DedSec’s ranks, Hayley wasn’t sure their summons were altruistic. DedSec could use the opportunity to set Aiden up. They knew, somehow, that he was after Blume’s CIO. So they had two choices; they went to the meeting, knowing it could be a potential trap. Or, they ignored the email and jeopardized having information that may help them discover what Klockwork was, slip through their fingers.

It wasn’t really a choice, Aiden was always going to go. It didn’t mean they weren’t careful and didn’t have their own backup plans in place.
They’d had a difference of opinion over Hayley coming tonight. Aiden wasn’t keen on her showing her face to DedSec. Hayley had considered his argument, knew his concerns were valid. But she would not let Aiden walk into a potential ambush. Sure, Aiden could take care of himself, but this was also her mission. She’d come this far, and she certainly would let DedSec chase her away.

“Are we going in?” Hayley asked.

Aiden flicked his thumb over the screen once more before looking up at her. “Yeah,” he confirmed as a frown settled on his face.

“It’s difficult to account for everyone, but Profiler only tagged the usual delinquents who would frequent a club like this. Drug trafficking, resisting arrest, that kind of history. No sign of Blume security or Cops. Of course, they can fool Profiler as well as I can so that’s not any kind of assurance,” Aiden pointed out, deep voice vibrating with frustration.

Hayley wasn’t the only one concerned about the logistics of this mission. They were boxing themselves in an unfamiliar place full of civilians. If DedSec were trying to betray Aiden, they were putting a lot of people’s lives at risk. Aiden would defend himself, so there was bound to be collateral damage.

Sighing, Aiden inclined his head towards the building. “Okay, let’s go.”

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What was once a beautiful old theatre had now been degraded into a gaudy dance club complete with tacky laser lights flashing on the ceiling. The bones of the structure were still in place, the ornate archways standing silently, almost dismissively, against the tide of humanity.

A D.J was atop a stage against the far wall, large black speakers throbbing beneath him with the techno junk the present generation called music. The current song was like a slow, arrhythmic beat, soaking into her skin to keep pace with her heart.

Stepping around a group crowding around the bar, Hayley’s eyes darted around, skimming over dancers, touching on every face. It was a difficult environment to control, too many people milling about to be sure they weren’t a threat.

She couldn’t see Aiden but he was out there among the throng of dancers. They’d split up when they’d entered the club, a strategy to cover more ground and assess possible threats.

Hayley stuck to the edge of the dance floor, watching the crowd carefully. If there were undercover Cops among the crowd, Hayley was fairly certain she could pick them out. She’d been on similar covert missions in the Army, so knew exactly what she was looking for.

Tapping into the cameras, Hayley angled the lens over the crowd. The dancers were carefree, their body language reflecting that attitude. If there were any undercover agents, they weren’t on the dancefloor. She was looking for men or women who appeared deceptively relaxed but were far too attentive to be a club goer. They’d also be strategically placed, and wouldn’t move from their allotted area. Switching cameras, Hayley scanned the second level, but was unable to discover anyone who she’d mark as a possible threat.

Pocketing the phone, Hayley climbed the stairs to the second level. Sweat dripped down her back as she pulled the sleeves up on her jacket. Packed with dancing, sweaty bodies, a clammy heat had filled the air like smog. But she couldn’t remove the jacket, it was concealing her weapons.

Some people were leaning over the balustrade while others lounged on the sofas. Hayley studied
them carefully, watching their body language. The tempo of the song moved through them in unconscious movement; the tap of their feet, the nodding of their head. They were talking, laughing, sipping drinks.

Scanning the crowd, Hayley’s gaze passed over everyone until she spotted Aiden leaning a hip against the railing. He kept glancing up from his phone, eyes probing deep into the shadowy corners of the club, his phone allowing him to peel away the layers of other people’s lives to expose their secrets.

Someone bumped into Aiden, and he looked down. Hayley was too far away to hear, but the woman smiled, spoke briefly to Aiden before turning away.

A laugh caught in her throat. It was like the Clark Kent and Superman phenomenon. Aiden was the most wanted man in Chicago, but people only saw his image as the Vigilante. Remove his most recognizable features, his cap and battered leather jacket, and he dropped instantly from other’s perception.

Aiden looked over and arched an inquisitive eyebrow at her as she squeezed next to him. She shook her head in the negative. They were standing a few doors down from room 12. Hayley shifted uneasily as she realized that the room they were going in to was at the end of the second story. There was only one exit, the staircase at the far end of the walkway.

The second floor of the Ambrose, originally designed to seat people in the upper echelons of society, had been gutted to make way for private rooms. They were rented out each night to guests. Hayley suspected the rooms were used for drugs, prostitution and any other number of prohibited activities.

Hayley turned her head sharply towards Aiden when she felt the faintest undercurrent of tension vibrating from his still form. The music flowed around Aiden, not quite touching him, the tautness in his body pushing against the throbbing beat. Hayley turned so her back was against the railing, eyes darting around, examining everyone who passed by.

Leaning towards her, Aiden’s breath lightly touched her face as his mouth drifted towards her ear.

“The man in the black jacket. Near the door marked 10. He’s a Fixer. The other to his left, the tall guy in the grey shirt, he’s a Fixer as well.”

Aiden’s voice was a low rumble in her ear but she heard him clearly. In a decent show of nonchalance, Hayley took a step away from the railing and scanned the balcony. Tension soaked into her muscles as the music faded into the background, barely able to keep pace with her increased heartrate.

The man in the black jacket turned towards her, gaze lingering on her face. Hayley felt his probing stare like a scorching brand. Medium height, pleasant face, non-descript features, he blended in the crowd well because he looked so ordinary.

Aiden’s back was to the Fixer, but Hayley was certain he was following his movement through the cameras.

The Fixer raised a glass to his lips, drained the contents and slid the empty tumbler onto the nearest table. He pulled his phone out of his jeans, eyes darting across the screen. His eyes flickered towards Aiden before he leant over to speak with his companion.

The other Fixer placed his beer on the table, and both walked towards her, a casual stride which had Hayley lean back to grip the wood railing in anticipation. She’d already marked her path of attack,
knew exactly how she’d take him down. Grip his wrist, twist, knee to the groin, and a sharp tap on his carotid artery. It’d cause a scene but hopefully give them the opportunity to slip away in the confusion.

Everyone else faded into the background as Hayley shuffled her feet apart. The people between them blurred, like a lens out of focus. Someone moved and blocked her view. Hayley lost sight of him for a few seconds. Adrenaline fused with her thoughts, making everything else feel razor-sharp as her body primed for action and her mind chipped away any unnecessary thoughts.

Not panicking, she pivoted on her feet and scanned faces until she caught sight of the Fixer. He weaved between a couple, glanced in their direction. The moment stretched out like molasses, sticking to her nerves, coating them in adrenaline.

Hayley waited, hand flexing around the railing. Then his gaze dropped and the Fixer, along with his companion, headed towards the stairs. Blowing out a slow breath, Hayley’s heart contracted as she watched the two men walk down the stairs and disappear onto the dancefloor. Aiden’s eyes narrowed as he followed the Fixer’s progress across the room.

“Shit,” she ground out, the adrenaline surging through her system making her voice sound like she’d chewed on powdered glass.

Jaw tightening, Aiden turned his head and let his gaze rest on her. His expression was contemplative, but flashes of that ruthless exterior began to form, coating him like ice. She saw it in the set of his shoulders, his expression hardening as his eyes glinted like cold metal.

“Aiden, what’s going on? Are those Fixers here for you? Do we need to leave?” Hayley asked, scanning the faces of everyone around her.

Pushing off the balustrade with his hip, Aiden shook his head. “No. We go in, but keep alert.”

A frustrated rumble worked up her throat, but she didn’t have time to question Aiden before he turned his back and walked towards room 12. Aiden wouldn’t confine himself in a room if he wasn’t confident he’d be able to escape.

At least, Hayley hoped that was the case. The last few weeks Aiden had been working tirelessly to produce some type of lead, trying to discover what Klockwork was. It was almost feverish, bordering on obsessive. Hayley was keen to end this as well, get on with her life, but Aiden seemed… fixated.

She understood the need for urgency. If these drugs hit the street, there was no way they could stop production. But, Hayley sensed this had become a crusade for Aiden, he’d drawn the battle lines but hadn’t told anyone he’d declared war. Just set about correcting the imbalance on his own terms. Careless was never a word she’d use in describing Aiden. Meticulous, cunning, ruthless were more appropriate terms. But, there was a niggling doubt that Aiden was taking risks he’d not normally take.

Shaking those thoughts off, she bared her teeth in agitation at Aiden’s departing back, and followed him towards room 12.

The last room on the second floor was behind a bright red door, a keycard lock baring their entrance. Aiden stopped in front of the door and tapped on his phone.

Peeking over his shoulder, she watched him pick up camera feed inside the room. Aiden panned towards the figure sitting on a sofa, but his image was blurred. Exiting the feed, Aiden accessed a
hack to open the door.

Hayley followed Aiden inside reluctantly, lingering in the entrance as she sent a concerned glance over her shoulder. She let the door fall shut, muting the music until it was only a faint pulse, like a throbbing vein. And taking in the details of the room, she realized that analogy was entirely appropriate.

Much like the red door, the entire room was decorated in various tones of crimson. The walls were covered in a sheer drapery, the deeper hues of burgundy shimmering in the dimmed lighting. On top of plush black carpet sat a long table in the center of the room, lined each side by three red single chair sofas. Black wrought iron candleholders were placed strategically around the room, the flickering candles creating a smoky ambience.

Hayley’s eyes immediately latched onto the figure seated on the sofa set against the back wall. Aiden paused in his stride when he spotted the young man. Putting his hands inside his jacket, Aiden resumed his leisurely pace, skirting a coffee table until he stood a body length away from the other man.

Standing next to Aiden, Hayley looked over at him. His expression betrayed nothing but mild interest as he studied the other man. The DedSec member looked to be in his mid-20’s, strands of his medium length blonde hair flopped over his face, partly obscuring light brown eyes. Those eyes slid towards her, raking an appraising gaze over her before settling back on Aiden.

The man took a drag on his cigarette before settling the smouldering object between his fingers. The smoke curled lazily around his hand as ash fell from the end, drifting idly to the floor like grey snow. Blowing out a plume of smoke, his eyes betrayed his nervousness, darting uncertainly between them. But as he ended on the exhale, his expression settled into a careful mask of aloofness.

“I honestly wasn’t sure you’d show,” the DedSec member declared, leaning over to stub his cigarette out in the ashtray.

Aiden didn’t answer, just followed the younger man’s movement as he bent towards the table. Outside, the song changed, the faster rhythm creating an almost frenetic energy as the muted beat thrummed inside the room, building into a crescendo. Aiden gazed wordlessly at the DedSec member, creating enough tension to stifle the younger man’s nerves.

Swallowing, the other man’s muscles in his neck worked visibly as he brushed hair out of his eyes in an unintentionally nervous gesture. He shifted uncomfortably under Aiden’s immutable stare, visibly intimidated.

“Who is this?” the other man asked sullenly, light brown eyes darting towards her speculatively.

“My bodyguard,” Aiden answered.

Hayley tamped down on the laugh rolling up her throat. Aiden turned his head towards her, when their gazes collided, his lips turned up into the smallest smile. When he turned back to face the other man, any trace of humor had vanished, leaving his normally stony expression.

The DedSec member blinked, clearly trying to decide if Aiden was serious. The mere thought that the Vigilante would need a bodyguard was so ridiculous, Hayley’s assessment of the younger man’s intelligence dropped a notch when he didn’t immediately dismiss the idea. Eventually, he must have realized Aiden was mocking him, because he scowled.

“I didn’t think it was necessary to specify you came alone,” the DedSec member sneered, sending a
poignant look in her direction.

Aiden uttered a low sigh that sounded more like a threatening growl. “Tell me what you know about Julian Collins,” he demanded, impatience smoldering behind the words.

The younger man’s chin lifted in clear defiance. “No. We speak alone or not at all.”

Hayley watched Aiden tilt his head slightly, the movement reminding her of a predator coolly assessing its prey. He appeared to consider the words, before shrugging. Turning towards her, Aiden motioned with his head.

“Let’s go.”

She followed Aiden, knowing exactly what he was doing, and fervently hoping the tactic would work. She didn’t look back, but she could feel the shock pulsing around the room, brushing against her senses. They’d almost reached the door before the DedSec member called out. She took a quick breath in, relieved the bluff had succeeded.

“Wait,” he cried out, alarm clear in the higher tenor of his voice.

Aiden didn’t wait, he just kept walking until he reached out to grab the door handle.

“Stop. Okay, she can stay,” he announced, voice edging into panic.

In the gloomy alcove of the doorway, with the light barely reaching his position, Aiden blended into the darkness. It looked like someone had cut carefully around him and peeled his outline away, leaving only blackness behind.

Time was measured by the slow beat of the music as Aiden remained unmoving in the doorway. The moment was poised precariously, tipping slowly in uncertainty, until even Hayley was unsure whether he’d would walk out.

Aiden’s stillness denigrated whatever power or control the DedSec member imagined he had in this situation. Even if DedSec did possess information they needed, they’d called Aiden for a reason.

Dropping his hand from the door handle, Aiden swivelled his head slowly towards the younger man. The sallow light crawled across Aiden’s face, sharpening the animosity carved in his expression. The dim light of the room made Aiden seem even more imposing, the scant illumination working for rather than against him. It draped a black aura of menace so casually over his body, he really didn’t need to voice any kind of warning.

Aiden retrieved the phone from his pocket, and flicked his thumb over the display. Concentrating on the screen, he walked back towards the DedSec member casually, not even deigning to acknowledge the other man, or his concession to allow Hayley to remain. The poignancy of the gesture was obvious to even the most obtuse observer.

Hayley watched the DedSec member struggle to maintain the aloof, if slightly bored, expression he'd adopted when they entered. Anger, either at being so easily played or dismissed entirely, was slowly bleeding into his eyes. Teeth latched onto his lip as he glared at Aiden, who appeared, if not oblivious, then completely unconcerned about the younger man’s irritation.

By the hostile glance he launched her way, Hayley could tell he didn't appreciate her presence but lacked the nerve to press the issue. Aiden had successfully established the hierarchy in this instance, and it likely came as a bitter lesson that he was on the lower end of the pecking order.
“So who are you?” Aiden asked, barely glancing up before his attention was dragged back to his phone.

The other man jumped slightly, tried to cover his inattention by shifting forward on the sofa. He didn’t answer immediately, instead let his gaze wander around the room. Aiden flicked his eyes towards the other man, narrowed in displeasure.

Shifting restlessly, he shrugged. “You can call me Dave.”

The corner of Aiden’s mouth twitched, but the movement was so brief that it was difficult to tell whether he’d smiled or sneered.

When Aiden continued to ignore Dave, tension crawled around the room, seeping into the corners until it felt like a stagnant presence.

“Turn your phone off,” Aiden demanded, pocketing his phone and looking expectantly at the other man. “And the device planted behind the sofa.”

Dave balked at the demand, shooting a quick glance over his shoulder, incriminating himself before he stilled, realizing what he’d done.

“I can’t do that,” Dave stated.

Aiden shrugged. “You turn them off or we don’t talk. You may have set the meeting place but I set the rules.”

It was evident the younger man hadn’t expected the animosity, if not outright disrespect, Aiden was exhibiting towards him. Clearly out of his depth, Hayley watched Dave struggle ineffectively with the decision, powerless against the overwhelming tide of Aiden’s interminable authority.

Shoulders slumping, Dave appeared to wither like a dying weed under Aiden’s scorching stare. Running a hand over his face, he lifted his shoulder in a shrug.

“Fine,” he muttered.

He got up from the sofa, knelt down and retrieved a tablet. Standing up he placed it on the table after he’d switched it off. Next, Dave grabbed his phone, made a show of turning it off and threw it across the table. The phone skidded across the laminate until it hit the tablet with an audible thump.

When Dave sat down to glower at Aiden, Hayley was vaguely amused by his impressive repertoire of belligerent facial expressions.

“What do you know about Julian Collins?” Aiden asked, asperity lurking beneath the quiet tone.

A shadow of anxiety crossed Dave’s face as he looked away from Aiden. “We have a source inside Blume.”

Dave fell silent after this confession, seemingly reluctant to impart any more information. Perhaps his hesitation was underscored by the fact that he was seeking assistance from his organization’s main antagonist.

“Tell me about your source,” Aiden demanded.

Dave stiffened at the terse command, irritation clouding his features. Defiance flashed in his eyes as he opened his mouth to respond. Aiden didn’t give Dave any chance to deny his request. He took
two quick steps towards Dave until he was in the confines of his personal space.

Flinching, Dave leaned away from Aiden before he could stop himself. Hayley could practically feel the mounting pressure from Aiden’s gaze as it drilled into Dave, building like an unstable volcano as he loomed over the younger man. When Dave looked up, whatever he saw in Aiden’s expression wiped away the hovering scowl. The color drained from Dave’s face as his hands dug into the sofa, his white-knuckled grip appearing to bleach into the grey sofa.

Hayley imagined the sheer physicality of Aiden’s presence was unnerving, the force of his will pushing down on Dave like a physical weight. While it was a blatantly transparent intimidation tactic, Dave couldn’t even look Aiden in the eye, despite, or maybe because of, the laser like intensity of Aiden’s stare. Instead, Dave shifted back further into the sofa, putting as much distance between him and Aiden as was physically possible.

“Your source,” Aiden repeated, voice ending in neat growl.

Aiden’s stillness pooled around Dave, ripping apart any conceived notion that he had any control in this situation. If Dave thought having information meant he’d be able to exert any influence over Aiden, he was slowly realizing that wasn’t the case.

“We .. uh.. recruited him,” Dave acquiesced, shooting a nervous glance up at Aiden. “He was … uniquely placed inside Blume.”

“Go on,” Aiden encouraged blithely, taking a slow, deliberate step back.

Dave tensed, watching Aiden warily for any sign that he was going to approach again. Aiden lent his hip casually against the sofa, and gave Dave a stilted smile.

“He worked on Bellwether,” Dave announced, capturing both Hayley and Aiden’s immediate attention.

“So DedSec do know about Bellwether,” Aiden muttered, almost to himself.

Dave drew his lips back in agitation. “Despite what you personally think about us, and our capabilities, we keep a close eye on Blume. We have people who feed us information. Most of the employees who worked on Bellwether were directed towards other departments. Only a few remained, especially since Julian Collins took over complete control of the project. The guy we have inside Blume approached us. At first we thought, maybe he was sent to infiltrate our ranks. You know, take us apart from the inside,” Dave explained.

He looked up at Aiden, who merely stared back. Gaze skittering away, Dave gave a jerky little shrug, and continued his explanation.

“But another member was able to corroborate his story. She was an ex-Blume employee and had worked with our source, so she vouched for him. Since then, he’s been feeding us what he can about Bellwether. Despite having access to the inner working of ctOS, the team’s work is monitored closely. Network traffic, emails, everything is scrutinized. So he has to be careful about what he looks at.”

“Our inside guy, his current job is to pave the way for ctOS 2.0. After the blackout,” Dave sent an accusing look Aiden’s way, “people weren’t sure about having a Smart City. Polls indicated faith in ctOS was at an all-time low. So the Bellwether team created a smear campaign against the Vigilante, DedSec and hackers in general. The public’s opinion is being influenced towards a new and ‘better’ ctOS. Something safer and unhackable,” Dave ended, rolling his eyes.
Crossing his arms, Aiden stared pensively at the DedSec member. His expression conveyed mild curiosity, but a like striking a flint, cold calculation sparked in his green eyes.

“So if you know about Bellwether why not use that in one of you billboard interruptions?” Aiden asked, condescension clear.

Dave sighed, a sound tinged with exasperation. “Because we don’t really have definite proof. And who would believe us without proof? I’ve seen the way people sneer at our billboard campaigns. I know the public see us as a nuisance. So why would they believe such an outlandish claim of mind control?”

Impatience settled across Aiden’s expression. “You’re not telling me anything new. What do you want?”

Dave shot Hayley a nervous glance, before settling his gaze back on Aiden. Aiden seemed aware of Dave’s hesitation because he didn’t push him, didn’t move at all, just allowed Dave to overcome whatever doubts he was having. Aiden had an instinctual sense about other people’s limits, knowing when to apply pressure or withdraw completely.

“What is it you want in exchange for the information you have on Collins?” Aiden asked.

And there it was. What they were here for. No self-respecting DedSec member would willingly give Aiden information without wanting something in return. They wouldn’t really be here at all if they hadn’t hit a snag in their investigations. So what if they had to do something in exchange?

Dave stared at Aiden broodingly. Straightening his shoulders, he blew out a breath, the nervous tension from his body expelled to disperse around the room.

“Okay,” Dave began, sounding resigned and tired. “When my source first approached me, he was a mess. He’d been working on Bellwether since its inception. When he was tasked with using the Bellwether code to re-elect Rushmore, he admitted that he enjoyed ‘influencing the masses’. Then he was instructed to instigate a divorce between Rushmore and his wife. He started to have attacks of conscience after that. When he learnt that Blume was affiliated, financed, run, whatever you want to call it, by Lucky Quinn, he wanted out. But, he was spooked. He thought he’d be killed if he tried to quit. So he approached DedSec. He thought we could help him get out of Chicago in exchange for information about Blume.”

Dave paused, scrubbed a hand over his face, his expression growing more haggard the further he progressed with his narrative.

“We, well I, persuaded him to stay with Blume and funnel information to us. I convinced him it’d be safer to stay in Chicago, rather than be on the run from Blume. I painted a bleak picture for him. On the run, no resources, always looking over his shoulder for Fixers. He could assuage his conscience knowing he was working for DedSec. Look,” Dave barked irritably, interrupting his story, “I’m not proud of this. I should have just helped him leave Chicago. But I’d been newly elected to the Council, my ambition clouded my judgement. I thought if I brought information about Bellwether to the Council, I’d have something on the other Dave’s.”

A frown dug into Aiden’s expression. “And?” he prompted, the harsh edge to his voice brushing aside Dave’s remorse with the same brutal action as a guillotine. If Dave was looking to assuage his guilt, he’d certainly chosen the wrong person to do that with.

Wariness soaked into Dave’s features as he fixed Aiden with a sharp stare. He ran his hand up and down the sofa, a decidedly agitated gesture.
“I got an email from my source a few days ago. He’d found something, but wanted to meet in person. Didn’t want to risk a digital trail. We were supposed to meet two days ago, but he never showed. I tried every way I know to track him. He’s disappeared. I need your help to find him,” Dave pleaded.

The lambent light from the candles melded with the wavering shadows, flickering across Aiden’s face to sharpen his expression.

“What makes you think I’d help? You’ve given me nothing which suggests you know anything more than I do,” Aiden said dismissively, adopting a bored expression.

Aiden’s phone beeped before Dave had a chance to answer. Taking the phone out of his pocket, Aiden stared at the screen, a frown forming as his thumb tapped on the display. A few moments later, he pocketed it to look back at Dave impatiently.

“I can show you some of the data he’s transferred to me since he started working as our mole,” Dave said, gesturing to his tablet. “Listen, whatever information he’s procured has scared him enough to disappear. You find him, you can have everything we know about Bellwether and Julian Collins. DedSec knows you’re looking into him. You find my guy, you can have access to what we have.”

Aiden said nothing, his expression as smooth as glass. But Hayley knew his mind was working much like a computer. Calculating the raw data so that it made sense. Highlighting risks, dismissing possibilities.

“How do you they know?” Aiden asked, fixing Dave with a corrosive stare.

Dave’s eyes darted around the room, confusion obvious in his pinched expression. “Know what?” he asked, irritation sitting behind the perplexity in his tone.

“How does DedSec know I’m looking into Julian Collins?”

Hayley had been wondering the same thing.

“I have no idea,” he said, shrugging.

The unpleasant smirk hovering around the edge of Aiden’s mouth indicated he didn’t believe this.

“You want to rethink your answer?” Aiden asked, voice dipping so low Hayley felt the echo of it in her bones. It was made all the more intimidating because it mingled with the beat of the music, matching the menacethrobbing in his tone.

Looking up at Aiden, Dave held his stare for the space of a few heartbeats, but his gaze skittered away and he appeared to shrivel under the cold stare boring into him.

“I really don’t know,” Dave said through clenched teeth. “Not that you have a right to ask,” he muttered unpleasantly.

Sitting back in the sofa, Dave folded his arms across his chest, as if that small defiance would stop Aiden from getting the answer he wanted.

Slowly, Dave was recapturing some of that confident attitude he’d originally worn like an ill-fitting cloak when they entered the room. It didn’t suit him, the false bravado just made him seem appear more conceited than he needed to.

Hayley saw Aiden move in a kind of detached, slow motion. Pushing himself from the sofa with his
Aiden launched towards Dave, who’s only reaction was to watch in slack-jawed apathy. Gripping the back of Dave’s neck, Aiden grabbed his arm and pulled him off the couch. Snapping his arm around behind him, Aiden slammed Dave into the floor headfirst. Hayley heard Dave’s pained grunt as Aiden twisted his arm around behind his shoulder.

A scream of pain made Hayley wince. She glanced up at the cameras and then quickly towards the door, concerned the sound would be heard over the music.

“Aiden, the cameras,” Hayley warned.

“I’ve disabled them,” Aiden replied tersely, not looking at her.

Hayley honestly wondered if Aiden could have a normal conversation without resorting to violence. Sighing, she brushed aside the rather unwelcome thought that Dave deserved this treatment. Baiting Aiden was about as clever as jumping into shark-infested waters without a cage.

Pivoting on her foot Hayley looked down at Aiden, bent over Dave’s body. Face down on the carpet, Dave’s arm was wrenched behind his shoulder while Aiden’s foot rested lightly on is back. If Aiden applied any more pressure, he’d dislocate Dave’s shoulder.

“Let’s try that again. Shall we?” Aiden asked pleasantly.

Dave just groaned. Aiden eased the pressure on his arm slightly.

“Where did you get that photo of Collins and Michael Quinn? What does DedSec know about them and how do they know I’m investigating him?”

“I don’t know,” Dave shrieked, voice tainted with pain. “Honestly. I’ve only recently been admitted to the Council. Some information is still off-limits,” came his reply, muffled by the carpet his mouth was currently pushed in to.

Another scream coiled around the room as Aiden yanked harder on Dave’s arm.

“I call bullshit on that,” Hayley said.

Aiden looked up at her, eyes utterly devoid of emotion. Dave was not someone who could hold up under prolonged torture. If his sniffling was anything to go by, Aiden had already broken him.

“I swear. Fuck. Please. Just let go. Have a look at my tablet, I’ll give you all that I know,” Dave pleaded.

Aiden held on to Dave’s arm for a long few moments. Then he gave a kind of subdued snarl and let go.

Immediately, Dave rolled over, groaning pitifully as he massaged his shoulder. His ragged breath almost seemed to hitch with the same regularity of the music. Adam walked over, grabbed the tablet, then walked back to deposit it into Dave’s lap. Turning the tablet on, Dave bypassed whatever security measures he’d installed and gave it to Aiden.

Accepting it, Aiden walked over to the table, placed the tablet there, and palmed his phone. Some minutes passed as Aiden ignored them in preference of the tablet. Dave had sat up but didn’t dare move. He’d wince ever now and then but he didn’t comment.

“The photo of Collins and Quinn,” Dave started tentatively.
Aiden’s head jerked up, gaze coming to rest on Dave, who swallowed nervously. “I honestly don’t know how DedSec obtained it. The only reason we gave it to you was because you helped us out by disposing of Ethan Malley.”

“I didn’t do it for DedSec,” Aiden scoffed.

Dave shrugged. “Yeah, we figure that,” he said, injecting a healthy dose of sarcasm into the sentence.

When Aiden narrowed his eyes in displeasure, Dave paled. “Look. I don’t know how we got that picture, or how DedSec know you’re after Collins. I was just instructed to send it to you. Like I said, a lot is still hidden from me as a new council member. It’s why I wanted to get that information on Bellwether, so I could get more access. Now my source has gone missing and I’ll be seen as a failure. May even be kicked off the council.”


Opening his mouth to respond, the denial forming on his lips was nullified by the truth she saw flashing in his eyes. Hayley cocked an unimpressed eyebrow at him, letting him know unequivocally what she thought of him.

“DedSec doesn’t know you’ve contacted me, do they?” Aiden surmised.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Dave shook his head. “No,” he confirmed in a whisper.

“Right. Since you couldn’t find your source on your own, you thought you’d dangle what you know about Collins as incentive for me to find him.”

Sighing, Dave gave a little wag of his head, not quite a confirmation, but a validation nonetheless. Placing the tablet back on the table, Aiden crossed his arms and stared at Dave in contemplation. Hayley didn’t know if he’d risk going after Dave’s source. Perhaps if they had another lead, this wouldn’t be necessary.

“Okay, I’ll find your source. Give me everything you have on him, the file you have stored on your dirty little secrets server. This better not be a set-up either,” Aiden warned, eyes broadcasting the subtext of hundreds of different violent scenarios.

“When I find this guy, he better have information worth my time, or ….”

Aiden let the last word drop into silence, the threat far more menacing since he hadn't actually voiced it.

Dave swallowed nervously. “Of course. His last location is on my phone.”

Reaching over, Aiden grabbed the phone, turned it on and delved into the contents. Dave looked about the protest, but thought better of it when Aiden looked over, a smirk hovering on his lips, daring him to say something.

Shifting, Dave swung his gaze away from Aiden. Looking back down at Dave’s phone, Aiden finished copying whatever files he had.

“Those Fixers lingering outside the door. Did you hire them?” Aiden asked, pocketing his phone to stare expectantly at the DedSec member.
The barest flicker in Dave’s eyes gave Hayley confirmation that Aiden had construed the situation, as usual, with annoyingly perceptive accuracy. When Dave remained silent, Hayley nudged him with her foot. Dave whipped his head up to her, bitterness burning like acid across his expression.

“I’d answer the question,” Hayley cautioned.

Aiden wasn’t known for his patience, and he certainly wouldn’t hesitate to persuade Dave using more forceful methods. She was just trying to forestall this. If Dave wanted to be an insolent little shit, she could console herself with the thought that she’d tried.

Giving her a lingering scowl, Dave shifted so that he could look up at Aiden. “Yeah, I did,” he confirmed. “I didn’t want to meet you without backup.”

Throwing Dave his phone, Aiden pointed his finger at him. “Send them away.”

Dave’s sputtering protest was met with an uncompromising glare. “You misunderstand, Dave. That wasn’t a request. I see any sign they haven’t left or that they’re following me, our deal is off,” Aiden warned.

His expression of displeasure was brief but noticeable. “Whatever,” Dave mumbled unwisely, but he did as Aiden asked.

Choosing to ignore Dave’s mutinous words, Aiden waited with exaggerated patience, glancing between his phone and Dave. Walking over to Aiden, he tilted the screen towards her so that she could watch the two Fixers outside their room. The one in the leather jacket pulled out his phone, sent a look towards their room. For a moment, Hayley thought they might come in, but the guy shrugged and signalled to his companion. Aiden handed her his phone.

“Keep track of them for as long as you can. Make sure they don’t circle back.”

When she nodded, Aiden looked across at Dave.

“I’ll see if I can find your source using some of my methods. What’s the guy’s name?”

Dave’s lips thinned as he caught the subtle insult wrapped up in that sentence. Since you’re obviously inept, was what Aiden really meant.

“Malcolm Deodato.”

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:

Malcolm Deodato is an unseen character from Watch_Dogs. You can listen to his audio logs, which progress from being hired by Blume, using Bellwether and his subsequent guilt as he witnesses the consequences of his actions. We don’t know what becomes of Malcolm after the game, so I took some liberties with his characterization.
The fugitive sun lingered in seclusion over the cloudy Chicago skyline. Winter trees lined the streets, their denuded forms standing starkly against watery sunshine, almost like charcoal outlines sketched by a passing artist.

People walked slowly down the main street of Pawnee, nauseatingly happy as they waved to neighbors and generally found contentment in their yokel lives. Aiden hated small towns. In particular, he hated Pawnee.

Pawnee presented a time in his life that was too hard for him to look at closely. It wasn’t a simpler time. He couldn’t remember a time when his life had ever been simple. But it had represented a rare happy period for him. Lena. Jacks. Fishing. Camping. When he was with the kids he’d been able to reach that place inside himself he’d thought long buried.

The brutality in his life had no place with his family. As if the line he’d drawn between his two lives would actually be respected by anyone. He’d probably indulged in the fantasy of his perfectly balanced life a little too long, his compliancy had likely killed Lena as much as Maurice had.

He’d tried to mourn Lena’s death. He’d spent months wallowing in grief, often looking down, bleary eyed, into the bottom of another bottle of Scotch. Never comfortable with living or seeing the consequences of his actions, he’d decided on another path. Better to punish others rather than himself.

So no, the small-town charm didn’t work on him. It had rubbed thin while he was there with the kids. And he considered himself happy back then. Now, that veil had been eroded and all he felt was a bitter resentment at everyone who’d denied him happiness.

The passenger door opened, the wind banking sharply to tumble inside the car, dispersing the residual warmth. The vibrant aroma of coffee seemed to extricate itself from the thick, creamy froth sloshing over the Styrofoam cup, to penetrate the car’s interior. Aiden inhaled deeply, savoring the slightly bitter, but delectable scent, of freshly brewed coffee.

Hayley hissed as she jostled the cup and the brown liquid scaled her fingers. Aiden reached over and grabbed the cup from her. She grimaced, shaking her fingers as she shut the door slightly harder than necessary and sank into the leather chair with a groan.

“It’s fucking bitterly cold out there. Who’s bright idea was it to suggest coffee?”

He snorted. “You offered to get it.”

Hayley glared at him as she blew on the cup, the steam rising to make her look like she was snorting vapor like a dragon.

“Did Ray get back to you yet?”

Aiden shook his head. “No. It'll take some time for him to access DOT servers.”

When Dave had provided his source’s name, Aiden’s curiosity was immediately piqued. He knew of Malcolm Deodato. The same way he knew of Angela Balik. The Bunker. That place had proven to
be a goldmine of information. It was too bad Blume had reclaimed it; the data inside those servers could have proven useful now.

Aiden was concerned DedSec knew he was tracking Collins. There were too many unanswered questions for his comfort level. And it was obvious ‘Dave’ wasn’t able to provide any further answers. He’d pushed him hard. Hard enough to know that if he’d had any information, he would have squealed like a pig the moment Aiden applied any physical pressure. So how did DedSec obtain that photo of Collins and Quinn? Were they following Collins because he was also a person of interest for them? Just happened to luck out when they discovered Collins and Quinn’s meeting.

He didn’t think DedSec was setting him up. They lacked the true grit to pull off anything too sophisticated. And what would they hope to gain if they were targeting him? Their ranks had been decimated because of Ethan Malley’s instability. If he hadn’t killed Ethan there wouldn’t be any Dave’s left. While he didn’t kill the kid for DedSec, they had benefited from his actions.

Sighing, Aiden took a sip of his coffee, the caffeine hitting his system immediately, the brown liquid snaking through his veins to give him a much needed pick up. Hayley reached over and turned the radio on, humming quietly to a song as they sat in companionable silence.

Aiden shifted and looked out the window. The information Malcolm had been funnelling to Dave was interesting. Malcolm had provided some rudimentary data about ctOS 2.0, and some very interesting plans for passing legislation which would give Blume’s own private security a lot of power.

That data had convinced him to find Malcolm, because he obviously had access where Aiden didn’t. And information was a powerful motivator for him. He was going to make sure he got whatever data Malcolm had managed to smuggle out of Blume. If it meant taking risks, calculated risks, then so be it.

The sudden way Malcolm disappeared suggested that his prying had uncovered something he wasn’t meant to have access to. Likely Blume had discovered this and tried to eliminate him. But after tracking him, Aiden believed Malcolm had managed to evade Blume. For now.

It was why they were in Pawnee. Malcolm had picked a perfect place to disappear. Despite Pawnee being in Blume’s backyard, the town was relatively behind in regards to ctOS. Too many open spaces for cameras to capture everything. It was why Blume had set up their command center there; less prying eyes.

From what he could gather Malcolm had fled the city, his last known location was on the outskirts of Chicago, where he’d turned off every device and hadn’t been heard from since.

T-Bone had the idea of tracking Malcolm using Blume’s department of transportation, or DOT. The department was responsible for traffic monitoring, using Blume’s system to assist with rerouting commuters when there were delays, roadworks etc.

What most people weren’t aware of, was that their phone’s Bluetooth signal was automatically paired with the nearest cell tower to determine traffic conditions. It was allegedly to help the flow of traffic, but every car’s position was logged each time they passed a cell tower or camera that allowed Bluetooth connection. That raw data was stored inside ctOS. Since they couldn’t track Malcolm using his devices, T-Bone thought he might be able to use Malcom’s last Bluetooth pairing to track him.

By determining the vehicle he drove, T-Bone could, theoretically, use ctOS’s camera logs to track his vehicle. It wouldn’t be easy. T-Bone would have to dig through footage since he couldn’t
physically move the cameras to trace Malcolm’s position. Using this method, they’d tracked him as far as Pawnee and were waiting for T-Bone to pinpoint a more precise location.

Reaching over, Hayley interrupted his thoughts when she turned the volume up on the radio. He looked over at her irritably, about to protest when he heard the story.

“… have yet to confirm whether GeneTech will be prosecuted for their alleged role in the creation of the controversial Digital Trip technology. Police raided GeneTech’s premises after an anonymous tip, seizing various computers and questioning numerous staff. Months ago, an official investigation was launched to discover the source of the Digital Trip technology after some users reported severe reactions resulting in hospitalization. It’s long been speculated that Digital Trips are actually digital drugs, but the Police have no jurisdiction to apprehend or convict dealers or users.”

When the broadcaster deviated into another story, Hayley turned the radio down.

“If GeneTech are prosecuted, maybe the cops might have the jurisdiction to apprehend dealers. This might be a good thing, if Gnaural is released they can confiscate phones. Find evidence of the new drug if we can’t stop it from hitting the streets,” Hayley surmised.

Aiden shook his head. “I’m not sure if a new law would make any difference. The app itself isn’t stable. It’s like a virus. It’s installed on the user’s phone and once it’s used, the app starts to degrade until it self-deletes. There’s no evidence left. It’s why it’s perfect for trafficking drugs. Get caught by the Police and unlike cocaine, where it’s pretty obvious you’ve got the drug in your possession, Gnaural can be deleted by the user or the dealer with a flick of a button. No evidence, no prosecution.”

Sitting back in the chair, Hayley folded her arms. “Well fuck,” she muttered and fell silent.

Taking a sip of her coffee, Hayley stared out the window. Gazing at her profile, Aiden wondered, not for the first time, if he’d made the right decision by approaching her months ago. If he should have just let nature run its course and never intervened in her life. He suspected that his interference had only made the situation worse for her. It was why he insisted she stay close to him. Well, that was the reason he gave himself anyway. Whether he’d been protecting Hayley her or exposing her to more danger, Aiden wasn’t sure.

He’d tried to keep Hayley at arm’s length, convinced that the connection they’d shared had long since dissipated, time eroding any residual feelings. Being in such close confines certainly hadn’t helped. He’d tried to show Hayley what her life might have been like, the violence and volatility she’d have to endure if she’d become involved with him. Maybe it was a miscalculation. Keeping part of himself hidden from Hayley years ago had driven a wedge between them. Possibly his approach of letting her see more of himself, even if it was showing his more disagreeable traits, had worked against him.

What of Hayley in this whole mess? The normal life she’d wanted build had been ripped away from her because he’d wanted to sate his own curiosity. To just see her again. She’d come from a warzone and he’d pulled her into another while she was trying to cope with her own demons.

And if he’d known about her PTSD? He honestly couldn’t decide whether that knowledge would have influenced his decision to approach her. Maybe he would have decided Hayley had suffered enough. Just walked away and spared her the future pain any association with him would cause.

Because Hayley deserved more than the instability a life with him would bring. She’d been slowly pulled into his violent existence, asked to do so much more than she’d agreed to. He had no right to ask more of her, especially since she was putting her life and future in jeopardy because of his war
against Blume.

But Hayley had proven she was a survivor, that she was capable of more than just treading water in the turbulent current of his life. They made a good team. Well-trained, fast, ruthless when needed, he could depend on her in a tight situation, knew she’d have his back. There were times in the last few months when her presence had tipped the scales in an otherwise disastrous situation. And he could trust her, something he couldn’t say with many people.

He should be pushing her away, as he’d done years ago. Despite her desire to stay with him, there was no way he could protect her. Not that she really needed protecting, but he’d long ago learnt that no one was safe if they knew him. When Hayley had asked him whether he wanted her stay, he’d opened his mouth to say no. But the idea of not seeing Hayley had caused a surprising clench in his chest. He wanted to hold on as tight as he could, some base instinct not to let go despite knowing the inherent dangers which came from Hayley associating with him.

“Aiden?”

He blinked. “What?”

Eyebrow cocked, Hayley pointed to the dashboard. “Your phone.”

It was vibrating. He reached out grabbed it, and swiped across the screen.

“*Took your sweet time answering.*”

He ignored the jab, knowing T-Bone didn’t *approve* of what he was about to do. “Found him?”

T-Bone grunted. “*Just. I’ve sent the co-ordinates to your phone.*”

“Thanks, T-Bone.”

Aiden was about to disconnect when T-Bone spoke again. “*Be careful,*” T-Bone warned. “*Both of you. This whole situation makes me uneasy.*”

Reaching over, he turned the key in the ignition. The engine purred, shivering pleasantly through the frame of the vehicle. Aiden knew about T-Bone’s reservations. He did have more valid points than Aiden liked to acknowledge. It felt like DedSec were sitting quietly in the background, influencing from afar, their true motivations concealed. But he knew what he was doing, wasn’t stupid enough to walk into an ambush.

“I know. We’ll be fine,” Aiden replied dismissively and cut the connection.

He didn’t need T-Bone’s doubts influencing him, clouding his judgement. Despite what T-Bone thought, Aiden did feel like he was a chess piece being moved around. By DedSec possibly, although he didn’t know why. Regardless, this whole charade needed to play out.

Tapping on the phone, Aiden loaded the co-ordinates onto the GPS. Glancing in the side mirror, he eased the car into traffic. He followed the arrow on the app, driving off the main street to wind into Pawnee’s tangled woodland.

The SUV’s engine gave a throaty roar as he accelerated up a steep hill. Houses flashed by, nestled in quiet seclusion, their bleached wooden slats and chipped paint a testament to their age. Aiden raised his hand to shield his face as the car topped a hill, the setting sun’s rays stabbing sharply across his vision.
Turning onto a dirt road, Aiden felt the crunch of gravel and was glad he had the foresight to ‘borrow’ an off-road vehicle. The GPS took them further into Pawnee’s less populated forestry areas. When they’d almost reached the destination, Aiden pulled over. He left the car idling, the engine humming quietly as he eyed the area.

Malcolm had chosen to hide out inside Pawnee’s infamous unfinished train station. During the mid-1950’s, three Cops were killed after a shoot-out with the Chicago South Club. For some unfathomable reason, it inspired copycat murders in and around the unfinished station. So work on the rail was abandoned and left to the elements.

Old train carriages, flaked and rusted, stood like oversized metal gravestones. Pulling out his phone, he tried to access nearby cameras. Aiden felt his lip curl in annoyance when he could only connect to two in the area. He was surprised there were cameras installed there at all. The lack of technological access was one of the many reasons he hated Pawnee.

Without live feed, Aiden felt unusually exposed. He was so used to relying on his phone, to having access to anywhere; it was an anomalous feeling knowing he was going in blind. If he had time to think about it, maybe he might even concede that he relied on the tech a little too much.

Tucking the phone back in his pocket, Aiden cut the engine and got out of the car.

“From a strategic point of view, this guy chose a great spot to hide out,” Hayley said, wry amusement and frustration mixed into her tone as she came to stand beside him.

Sunlight caught the chestnut tones of Hayley’s hair, bringing warmth and light from within the darker strands. Unholstering her gun, she pulled back the chamber, checked that it was loaded before holstering it on the strap on her hip.

“Is Ray sure Malcolm is in here? I know he can’t check into the Novatel, but why here? As a side note, this looks like a lovely place for an ambush,” Hayley remarked dryly, shooting him a quick glance before looking away.

Aiden felt his lip curl into a sneer. “It’s like having two nagging wives. As if T-Bone’s constant negative influence isn’t enough, now I have to hear it from you.”

Tilting her head to the side, exasperation settled across Hayley’s expression as she gave a tiny shake of her head.

“I’m certainly not your wife,” she adroitly reminded him. “Since you’re so confident, shall we split up then? Cover the area quicker?"

Hesitating, Aiden looked at the edges of the rail yard. He did agree with Hayley’s assessment of the situation. This might be a potential ambush. Without cameras inside the perimeter, he had no way of knowing what awaited them.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “This guy could be inside an old rail car, but I doubt it. There’s a building towards the far end of the property, an old station. That’s where he’s likely holed up. Circle around, check the perimeter and meet me near the building.”

Hayley gave a stiff nod. “See you on the other side,” she replied, walked around a carriage and was gone.

Aiden cautiously made his way around the outer edges of the property. The wind tugged at his jacket, beating against the carriages to sound like a haunted drum.
Gravel crunched underfoot as he walked further into the rail yard. It was a veritable maze of old, rusted carriages. A thousand places for someone to hide. Reaching up, Aiden grabbed the handle of a carriage and pulled experimentally. It didn’t budge. A few yards down, he tried another, but it had either been welded or rusted shut from age. Either way it confirmed the unlikelihood of Malcom hiding in one of them.

As daylight dwindled, shadows deepened around the containers as Aiden made his route around the area. Walking towards their rendezvous point near the building, he heard Hayley shout. He was too far away to make out the words, but the wind carried the noise towards him, the chilly gust slapping him in the face with the urgency in her voice.

Drawing his gun, a sharp, icy focus seized his mind as he ran towards the building. Keeping low, he stayed close to the carriages as he peeked into the open area in front of the building. His eyes darted over his surrounding, expecting resistance but finding nothing but a derelict building.

Out the corner of his eye, he caught movement and turned just in time to watch Hayley disappear behind a train. Who the hell was she running away from? Aiden cursed as he trailed his gaze quickly over the open area. Finding nothing, he pivoted on his heel, kept a container on his side at all times so he could concentrate on his exposed side, and ran towards where Hayley had disappeared.

“Shit.”

Confronted with a wall of metal, carriages spanned out in different directions, placed almost strategically like life-sized children’s toys. She could have gone ten possible ways. But faintly, he heard the distinctive crunch of gravel. Aiden lightly touched the trigger on his gun and followed the sound cautiously, hearing Hayley shout again. He still couldn’t make out words, but there was no fear in her voice, just a brisk sense of urgency.

Then realization snapped across his mind like a whip. Hayley wasn’t running away from someone, she was chasing someone.

Darting around carriages, he tried to keep pace with Hayley, more concerned with expediency than caution, since he had a fair idea who she was running after. Sound travelled like an echo across the metal, hollowed out and difficult to decipher. Slowing to a jog, Aiden stopped. Heard the murmur of voices. He couldn’t make one of them out, but the other was definitely Hayley.

Walking slowly, trying to minimize the crunch of gravel, he inched around a carriage as the sound of Hayley’s voice got louder.

“…not here to hurt you.”

Shuffling forward, Aiden peeked around the corner. He must have somehow got ahead of Hayley because he now stood a few yards down and to the left of her position.

Hayley stood in the open, hands up palm outwards. In front of her, a guy was pointing a Beretta pistol at her chest. She must have noticed movement because Hayley flicked her eyes up to his position, gave the barest shake of her head, before settling her gaze back on the man in front of her.

Despite staring at the back of his head, Aiden suspected he knew who the guy was, but he needed to get closer. Backing away slowly, Aiden walked with exaggerated care behind a line of carriages, careful to keep the sound of his footsteps on the gravel to a minimum. On the other side of the carriage, he heard Hayley continue to talk in a calm manner.

Squeezing between an opening, Aiden ducked under a large spoke and edged towards the side of the
nearest carriage. Now, he could make out the guy’s profile.

“Fucking hell,” he muttered.

Malcolm Deodato was the guy pointing a gun at Hayley.

“Did Blume send you?” Malcolm screeched.

The gun wavered disconcertingly towards Hayley’s chest, Malcolm’s handing visibly shaking. He’d whip his head from side to side every few seconds. Malcolm’s whole being was vibrating with fear, his face slowly cementing into reflexive terror, ready to crack at the slightest provocation. The skin around his eyes was red, likely from sleep deprivation, and his expression betrayed a strange merging of antagonism and panic.

When Malcolm turned his head away, Hayley took a quick step towards him. Aiden snapped his gun up, waiting for Malcolm to notice. It didn’t matter if Malcolm had information, he would not let him shoot Hayley.

“Who else is with you?” Malcolm shouted, spit flying from his mouth.

“I told you,” Hayley said calmly, the barest inflection of exasperation in her words. “I’m not with Blume. I’m here to help you.”

“You’re lying,” Malcolm screamed, shaking the gun at Hayley.

The distress in his voice spread out like a ripple to batter against the carriages as he took a few steps closer to Hayley. Fear was rapidly degrading whatever was left of Malcolm’s mental state. Aiden gripped his gun, cursed inwardly at the situation. He couldn’t just shoot Malcolm. His finger was wrapped around the trigger and Malcolm would, in all likelihood, accidently shoot Hayley if Aiden shot him.

Maybe he could approach Malcolm from behind and subdue him. Leaning into one of the carriages to duck under an opening, the metal groaned loudly. Aiden bared his teeth in agitation as Malcolm swung towards the sound.

Making the mistake of turning away from Hayley, Aiden watched her react, striking as quick as a cobra. He knew how deceptively fast she was, despite her smaller frame, lulling others into thinking her harmless when she was far from it.

She lunged at Malcolm, grabbed the top of the gun, shifted the barrel away from her torso and exerted pressure in a downward motion on his wrist. Malcolm’s finger, caught in the trigger guard, reflexively curled around the trigger. The gun discharged harmlessly away from Hayley and into the ground.

Hayley easily disengaging the gun from Malcolm, who’s expression of slack mouthed bewilderment was actually amusing. Taking a quick step into Malcom’s space, Hayley snapped his hand up, secured his wrist in the crook of her elbow, swung her leg out and let him fall to the ground. She followed the movement, wresting Malcolm’s arm behind him and leaning her knee on his back as he lay face down on the ground.

Malcolm bucked wildly until Hayley pressed the gun into the back of his neck. She leaned over and spoke to him, something Aiden couldn’t hear but he stilled instantly.

Hayley jerked her head up as he approached, barely suppressed agitation flickering in her eyes. Taking a deep breath, she eased the pressure on Malcom’s arm but didn’t let go. A strained cry came
from Malcolm, the sound speckled with desolation.

“I’m going to let you up. We’re not here to hurt you, but don’t try anything,” Hayley warned, her words coming out with the same gritty consistency as the gravel around them.

As she eased off his body, Malcolm groaned, got up on his knees and coughed. He scrambled to his feet inelegantly, turned around and stilled abruptly when he noticed Aiden. He gave a jerky kind of movement, like a bird trying to take flight, before he turned and attempted to run. Aiden moved to stop him, but Hayley was closer. She gave a grunt of frustration, grabbed Malcolm’s arms, swept her legs under him and let him fall. Again.

A surprised snort was torn from Malcolm as he hit the floor. He stayed there, shoulders hitching, despair leaking out of his form to coat his surroundings.

Sympathy and exasperation flashed like a flickering lightbulb across Hayley’s expression as she stared at the back of Malcolm’s head. Sighing, she leaning down, grabbed Malcolm by his arm and hauled him up. Malcolm got to his feet clumsily, as pliable as plasticine now he thought he’d been captured. He stared almost blankly at Hayley.

“You’re Malcolm Deodato?” she prodded gently.

Swallowing, Malcolm stared wide-eyed at Hayley without answering. Aiden studied the Blume employee in the wan light. He was lanky, all sinew and no real muscle. He wrapped his arms around his stomach and hunched in on himself. Clearly unable to defend himself, he was no threat, with or without a weapon. Tension fizzled like a dropped soda bottle around him as he stared silently at Hayley.

“We’re not Blume. I told you, we’re here to help. Your name is Malcolm right?” Hayley asked, making an effort supress her impatience, but it still skated across her tone.

It was Malcolm. Dave had provided his picture. It was just that guy in front of them was a more frazzled, dirtier and far more distressed version of the one they’d seen in the photo.

When Aiden stepped forward, Malcolm twitched uneasily. Aiden didn’t move or speak, just waited for the reasoning part of Malcolm’s brain to overcome the fear rolling inside him like a tumble-drier.

Darting quick glances around him, awareness slowly animated Malcolm’s expression. He watched recognition stir sluggishly behind Malcolm’s eyes as his gaze came to rest on Aiden. A jerky frown pulled down over his eyes as he stared at Aiden like he was a complex math problem.

“You’re the Vigilante,” he said breathlessly.

Aiden tilted his head in agreement.

“You’re Aiden Pearce,” Malcom said, the words uttered with something suspiciously akin to awe.

Hayley tilted her head towards him and rolled her eyes. “Another fan.”

Aiden felt his lips twitch but didn’t allow his amusement to show. Clearly having a gun pointed at her had the same antagonistic affect it did on him.

Malcom turned his head sharply to stare at Hayley with narrowed eyed intensity. The fear spurting behind Malcolm’s blue eyes like a geyser was slowly tapering off to be replaced with a kind of strained calm.
“Who are you? You’re not Blume,” Malcolm said, shoulders dropping in obvious relief.

Shaking his head, Aiden replied, “What gave it away?”

Whipping his head around to stare at Aiden, Malcolm blinked a few times, but absorbed the sarcasm with the barest flicker of annoyance.

“What … I mean why are you here?”

“Your DedSec pal, Dave, sent me.” Aiden took a step towards Malcolm. “He thinks you have something on Blume’s CIO you’re not supposed to. And it’d be something you’re willing to share with an interested party who can help you hide from Blume,” Aiden said, an edge in his voice under the apparent nonchalance.

Malcolm blinked rapidly, eyes darting around like he was watching an invisible tennis match.

“You’re here to help me?” Malcolm asked tentatively.

Aiden shrugged, “If you have information I deem worthwhile.”

Rubbing his hands together, Malcolm lowered his head, his unfocused gaze turning inward. There was only one choice available to him; why he had to even consider it was beyond Aiden. He was about to interrupt Malcolm’s musing when he lifted his head.

“Yeah, I do. It’s inside the old station.”

Aiden ground his teeth together. It just wasn’t worth his time explaining the ins and outs of Blackmail 101, including the folly of leaving said blackmail behind when you bailed on the location.

“But…” Malcolm started, “You have to make sure I’m safe before I give you the data.”

“Have to?” Aiden repeated softly, allowing displeasure to leak into his tone.

But the urge to push the issue dissipated before it could reach any kind of boiling point. It didn’t seem worthwhile pointing out that he could take the data from Malcolm now he knew where it was. Just leave him there and bid him good luck with Blume. Depending on the data, Malcolm could still be useful.

Malcolm grimaced at his tone, shooting glances between him and Hayley, possibly calculating the odds of escaping. Far too low. Aiden relented.

“I’ve got a safehouse you can stay at.”

Taking in a sharp breath, relief flashed across Malcolm’s face before he turned to Hayley.

“Who are you?” Malcom asked Hayley suspiciously.

“No one you need to worry about,” Aiden interjected firmly.

An uneasy grimace rippled across Malcolm’s face.

“I’m not comfortable with this. I never agreed to any of this,” Malcolm whined.

“Then you shouldn’t have stolen the data. You agreed to be DedSec’s mole inside Blume. What did you think would happen?” Aiden snapped.
Hearing Aiden state the facts in such cold, blunt terms ripped the resistance out of Malcolm, like pulling the roots of a weed out of soil.

“I just wanted to make up for what I did. Do the right thing,” Malcolm whispered.

“And we’re trying to help with that. But keep pushing and you won’t like what happens when we push back,” Hayley pointed out.

Staring at Hayley, Malcolm looked set to comment, but at her hard glare, he was astute enough to allow his misgivings to remain unspoken. Malcolm gestured towards the Beretta.

“Can I have my gun back?” he asked.

Hayley gave a derisive snort. “No,” she said firmly, tucking the pistol into the back of her pants.

Hunching his shoulders, Malcolm’s jaw clenched but he let the argument fizzle out. Pulling out his phone, Aiden did a quick camera check of the perimeter, before tucking it away. Neither he nor Hayley holstered their guns, both alert as they followed Malcolm towards the old train station.

Darkness clung to the station like cobwebs, hungrily devouring the sunlight to emphasize the gloom of the rotted exterior. Ivy gnarled its way through broken windows, tangling its leathery shape throughout the dwelling.

Stepping over the threshold, Malcolm turned left, the old floorboards shifting and creaking in the looming emptiness. Approaching what looked like an office, the hinges whined as he opened the door.

Aiden followed him inside, gaze skimming over the interior. Grime lay over every surface like dirty snow, while dust bunnies the size of bowling balls tumbled across the floorboards as they moved further inside the office. Hayley held her phone up, using it as a flashlight in the darkened room. The shaft of light cut a bright path in front of them, lingering on old coffee cups as they lay on a table thickly encrusted with mould.

A few empty cans of baked beans were strewn around the room but there was no evidence of where Malcolm had slept.

“How long have you been here?” Hayley asked, thoughts obviously in line with his as her gaze crawled around the room.

Malcolm slowed his step and turned towards Hayley, expression contemplative. “A day. I think. No, two,” Malcolm amended, face screwed up as he made the mental calculations.

Turning away, Malcolm moved towards the far side of the office. Hayley looked over at him with a raised eyebrow and a pointed look around the room. Either Malcolm slept on the cold floor, or not at all.

Leaning over, Malcom pulled up a loose floorboard. Aiden stifled the urge to roll his eyes. How original.

“So this data you acquired, where did you get it?” Aiden asked.

Reaching into the gap in the floorboards, Malcolm’s arm disappeared. He sent a quick look over his shoulder towards Aiden, before a satisfied grunt escaped and he pulled a tablet out. Malcolm sat back against the wall and pressed the side of the tablet to turn it on. The bright light of the screen flashed, running through the start-up routine. Hayley lowered her phone and turned the flashlight app off.
"I stole it from Julian Collin’s office."

Surprised silence greeted this statement. Hayley made a strangled, almost disbelieving sound in the back of her throat which filled the void left by Malcom’s unexpected declaration.

“And just how did you manage that?” Hayley asked, suspicion giving her tone a sharp edge.

Instinct was telling Aiden that there was something off about Malcom. He’d reacted with a convincing amount of panic when he thought Hayley might be Blume Private Security. That level of fear was difficult to feign. From the brief interaction he’d had with Malcom, Aiden had made his own assessment of his capabilities. He didn’t believe he had enough street smarts to be able to evade Blume. Maybe he’d got lucky, but there was something else in play that he couldn’t quite put his finger on.

Swiping across the screen, Malcom didn’t answer Hayley, just tapped in a six-digit passcode. Aiden leaned over, just able to see the touch screen’s keypad. From his angle, he could just make out the quick flick of Malcom’s fingers. He memorized the numbers. 7, 4, 5, 9, 2, 4. Maybe not all correct but he had a fair idea of the sequence if it needed to be replicated.

“But chance,” Malcom said, shrugging. “It wasn’t even planned. It was just the perfect opportunity…”

“Aiden,” Hayley cut in.

Swinging his head towards Hayley, Aiden glared at her. The silence condensed, tipping over into something taciturn as he let the heat of his anger rest on her, thoroughly annoyed that she’d interrupted.

“What?” he snapped impatiently.

Hayley gave him one of her truly irritated looks, the flecks of gold in her green eyes sparking like a live wire.

“Fine,” she hissed, turning her phone around to show him the screen. “I guess you won’t want to know about the guys getting out of their cars wielding semi-automatics.”

/I/I/

Hayley felt the force of Aiden’s irritation, like a sharp whip striking her face. She wagged the phone at him for emphasis as hostility flickered in those green depths. Then that famously blank expression he’d cultivated into an art form, draped across his face like a heavy curtain when he focused on the camera feed.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god,” Malcom intoned, already scrambling to his feet.

Aiden whipped his head towards Malcom, stalked towards him and grabbed him by his throat.

“Is this a set-up? Aiden asked, the ice in his tone shearing through the air like frozen stalactites.

Malcom spurted ineffectively as Aiden gripped his neck tighter. Malcom was shaking his head, his face almost puce as panic spread across his expression. Loosening his grip, Aiden let Malcom go by shoving him roughly against the wall.

“You have to get me out. God, it’s Blume, they want to kill me,” he husked, eyes brimming with unshed tears.
Malcolm was either giving the performance of a lifetime and deserved an Oscar, or he was truly terrified for his life.

Ignoring Malcolm’s sputtering, Aiden palmed his phone and stared at the screen. Hayley wasn’t even sure why she’d checked the camera feed. Possibly her overly suspicious nature. She hated not having eyes on her surroundings. Shock had flooded her system the moment she saw the men. Her first thought was Blume. But the men were too unpolished, didn’t move like a private security force but were still dangerous nonetheless.

Hayley unholstered her gun and pulled back the slide to check a round was in the chamber. Walking over to Aiden, she bent her head towards his phone as he flicked between the two camera feeds. She counted roughly a dozen men peeling off in groups to surround the area.

Profiler was quickly scanning the men in range of the camera. All of them had a criminal past, but what Hayley found disturbing was the Chicago South Club connections the Profiler made.

“Shit. Why would the Club be here?”

Aiden flicked his gaze over to her but didn’t answer. It was a rhetorical question anyway. There was something inscrutable in his expression, a kind of lingering incense which didn’t lift as he turned back to stare at the phone. Beneath the surface, smouldering like ashes was his anger, ready to blaze to life.

Hayley ignored Malcolm’s hiccupping breaths and considered their options. On the opposite side of the railyard, the men would need to slowly make their way around the huge area. They had some time. Time to create an exit strategy at least.

Behind the station were miles of open paddock. Almost dark, they could try to slip past the Club’s hit squad and try their luck out in the open. But Hayley wasn’t at all comfortable with that option. She didn’t relish being shot in the back.

“What are we going to do with him?” Hayley asked, gesturing towards Malcolm.

Aiden shrugged, a careless dismissal. “Leave him.”

Hayley blew out an agitated breath. “Aiden,” she started, ignoring the violence lurking in the back of his gaze. “Think about this. We can’t. I don’t think it’s a set up. If it were, that would be Blume private security out there. Malcolm stole Blume data yet Club soldiers come after him. Why? The Club, however they knew where he was, were sent after Malcolm for a reason. He obviously knows something important. Something which might help us. And you don’t think he’s going to squeal on us to save his own ass? Do you want Collins knowing you’ve figured out what he’s doing?”

Irritation swam in Aiden’s eyes as her points hit home. He didn’t say anything, but Hayley saw the shift in his gaze as he made the mental calculations for a different exit strategy.

With Malcolm. He was a bit of a weasel but she couldn’t in good conscience, just leave him there.

Turning, Hayley eyed Malcolm’s lanky frame. Both her and Aiden were fit and could run the distance through the paddock, but with Malcolm tagging along, he’d likely slow them down or collapse after a few yards. Then they’d be stuck in the open and would get a bullet for their trouble.

The best option was to try to slip past the men. The area was big enough, with ample cover. Stealth combat was her preferred method of conflict anyway. Holstering her gun, Hayley slipped her knife out of its sheath. The handle felt solid in her hand, comfortable, merciless.

Aiden pocketed his phone, tracing his gaze over her knife. Obviously coming to the same conclusion
as Hayley, Aiden reached inside his jacket, retrieved a sound suppressor and twisted it onto the muzzle.

The silencer was another one of Aiden’s toys which Hayley was impressed with. Purchased on the black market, a military grade extension, the SF Ryder 9Ti suppressor attached to a 9mm. It reduced a weapon’s sound and muzzle-flash signature, with the added bonus of reducing a weapon’s recoil, allowing for faster follow-up shots. Since Aiden only had one, she’d have to rely on her knife for silent takedowns.

“I’ve installed trackers on as many phones as I can. Since there aren’t cameras available I’ll use the trackers to follow their movements.”

Turning, Aiden took two quick steps until he stood in front of Malcolm. While Malcolm was roughly the same height as Aiden, the force of Aiden’s personality made it seem like he loomed over Malcolm, who shrunk back under Aiden’s glower.

“You keep quiet and follow us. Make a sound or do anything to jeopardize our escape and I’ll shoot you. Save the Club a bullet. Give me the tablet,” Aiden demanded.

Malcolm hesitated, eyes dropping to the tablet in his grip. Aiden made a growling sound and ripped it from Malcolm’s hand. He turned and handed it to Hayley, who in turn tucked the device into a pocket on her tactical vest.

“Can ... can I have my gun back,” Malcolm pleaded.

Hayley gave a tight unamused laugh. “No. If I’m going to be shot, it won’t be in the back from your wayward aim.”

Gripping her knife, Hayley turned her back on Malcolm and followed Aiden out of the old station. The fiery red orb of the sun had almost sunk beneath the horizon. Threads of light lingered, slowly melting away as the approaching night cast sallow shadows across the railyard.

Keeping low, Hayley shot a quick look over her shoulder to make sure Malcom was following. The Blume employee was a liability. He’d just as likely turn tail and run as soon as he heard a bullet. If that happened, as much as Hayley hated to admit it, they needed to protect themselves first. She had the tablet with the data. Malcolm came a distant second. Hayley grimaced as she realized how cold and callous she sounded, but this was a deadly parley with dangerous adversaries. She couldn’t afford to have a conscience right now.

Moving towards the closest carriage, Aiden shot a quick look at her before he crouched down, studying his phone. By silent communication, Hayley came to stand in front of Aiden, eyes continually roaming over the area as she acted as his backup while he concentrated on manoeuvring around the area without being spotted.

It was a familiar routine for Hayley, who’d often have to operate in teams of two or more to take down targets in high-density areas. She worked from the parlance of the Four F’s; find, fix, flank, finish. Simple, effective.

By splitting off to cover a larger area, the Club soldiers had made an error of judgement. They’d actually made it easier for Hayley and Aiden to subdue them quietly, both to thin their number and hopefully, slip away unnoticed.

Aiden stood up, held two fingers up and pointed north-east of their position. Gripping Malcolm by the arm, Hayley pushed him back towards the far end of the carriage and physically shoved him
down so he crouched behind cover. Malcolm complied, blinking owlishly at her, each flutter of his lids flashing fear out of his eyes like a camera.

“Stay here, keep quiet and don’t move,” Hayley hissed.

Malcolm nodded numbly. Hayley gripped her knife and walked towards Aiden. Pocketing his phone, Aiden withdrew his gun. Walking as silently as possible on gravel, they made their way towards the area Aiden pointed out. Without a word, they peeked away from each other, taking either end of the carriage in a pincer type manoeuvre.

Hayley’s heart beat a steady rhythm in her chest, shooting adrenaline through her faster than a bullet. Her vision sharpened, not unlike turning the knob on an old television set to find the right frequency. Every muscle in her body was primed for action. Emotions were tucked away into a separate corner of her mind. Nothing else fit into her conscious thought but performing the intuitive reactions drilled into her through countless hours of training and subsequent years of practice.

Moving up to the end of the container, Hayley took a quick peek around the corner. She saw two Club soldiers walking slowly down an aisle, back to her but guns up and alert. Aiden appeared directly opposite her, on the other side of the lane. Moving as silently as possible, Hayley brought her knife up and joined Aiden as they flanked the men.

Almost on top of their positon, one of the men must have sensed something because he turned around. Hayley felt rather than saw Aiden lift his gun, heard the suppressed sound of a single gunshot. Normally, silenced pistols still made a sizeable noise, but the military grade suppressor meant it sounded like a muffled retort, barely heard above the wind.

Hayley distantly watched the guy jerk forward and collapse onto the floor. The man next to him hesitated, turning to stare in shock. This action alone confirmed these guys weren’t trained soldiers, who reacted instinctively rather than stare numbly at their fallen comrade.

It gave Hayley the few precious seconds she needed to subdue the other guy. She kicked out, her foot connecting with the back of his knee. He grunted and stumbled forward. Before he could right himself, Hayley brought her knife up and drove her blade into the man’s neck for a perfect kill shot to the spinal cord.

A wet gurgling sound escaped as the Club soldier toppled over, dead before he hit the ground.

Ignoring the men’s bodies, Hayley’s eyes moved around the perimeter. Finding no one else, she moved back to where she’d left Malcolm. She compartmentalized her feelings about these killings. While not relishing the loss of life, Hayley was cynical enough to understand it was them or her.

Eyes wide, Malcolm had a ‘deer stuck in headlights’ look about him. She briefly considered stashing him somewhere and coming back for him after they’d dealt with the Club men. But their aim was to skirt around the area and avoid confrontation. Maybe taking Malcolm with them wasn’t her brightest suggestion.

With Malcolm following behind her, Hayley walked back to Aiden who’d hunkered down behind a carriage. Crouching down beside him, she peered at his phone. On screen, red dots moved around the area, but she could only see about five of them. The rest of them likely had firewalls on their phone Aiden didn’t have time to bypass.

“If we keep to the perimeter, skirt the fence, we just might be able to avoid another confrontation,” Hayley whispered.
Aiden nodded his agreement as his eyes strayed towards Malcolm. Irritation briefly flickered over his expression but he didn’t say anything.

By silent agreement, Hayley took the lead, allowing Aiden to both track their pursuers and keep an eye on Malcolm. A cold wind whipped around the containers, both a blessing and a curse. It kept the sound of Hayley’s footsteps from travelling but it also limited her ability to discern any other noise.

Aiden tapped her shoulder and gave her the signal to halt. When Hayley heard the murmur of voices, she stiffened. On the other side of the carriage was the fenceline. The Club men were patrolling the perimeter. Three of them. Too many to take out quietly, risking a confrontation which might draw others to their position.

Crouching down behind the carriage, Hayley flicked her gaze between Aiden’s screen and her surroundings, waiting for the men to pass. If they could slip past these men patrolling the outer edge of the perimeter, they might just be able to reach their vehicle without any further confrontation.

Sneaking a look around a carriage, Hayley watched two men take a right turn and disappear. Hayley nodded at Aiden and continued towards the fenceline. All the while shooting cautionary glances back where the men had disappeared, concerned they’d reappear while they were out in the open crossing between cover.

Hayley was too busy looking behind her, concerned more about Aiden’s welfare when she should have been looking after her own. Rounding a carriage, Hayley came face-to-face with a Club soldier. He was turned slightly away from her. Hayley reached instinctively, launching herself at the man before he had a chance to react.

With three quick steps, she was on top of him. But he must have noticed movement because he spun around, bringing his gun up towards her head. Reaching forward, Hayley deflected the direction of the gun. She grabbed the barrel and rotated the gun sideways away from her body while simultaneously stepping to the opposite side. Applying pressure in a downward motion, she slammed the hilt of her knife on his wrist.

The gun clattered to the ground in the exact moment she heard a hollow gunshot behind her. In a moment of distraction, she turned towards the sound.

Whipping back around to face her opponent, Hayley’s brain registered the silver glint of a knife, a second before her body reacted instinctively. As the guy swung his arm towards her, Hayley resisted the impulse to backpedal or duck. It would be what he expected, and she didn’t have time to win a prolonged wrestling match.

Instead, Hayley took a quick sliding step forward, her left hand coming up to block the knife arm. Her right hand shot forward and plunged her knife into his stomach.

The man’s eyes went wide with shock and his momentum faltered. Hayley withdrew her knife, clamped down her other hand on the guy’s wrist, then spun on her heel, around his back, using the momentum to pull him around and off balance.

Sliding her hand down, Hayley wrapped her fingers tightly around his wrist, then pulled it toward her, jerking the wrist joint. Hayley could feel the bones and ligaments beneath the skin twisting, stretching to capacity. The guy gasped in pain and let the knife clattered to the floor.

Hayley kicked his feet out from under him. He went down with a strained grunt, but Hayley didn’t allow him to move. Just grabbed the hair on the back of his head and slammed his forehead into the
ground twice for good measure. He didn’t move after that.

Panting heavily, Hayley sheathed her knife and quickly withdrew her side arm. She ground her teeth together and let out a string of curses that would’ve had nuns using their habits as ear muffs. Their silent escape plan had a puncture the size of a bullet hole in it. No plan ever survived first enemy contact. She’d learnt that the first time she’d stepped into a real combat situation.

The sound of a scuffle had Hayley edging towards the end of the carriage. Gun drawn, she peeked around the corner in time to see Aiden down his opponent. Leaning over, Aiden grabbed the guy’s neck and twisted. A sharp crack bounced across the carriages.

The air grew still, the night seemed to wrap more tightly around her, almost stifling. One other guy sprawled across to Aiden’s left, too still to be anything other than dead.

Bringing his gun up as Hayley stepped around the carriage, Aiden’s gaze snapped to her face, but he immediately lowered his weapon. Hayley’s eyes strayed to Malcom, slouched against the carriage. There was something odd about the way he was slumped.

Dread lodged in her throat as she walked towards him. There was a large bloodstain in the center of his chest. A vacant look of pain and confusion was etched across Malcom’s slackening face as the light in his eyes slowly dimmed.

Aiden grabbed her arm and spun her around. “Forget him,” he snapped, pulling her away.

With a lingering look over her shoulder, Hayley followed Aiden. She swallowed her sadness and turned away. She may not have liked Malcolm, but he didn’t deserve this death. Shaking off those thoughts, Hayley gripped her weapon and made a conscious effort to concentrate on their surroundings.

Hayley followed the familiar outline of Aiden’s back as he led them away from the area. She had no idea if there were other Club soldiers around, but that gunshot would have called attention to their position. They needed to get to their vehicle.

Quickly but cautiously, they crossed the railyard using a bounding overwatch tactic, more commonly known as leapfrogging. By taking a sheltered position, Hayley would cover Aiden while he crossed an area without cover. Once he was in a new covered position, Aiden would cover her. It was so one of them could react instantaneously to enemy fire if the other was out in the open. Silence was no longer their main priority; a swift retreat was.

By chance or luck, they encountered no resistance until they’d almost reached their vehicle. Hidden behind a carriage as she assessed their options, Hayley frowned. The Club soldiers had parked behind their car, blocking their exit.

“We’re going to have to appropriate one of their vehicles,” Hayley surmised.

Aiden grunted, eyeing the area. No cover between them and the cars meant they’d have to try and approach out in the open.

“When I say go, you take out the one to the right. I’ll take the one on the left,” Aiden informed her.

Hayley looked across at Aiden, head bent over his phone. “You’re creating a diversion.”

Amusement curled Aiden’s mouth, he didn't even bother to hide the mocking inflection in his low chuckle. “You could say that.”
Looking at the men near the vehicles, Hayley half expected something dramatic to transpire. Like the car rumbling to life and ploughing into the two men. Of course, that didn’t happen but the distraction, when it occurred, was no less effective.

One of the men shifted uncomfortably, shooting looks down towards his pants. He continued to squirm like a toddler needing a toilet.

“Now,” Aiden declared, already peeling away from cover.

The man she was assigned to take down lowered his head and reached down into his pocket. Hayley kept low, moving around and hopefully out of sight of the Club soldier.

She heard his mumbled curse as she got closer.

“The fuck’s wrong with my phone. It’s fucking hot.”

He hissed and dropped his phone. Hayley had seen this before. Aiden had hacked the phone and sent an override command to the battery, essentially overheating it. The distraction allowed her to approach to within a few feet before he noticed her.

Preoccupied, the guy had allowed his weapon to hang loosely in one hand. Hayley gave him no chance to raise it. She simply levelled her handgun at his head and pulled the trigger. Almost simultaneously Hayley heard a matching gunshot echo to her left as Aiden dispatched the other man.

The large SUV blocking their vehicle let out two quiet beeps, startling Hayley. Aiden appeared at her side opening the door to the driver’s side. As Aiden got in the car, Hayley holstered her weapon, withdrew her knife and approached the other two vehicles, plunging the hilt into a tyre.

The rumble of the vehicle seemed to match the impatience she could feel from Aiden’s stare. Climbing into the passenger seat, Hayley had just shut the door when she saw men running towards them.

“Shit,” Aiden muttered, jerking the gear into reverse.

Tyres screeched as Aiden retreated. Hayley heard the tinkle of bullets peppering the car’s exterior. Without warning, glass exploded as a bullet penetrated the front window. Instinctively, Hayley raised her arm, protecting her face. She felt the slight sting as glass struck her arm. The vehicle was jerked roughly to the side as Aiden accelerated backwards, performing a tight U-turn.

The SUV shuddered as Aiden accelerated, their charcoal surroundings blurring together as he pushed the vehicle through the off-road conditions. The wind whistled through the broken windshield, the cold settling across her face like a layer of ice.

Only at the outer edge of the town did Aiden slow down. The adrenaline humming through Hayley’s veins was slowly dissipating, leaving her body feeling achy and sore.

“Are you okay?” Aiden asked, shooting quick looks over at her.

Hayley nodded, but Aiden interrupted before she could say anything. “You’re bleeding.”

At the exact moment Aiden voiced those words, a sharp pain seared through her arm. The ebbing adrenaline had, until that moment, been masking the discomfort. Bringing her arm up, Hayley pulled back her sleeve gently to expose a large cut.

“Shit,” she hissed through her teeth as the wound oozed blood.
Hayley had been lucky. If she hadn’t raised her arm to protect herself, she’d likely have a face full of glass.

“It’ll need stitches,” Aiden commented, tension tightening his voice.

Aiden pulled up to a stop sign, letting the car glide to a halt. When Aiden locked eyes with her, Hayley felt that odd magnetic draw. Opposing and pulling her in at the same time. Something flickered in those green depths as he glanced at her arm, before he shifted to look out the window.

Hayley opened her mouth to speak, but the dryness etched into her throat made the words stick like glue and come out more like a dry rasp.

“What are you going to tell Dave?”

Why she asked that question when hundreds of others tumbled through her mind, Hayley wasn’t sure. Maybe it seemed like the easiest question to answer.

The tightening of Aiden’s hand on the steering wheel was the only response she received. Away from immediate danger, guilt was gnawing at the back of her mind. Regardless of whether she could have prevented it, and despite the rational part of Hayley’s mind telling her she wasn’t at fault, she still felt somehow responsible for Malcolm’s death.

It seemed no matter where she went, people died because of their interference. Maybe it was her curse, to watch others die as she stood by, unable to prevent it. Almost like seeing a glass fall but being helpless to do anything but watch it shatter. Maybe this was why Aiden worked so hard at keeping people at a distance. At showing that indifference to the world because it hurt too much to think of the ghosts left behind.

“I need to dump this car,” he remarked, ignoring her question.

“I told you not to go,” Ray criticized.

The older hacker’s diatribe had long since stopped being a concerned rant, and had tipped over into an unwelcome lecture. Listening to him the past few minutes, Hayley found her already disagreeable mood had curdled until it was downright sour. Lacking the energy to argue, she held her tongue, if only because she did agree with some of his points.

Hayley hissed as Aiden pulled out another piece of glass embedded beneath her skin. Aiden, uncharacteristically, had remained silent, absorbing Ray’s irascibility with a continually darkening expression. He reminded Hayley of an IED, waiting for the right amount of pressure before he exploded.

“Sorry,” Aiden murmured to her, placing the blood stained cotton wipes on the table.

Briefly, Aiden flicked his eyes over to Ray, narrowed in displeasure but he still didn’t comment.

“That’s the last piece,” Aiden said, striving for a normal tone, but the deep baritones of his voice rumbled ominously like thunder.

Tapping on the needle, the anaesthetic swirled like liquid butter inside the ampoule. The needle slid beneath her skin, the barest hint of a sting as the anaesthetic was injected.

“Was it worth it?” Ray needled. “Because from where I’m standing you risked your life, and
Hayley’s, for nothing. I told you we’d find another way to nail this Collins bastard. But no, you had
to do it your own stubborn way. Our only lead is dead. What do you have to show for your
adventure into the wilderness besides some dead bodies and more injuries?” Ray observed, looking
pointedly towards Hayley’s arm.

Aiden’s lip curled back, the sneer hovering over his mouth turning instantly into a vicious snarl. He
pushed the chair back so hard it hit the wall with a crack. With a few quick steps, Aiden stepped into
Ray’s personal space. Ray didn’t step back, but a cloak of agitated settled over him, obvious in his
deep frown and the intermitted flexing of his jaw.

“What other way T-Bone?” Aiden rasped. “We’ve been chasing our tails for weeks with no leads.
What is your problem anyway? Is it that time of the month?”

Hayley let out an unimpressed snort at that last question, but both men ignored her.

“You Aiden. You’re my problem. You’re not being smart about this. I’ve seen this before, you’re in
obsession mode. You’re like a wild animal, nothing else matters but the chase and the kill. You don’t
want to see the bigger picture. Doesn’t it strike you as odd that DedSec approached you of all people
for help? That we still don’t know how DedSec knew you were looking into Collins? That the Club
turned up while you were there to find Malcom when DedSec apparently couldn’t? And you go
charging off to Pawnee, without really considering everything. Tunnel vision Aiden, it’ll get you
killed one day.”

Ray’s grey eyes flared in anger, shimmering like liquid silver as he stabbed a finger at Aiden,
emphasizing each point. And valid points they were.

Hayley knew that Ray had misgivings about their trip to Pawnee. And had voiced those concerns.
Repeatedly. But Aiden wasn’t listening or responding. Maybe because Aiden didn’t have answers to
any of Ray’s questions.

“It is the bigger picture I’m thinking about. Do you want those Digital Drugs on the street?” Aiden
asked, deliberately provoking.

Ray looked like he was going to snap back a retort, but instead he just let out a noisy breath, an
obvious effort to calm himself.

“Of course I don’t want those drugs on the street,” Ray replied, voice pitched low in an effort to dial
back the argument into more of a discussion. “But too many things don’t add up here Aiden, and for
a perceptive guy, you’re missing a lot of hints.”

Artificial amusement curled Aiden’s mouth and he gave a low contemptuous chuckle.

“I’m aware we’re a few puzzle pieces short of a jigsaw. What do you suggest I do T-Bone? Walk
away because it might be dangerous?” Aiden sneered.

“And that doesn’t worry you?” Ray asked, a touch of reproach in his voice. “Take your ego out of
the equation, realize that you cannot control everything, and you might see what you’re risking. It’s
not just your ass on the line.”

The two men glared at each other, neither willing to back down. If they were canines, they’d be
circling each other with hackles raised.

“I know what I’m doing T-Bone. It’s called risk assessment for a reason. I’m going to see this thing
through. You want to walk away, that’s fine. But I’m not going to back down because shit’s become
a little too real,” Aiden replied dismissively, balancing on the edge of the thinly veiled insult.
Hayley sucked in a breath, waiting for Ray to react to Aiden all but calling him a coward.

“You dragged me into this Aiden. You came looking for me. You want my help but only on your terms. What you don’t like is the voice of reason. Or anyone questioning you. Because God forbid you’d make an error in judgement. All I’m asking is for you to think about this logically.”

Aiden stepped back, an air of wintry calm settling over him. The charged, tense energy pulsating around Aiden was at odds with his apathetic demeanor.

“Name one situation I haven’t been able to logically deal with?” Aiden asked, asperity creeping into his tone.

Throwing his hands up in the air, the older hacker let out an exasperated sigh. “Whatever Aiden. You’re always right, I forgot,” he sneered unpleasantly.

Antagonism burned in the back of Aiden’s gaze but he ignored Ray’s sarcasm. Placing his fingers on Malcom’s tablet, he slid it towards Ray.

“This is a lead,” Aiden remarked.

When they’d returned, Ray hadn’t allowed Aiden to finish telling him what happened before he exploded. As such, he was unaware of the tablet’s existence.

Crossing his arms, Ray flicked his gaze towards the tablet. “What is it?”

Aiden shrugged. “It was Deodato’s. Apparently this was the data he smuggled out of Blume.”

Despite the anger still chipping away at Ray’s expression, Hayley saw interest kindle in his eyes. Scooping the tablet off the table, Ray turned away without a word to set himself up at his rig. Hayley blew out a slow breath, realizing belatedly she’d watched the argument like a mute outsider, staring like a witness at a gruesome car crash.

Aiden watched Ray walk away with a guarded, impassive expression. Turning, he came back and sat across from her.

“Ready?” he asked, picking up the sutures.

Nodding, Hayley laid her arm on the table, watching without pain as the needle was inserted into her numbed skin. Six stiches. Not as bad as she thought. Aiden sat back, cleaned the instruments, and studiously ignored the tapping of the keyboard behind him.

“What’s nothing on here,” Ray announced. “Just a few apps but no data.”


“Unless there wasn’t any data and it was a set up,” Hayley remarked quietly.

Turning his head slightly, Aiden flicked his gaze towards her, visibly unimpressed. Agitation flashed
across his features but he didn’t comment on her observation.

Ray tapped on a few keys and sat back waiting for the diagnostic to complete. Folders opened up as all the tablet’s apps appeared. Ray scrolled through them individually. When he came to the calculator, he stopped and tapped on the screen, looking over at Aiden.

“Find anything odd about the file size?” Ray asked.

Leaning in closer, Aiden frowned. A few moments later, he snorted in appreciation. “It’s a Gatekeeper app.”

“What’s that?” Hayley asked.

“It’s a way to hide data or apps you don’t want others to see. Basically, the app T-Bone is looking at isn’t just a mundane calculator. If you enter the correct passcode into the keypad, it’ll open a hidden partition. It’s a tablet within a tablet. To an outside source, all the apps look normal. But the real contents are hidden within the Gatekeeper app. I’m gathering it’s how Malcolm has been sneaking data out of Blume,” Aiden relayed.

She blinked, absorbing this information. “How do we bypass the passcode?”

Ray shrugged. “I’ll try a brute force attack.”

A few minutes later Ray gave a satisfied grunt. “I’m in.”

Ray frowned. “Aiden, take a look at this. I’ll send it to you.”

Aiden sat in a chair at his own rig while Hayley tapped her foot impatiently. Looking over Ray’s shoulder was a useless endeavor. It was filled with code and other information she had no hope of deciphering.

“This is the code for Gnaural,” Aiden said, looking over at Ray.

Ray nodded. “Look closer.”

Aiden frowned. “There’s malware inside this code.”

Ray nodded again.

“What type of malware?” Hayley asked.

Highlighting a string of code, Ray tapped on the screen.

“Inside this digital drug app is a malicious code call a Botnet. Do you know what that is?” Ray asked, tilting his head at her. His sharp grey eyes peered at her as deadlocks swung like twisted charcoal shadows around his face.

“Yeah. It’s when computers are infected with malicious software and controlled without the owners’ knowledge. Right?”

“In its simplest explanation, yes,” Ray said, a smile ghosting his lips.

“So why place a Botnet inside the Gnaural app? What could it be used for?” Hayley asked.

Ray pointed to the screen. “That code there? It’s a sophisticated piece of malware. Whoever created this knew what they were doing. Botnets are very dangerous. They can infect thousands of
computers and used to distribute other malware, where the bot software essentially functions as a Trojan. The people in charge of a Botnet might direct the computers to download additional malware, like Keyloggers, Adware, and even Ransomware.

Hayley sat on the chair next to Ray, and started at the screen. “Okay, so Gnaural is not only a digital drug application, but it also infects a person’s device with malware. For what purpose?”

Ray shrugged. “I’m not sure. Let me analyze this code, run it through a few programs.”

Aiden spun his chair so he could look at her. “Whoever created this code is using Gnaural as a springboard for malware. Botnets contain various exploits to ensure they can root a device and install spyware.”

Hayley scrubbed a hand over her eyes. “Okay. Explain what that means.”

Shaking his head, Hayley saw a tinge of respect in Aiden’s eyes that almost looked like hacker envy.

“The malware inside Gnaural doesn’t affect the app itself, it’ll still provide the user with a drug-induced high. It’s an extraordinarily clever way of inserting malicious code onto a device. Gnaural was designed to be unstable so it can’t be scanned successfully by any anti-virus programs. Not that many people would bother. It’s the perfect way to bypass a firewall and install a virus. So when the app has been used and disappears, there’s no evidence of where the Botnet originated. The Botnet then stores rooting exploits in a binary file which waits for the device to turn off and then proceeds with its rooting routine.”

“Wait,” Hayley interrupted. “Just to make sure I’m following, a rooting routine allows hackers to create admin access to all files and directories. It gives them complete access to a person’s device.”

“Right,” Aiden agreed. “So the malware inside Gnaural successfully roots the device and the user is unaware that they’ve been infected with malicious software. See, most phones aren’t properly secured behind a firewall, leaving them vulnerable to attack. It’s actually incredibly easy for viruses to be installed on devices once the firewall is breached. From what I can tell, this Botnet is what’s called an IRC bot.”

“And IRC is like a chat channel right?” Hayley asked.

Obviously, both hackers had grasped the situation immediately, but Hayley, while probably more computer literate than most, was definitely not in the same league as Aiden or Ray. Which meant she did need some aspects explained. Which Aiden was doing with a surprising amount of patience.

“Sort of,” Aiden acknowledged. “Once installed on a device, the Botnet is designed to join a private IRC channel on a deep web IRC server and waits there for further commands. The problem is, IRC servers are freely available, easy to set up, and often untraceable.”

“Hang on,” Hayley began, mind working fast to try and piece together what Aiden said. “Let me try and simplify this so I can understand. Gnaural installs a Botnet, which is a type of malware, onto a person’s device. The Botnet provides the hacker with administrative access to a person’s phone. The Botnet is basically using the unstable nature of Gnaural to install malware.”

Aiden nodded. “Correct.”

“So can you trace the Bot back to the IRC server? Find out where it’s coming from and what it might be used for?” Hayley asked.

“Well no,” Ray interjected. “The domain to which the Bot sends requests isn’t technically a real IRC
channels, they’re just reverse proxies. Basically, it’s a false server, only used to send continual
commands. The hacker can just set it up and let the IRC channel churn out constant commands, but
they’d have a different access point.”

“So we’ve hit a dead end. Again,” she ground out, the last word catching over the hard lump of
irritation in her throat.

“I’m not sure. The malware the Bot installs is called a ‘PopUpBot’. The configuration file provides
the Bot with links to webpages that open in pop-up windows. The Bot connects to an IRC channel
which commands it to forcibly click on those links, resulting in redirection to a website, which is
displayed as pop-up windows.”

Leaning over, Ray highlighted a web address hidden within the code. “There’s a list of a dozen web
addresses in the Bot’s code. A command is sent by the IRC server which makes the Bot forcefully
open websites. I can’t for the life of me figure out why someone would write such a sophisticated
code to install adware on people’s devices.”

“What websites?” Aiden asked.

“That’s the thing,” Ray observed, the first hint of frustration evident in his low tones. “They’re just
regular sites, to sell the usual junk or get an unsuspecting user to install anti-virus software which is
really just full of viruses.”

“I’ll run a diagnostic on the code,” Aiden announced.

“Why?” Ray asked sharply. “I didn’t miss anything Aiden, you can be sure of that.”

Aiden took his cap off, placed it on the edge of the table and looked steadily at the older hacker.
Despite his relaxed posture, Hayley traced a touch of impatience in Aiden’s otherwise impassive
expression.

“I never said you did,” Aiden replied, an edge creeping into his voice. “I’m just taking a look at the
code myself.”

Ray’s chin jerked up, looking set to argue. The two hackers locked eyes, a dense, oppressive
atmosphere making Hayley shift uncomfortably. Ray shook his head, dismissing Aiden with a wave
of his hand.

“Do what you want,” he snapped. “You will anyway,” he muttered, loud enough for Aiden to hear.

Hayley stood up. “I’m going to get a beer. Maybe a Xanax. Anyone want one?”

A small smile lifted the corner of Aiden’s mouth. “Just a beer.”

Hayley looked over at Ray who shook his head mutely and went back to typing. Ray must be pissed
to decline a beer. Walking to the kitchen, she grabbed two beers, handed one to Aiden and went to
lay down on the couch.

Tired, sore, and frustrated, Hayley quickly drained her beer, the methodical tapping of the keyboard
oddly soothing, cutting through the tension surrounding the two men like an oppressive vapor.

She must have dozed off. Hayley rolled over, thrusting to the surface of consciousness too quickly.
Squeezing her eyes together, she sat up and hissed as the stiches in her arm pulled. The murmur of
both men’s voices held an agitated edge. Swallowing past the dryness in her throat, Hayley got up.
“What’s wrong?”

Aiden snapped his gaze to hers. “We found Klockwork.”

That one word pushed through the black curtain of fog which hung like sheer drapery in her mind, pulling away the last vestiges of sleep.

“How? What is it?”

Ray turned and beckoned her towards the computer. She walked towards his rig, anticipation curling like vines around the expectation sitting stark in her mind.

“Those popup webpages were the key. Aiden and I analyzed each webpage in the Botnet’s original code. There was a minefield of malware on each website. Every time we tried to click on a link, the site tried to install a virus. Aiden clicked on one link and instead of installing malware he was pulled to another website.”

“Actually,” Ray amended, “Aiden was transferred to a TOR web browser. It’s a deep web server hackers use to remain anonymous. Aiden and I use it all the time. But the thing is, if we didn’t have access to the TOR server, the link wouldn’t have loaded. A normal search engine like Google wouldn’t have allowed the site to load. Unless you’re a hacker, you don’t usually have access, or know how to get access, TOR.”

“What’s TOR?” Hayley asked.

“The onion router,” Aiden explained. “It’s a nickname. Really, it’s named because of the way it enables online anonymity through a series of multilayered nodes that is structurally similar to an onion. Unlike when you access the normal web, it’ll scramble the IP address of every point, or node, ensuring the anonymity of every computer involved.”

“Right. So getting back to the Klockwork?” Hayley encouraged.

Ray nodded vigorously. “Okay so on the TOR browser we were re-directed to a Dark Net website. Now I can tell you, there’s no way this site can be accessed through normal methods. We couldn’t have searched for this link or stumbled upon it.”

She gave an irritated shrug. “I don’t get what this has to do with Klockwork.”

Tapping on the keyboard, the screen saver disappeared and Hayley saw a black screen. Across the screen was the word Klockwork in white letters. The words Username and Passwords sat underneath. Hayley stared at the name, excitement shooting tiny bolts through her synapses.

“So Klockwork is a website. What’s inside,” she asked eagerly, turning to stare at Aiden.

Aiden’s expression remained impassive, with no hint of the enthusiasm she felt. Consternation stirred as her question remained unanswered.

Ray held up a finger. “A Dark Net website, there’s a difference.”

“Okay, fine,” she snapped impatiently. “It’s a Dark Net site. *What is Klockwork?*” she barked, voice rising in volume to buffer against the two men.

“We don’t know.”

The silence which fell in the wake of his declaration left a hollow echo in its place. Desolation settled
over her with the same brittle texture of a Chicago winter. Taking a deep, shuddery breath Hayley looked at Aiden for an explanation.

“We can’t break through Klockwork’s firewall. It’s protected by a legendary hardening package. It’s not just one firewall it’s ten. I can’t even re-code it to get in. You need a username and password to be able to log in,” Aiden explained.

“Let me work this out in my head. Gnural still operates as a digital drug, but it’s been re-coded to infect a device with a Botnet. That Botnet uses adware in the form of popup websites to provide concealed access to the Dark Net website Klockwork. Only you’d need to have TOR server access and know the right link to clink on in the adware, otherwise you’ll be infected with a virus. The hidden link in the adware re-routes you to Klockwork. But we can’t get into the website unless we have a Username and password.”

Both hackers nodded simultaneously in confirmation.

“So smeone has deliberately hidden a website inside Gnural, only you really have to know what you’re looking for. Sounds like a virtual game of hide and seek. Care to speculate what you think Klockwork is?” Hayley asked.

“Nothing good,” Aiden retorted. “Dark Net websites are almost impossible to find unless you’ve been provided with a direct link. Whoever created this site went to a lot of trouble to conceal it, but made it accessible enough to those who knew what to look for. The method itself is brilliant. The Botnet inside Gnural isn’t being used to spread malware for malicious purposes like we first thought. That’s just a cover. When the Botnet forces the device to open a window, most people will just close it in frustration. They won’t go looking through it like we did. Unless you know what you’re looking for, there’s no way some unknown web user could ever stumble upon this site. Without the code Malcolm stole, there’s also no way we would have found this site.”

Hayley winced at Aiden’s mention of Malcom’s name.

“You definitely can’t get in?” Hayley asked, looking from Ray to Aiden.

Because if either of the two hackers couldn’t break the encryption, then there was little hope of them accessing the site.

“No,” Aiden confirmed.

“But,” Ray spoke up, with a jerky little shrug of his shoulders. “I’m pretty sure I know who wrote the Botnet’s code.”

“How?”

“Most programmers have a signature - the way they block code, handle syntax, write background comments. Sometimes it can be as distinctive as a fingerprint,” Aiden explained.

“And you think you know who wrote the Botnet code? How does that help us?” she asked, looking at Ray as he stroked his beard in contemplation

“Anyone wanting to access Klockwork needs the correct Username and Password. That needs to come from somewhere. The Botnet is being controlled by an IRC server, which can send individual or collective commands to infected devices. If I wanted to hide the existence of a site and only wanted certain people to access the site, the anonymous IRC server controlling the Botnet is the perfect platform to send out that information to a select few.”
Tiredness trickled across Hayley’s mind like granulated grains of sand. At every step, they encountered resistance. It had taken months to get to this point. To even uncover what Klockwork was. And they still weren’t sure. It felt like they were taking one step forward, then two steps back.

“So you think the IRC server can provide a Username and Password to get into Klockwork. Who do you think wrote the Botnet code?” Hayley asked, fatigue scraping over her voice, making her words scratch against her throat.

Sitting back, Ray folded his long legs and gave her a level stare. “She goes by the handle ‘cr0w’.”

Ray paused, dragged Hayley’s gaze with him over to Aiden. Anger simmered in the back of Aiden’s gaze, predatory anticipation sharpened his features as cold amusement lifted his mouth into a snarling smile.

“In fact,” Ray continued, pulling Hayley’s attention away from Aiden. “She’s the reason why we don’t have access to the Bunker anymore. She sold that information to Blume. Even had information on Aiden she sold to Blume. I intercepted her call while keeping an eye on Charlotte Gardner. I’ve also had … professional clashes with her. She loved to write viruses disrupting ctOS. It’s how I recognized her work. She’s a nasty little hacker who’s more concerned with street cred than consequences.”

“So we go after this ‘cr0w’ hacker and hope she can get us into Klockwork.”

Aiden inclined his head, a ruthless grin spreading across his face. “She’ll get us inside, you can be sure of that.”

Hayley swallowed apprehensively. It wasn’t so much the words Aiden spoke, but the flat tones and the eyes staring at her devoid of emotion which worried her. The hunt for this female hacker was personal for him.

Sitting back, Hayley considered what they found. Klockwork was a Dark Net website. That was something she hadn’t expected, although Hayley really had no idea what she presumed Klockwork to be.

The digital drug Gnaural was more insidious than they first imagined. As if installing malware, which accorded complete control over a person’s device, wasn’t sinister enough. The Botnets appeared to have been created specifically to provide concealed access to the Klockwork website. If you knew where to look. That Klockwork’s website had been so well concealed meant that there was something important inside that site. A Username and password meant that people were supposed to access the site, they just needed to find out how.

Despite their setbacks, they were close to discovering what Klockwork was; Hayley could almost taste it.

Chapter End Notes

Author’s Note:
Cr0w is a minor character from the Watch_Dogs DLC Bad Blood. She has two audio logs, which T-Bone can intercept detailing her blackmail of Blume by providing
information about Aiden.

Definitions:
Dark Net: Is a network that can only be accessed with specific software, configurations, or authorization.

Deep Web: Refers to websites that are not indexed by major search engines such as Google, Bing, or Yahoo. Deep Web sites exist beneath the surface of the known web.

Botnets: A network of computers infected with malicious software and controlled as a group without the owners' knowledge.
Chapter 19

The rattle of a supermarket cart startled Hayley as she jerked her head up and stared at the lone figure limping down the street. With no stores nearby, the sound wasn't a normal part of the street's auditory makeup. An old cart, rusted and full of tin cans, shook as it passed over the uneven concrete, a shrivelled old man behind it with a stained grey beard flowing down his dark overcoat.

Hayley observed him for a moment; with the homeless, it was harder to get a bearing on their age, one year to them was at least five for others, likely more. As expected, the man averted his gaze, not meeting her eye as he passed by. The harshness of street life taught them very quickly to stay isolated in every possible way, even a stray glance could mean trouble.

The homeless man was the first sign of life she’d seen in the area. Leaning her shoulder against the cool metal of the car door, Hayley cast her gaze down the road. In the still air, the stain of the area’s indifference had time to sink into her skin. She could almost taste the desolation, a gritty texture like ash on her tongue.

Tracking down this female hacker had proven far more difficult than they’d originally anticipated. All they had to go on was her handle, Cr0w. And like most proficient hackers she used a scrambler to hide her image from ctOS, so there was no possibility of finding her through facial recognition. Since they had no name or address, ctOS was of little use in their search.

But, there was one avenue which they could track her. Financials. Cr0w had accepted money from Blume, in particular Charlotte Gardener, in exchange for information about Aiden. Despite her best attempts at hiding the money, Ray had managed to track it. Charlotte Gardener had, predictably, attempted to use methods to track the funds. Which Cr0w had subverted by converting the entire amount into Bitcoin currency.

It was a genius move. The Bitcoin network was designed to blur the correspondence between transactions and IP addresses. All Bitcoin users were connected in a peer-to-peer network over the Internet. Data flow between their computers was like gossip in a crowd, spreading quickly and redundantly until everyone had the information—with no one but the originator knowing who spoke first. Most people believed that as long as they used Bitcoin carefully, their identity was protected behind an impenetrable cryptographic wall. And while that was mostly true, there were ways to track funds.

By accessing the Block Chain, a public ledger which recorded every Bitcoin transaction, where it came from and where it went, Aiden and Ray had been able to track down where Cr0w had moved the funds.

Each Bitcoin transaction was listed as a long sequence of randomized numbers, which was where the user believed themselves to be safe from discovery. And while the Bitcoin system doesn’t allow anyone to tie their transaction to any one person, if you knew the amount you were looking for and the date it was deposited, you could track the movement of the funds through the Block Chain. Which is what they’d done.

But again, Cr0w had been meticulous by depositing the funds into different accounts, making it harder for them to track her. Already they’d spent a few days chasing false leads, always one step behind the hacker. Tracing I.P addresses, ATM withdrawals, tracking the money she bounced from one account to another, was difficult. Whether Cr0w knew she was being hunted or was just a naturally cautious person was yet to be determined.
Today, they’d discovered that Cr0w had withdrawn a large sum from an ATM close to the area, and the IP they’d traced from the transaction led them to this squalid, abandoned house on the outer edge of Chicago. But it looked to be yet another dead end, going by the lack of activity in the area.

Hayley looked over to see Aiden step into view from his perimeter search around the house. He jogged up the steps and peered into the grimy window of the house. Earlier he’d, unsuccessfully, tried to pry open the boarded up front door. She snorted softly and looked away, faintly amused by Aiden’s dogged persistence. He’d get into the house, one way or another.

The wind whipped like a cold slap across her face, rustling the trees scattered across the landscape. A lone leaf tumbled before her, cast away by its wintry boughs into air that sapped the heat. It twisted mid-air, gravity dragging it to its final resting place on someone’s shoe.

Hayley let her gaze travel from the shoe up the body of the person until she started at their face. It was a woman, her jet-black hair falling like silk around faintly Asian features. The woman stood unmoving, her non-descript clothes blending into the colorless surroundings.

From across the street their eyes met, and despite never seeing a picture of her, Hayley knew that this was Cr0w. Hayley waited for the other woman to react, reluctant to move lest she spook the hacker. Slow seconds trickled by, like drops of water building up into a wave as the moment lengthened.

The increasing burn in her muscles became difficult to ignore as adrenaline flooded her system, urging her to move. Even in the distance which separated them, Hayley felt the other woman’s sharply watchful gaze dig into her, weighing the threat she represented.

The other woman’s gaze shifted, staring at something Hayley couldn’t see behind her. But Hayley didn’t move, zoning in on the woman, knowing that if she looked back, not only would her focus split but so would the woman.

Without any change in the woman’s expression, she turned and ran.

Hayley called out to Aiden, not knowing if he heard her, and not having the time to check as she tore after the other woman. She could feel the heightened sensitivity of the adrenaline like electric shocks on her skin, the stimulation from the accompanying exertion providing enhanced clarity of vision, tension in her sinews and a rush in her blood as she ran after Cr0w.

Reaching the spot where the hacker had been standing, Hayley caught a glimpse of her vaulting a fence between two buildings with apparent ease. Fuck she was fast.

Skirting trash cans, Hayley ran hard, using her momentum to grab the top of the fence and vault over, albeit with less grace than her target. She softened her knees, let the weight of the jump down distribute evenly across her body so she wasn’t jarred too badly. Flicking her gaze up, Hayley was just able to see a flash of movement to the right as the other woman disappeared around the edge of a building.

Noise filtered to her position, sounded like the hacker had crashed into a pile of pots and pans. Hayley increased her speed, turning the corner and hesitating slightly as she discovered dozens of metal trash cans splayed like children’s blocks in her path.

Cursing, Hayley picked her way around the debris in the alley, aware that even this small delay would increase the distance between her and the nimble hacker.

Coming out of the side street, Hayley skirted to a stop, frantically looking around for the other woman. To her left, Cr0w was running down the street in the open. The buildings and houses were
clumped haphazardly together, like the developer had decided to throw dice and place buildings where they landed. Good for her as it left a lot of open space in between possible hiding places.

Hayley tore after the woman, letting her body take over, muscle memory from the miles she’d run on the track team and the continued level of fitness she kept herself at, allowing her to gain on the other woman.

The hacker risked a peek over her shoulder, a minute stumble and she righted herself, allowing Hayley to gain precious inches on her.

Darting right into another cluster of houses, the hacker cleared a small fence without pause and ran into another alleyway. Hayley followed, taking the corner sharply, watching in amazement as the woman toward ran towards some concrete pillars blocking her exit, placed her palm on the surface and executed a series of athletic leaps, only to land in a neat crouch on the other side.

Parkour, Hayley thought immediately. The fucking woman was a street runner.

Hayley didn’t even try to repeat the stunt; Aiden would have but Hayley was more of a long-distance sprinter, and she’d likely end up with a broken leg.

Instead, she ran towards the end of the other house, relieved to find only a small metal fence separating the premises, which she vaulted over quickly. Tearing down the side of the houses, Hayley tried unsuccessfully to catch glimpses of the hacker between gaps in the fence.

Her eyes watered in the wind, making the world around her appear as if underwater. Hayley skirted toys rusted and left in the open, grunted as a flailing branch slapped her check, leaving a stinging reminder of her tangle with the bush.

Breaking through the block of houses, Hayley felt her heart hammer painfully in her chest, moving up to lodge in her throat like a pulsing presence when she saw no sign of the hacker.

Movement at the edge of her vision and Hayley whipped her head around to the left just in time to see the barest hint of black hair like streamers coiling around the corner of an apartment building across the road.

Hayley clenched her teeth and ran on. In her haste to catch the hacker she took the corner too fast, slipping slightly in something wet. Felt herself fall but just managed to lash out, fingers wrapping around the edge of a dumpster. She hissed as her knee jarred painfully.

Righting herself, Hayley ignored the sharp pain in her knee and turned the only corner available in the tight confines of the buildings back alley, frustrated with herself for losing the hacker.

Hayley came to abrupt stop. The alleyway had no exit, it was blocked on both sides by apartment buildings, graffiti tags covering the crumbling façade. With no sign of the woman. A number of large dumpsters spotted the lane, overgrown with foliage and thick with bubbling orange rust. An abandoned graveyard of metal skeletons; nature was slowly reclaiming its territory, eroding their presence so it looked like the dumpsters were part of the original landscape.

Looking over her shoulder, Hayley hesitated before walking slowly into the alleyway. The hacker couldn’t have doubled back. She unclipped the holster on her hip, but didn’t draw the gun.

The lane smelt like urine, the astringent odor strong enough to make her gag. Hayley clenched her fists, aching to hold a weapon and feeling exposed. But she wouldn’t risk injuring the only lead they had.
Hayley had almost walked the length of the lane when she came upon the woman. She ignored the phone buzzing in her pocket, not able to spare the concentration to answer it and knowing Aiden could track her location anyway.

Back to her, the woman was trying to grab on to a fire escape landing above her but she was inches too short. Landing in a crouch, the hacker whipped her head around to fix Hayley with a cold stare. As she stood up, a defiant sneer pulled back her lips. Her eyes, a color so dark they looked like onyx stones, stared out at her from under a fringe. Ruthlessness was stained across her expression, giving the sharp planes of her face a haughty look.

Cr0w reached into her pocket and pulled out an object before Hayley could stop her. She flicked it open in a practiced way, exposing a switch blade.

Hayley let her knees soften, allowed the hacker to come to her, watching the arm with the knife. The other woman gripped the hilt and with no show of emotion, drew back and swiped towards Hayley’s stomach.

Taking a quick step back, out of range of the knife, Hayley let the woman complete the natural progression of her swing. Before she could recover, Hayley stepped forward, grabbed the woman’s arm with one hand and used the other to bend the wrist with the knife backwards. The knife clattered to the ground, and Hayley pressed her advantage, forcing the hacker to the ground.

But instead of landing face first into the concrete, the hacker pulled out of Hayley’s grip, lowered her head, tucked her body tightly and executed a neat roll. She came off the ground like a striking cobra, twisting around to launch herself at Hayley.

Hayley turned slightly, moving in to the other woman’s live side, using a basic stance with one foot forward. Moving to this angle placed Hayley in a position where she could be struck by either the hacker’s hands or feet. But Hayley wanted her to attack. Even from this brief encounter Hayley could tell the other woman relied on her athleticism rather than any true combat skill, which was where Hayley hoped to pin her.

Cr0w kicked out, Hayley sidestepped quickly and tried to grab her leg. But the hacker moved away, circled around so quickly, Hayley felt like she was fighting a fucking ballerina. Cr0w slap kicked Hayley in the kidney before she could turn around. Hayley grunted, ignored the pain and used the momentum to turn quickly and lash out with a right hook on the woman’s chin. The blow was hard enough to snap her head around, and Hayley felt the jarring sting in her knuckles.

As Cr0w levered herself upright, she spun on her heel, instantly cutting the distance between them. It barely gave Hayley enough time to notice the flash of steel slashing towards her throat. Little bitch had another knife hidden up her sleeve.

Hayley blocked the hacker’s knife arm with her right arm, while her left hand, formed into a fist with her thumb extended, shot forward and plunged into the nerve bundle in Cr0w’s armpit. The other woman’s eyes went wide with pain and she hunched inward. Hayley clamped down on Cr0w’s knife wrist, then spun on her heel, around the hacker’s back, using the momentum to pull her around and off balance.

She could feel the hacker try to spin away from her so Hayley gripped the woman’s wrist with both hands, deliberately grinding the muscles. Hayley could feel them twisting and stretching like coiled snakes beneath her skin.

Cr0w gasped in pain and let her hold on the knife slacken, enough for Hayley to wrench it out of her grip. Hayley used her own momentum to keep the hacker stumbling forward, off-balance so she
couldn’t repeat her last trick.

Abruptly, Hayley halted their movement, swung Cr0w’s arm back over her head, while kicking her feet out from underneath her. The hacker landed with a thud, back flat on the concrete. Hayley dropped down immediately, jamming her knee into her solar plexus. All the air exploded from Cr0w’s mouth, face red as she tried to suck in air. Hayley jammed the knife against the hacker’s throat.

Over the rush of blood in her ears, Hayley heard footsteps approach but didn’t dare take her focus from the hacker. Sucking in ragged breaths, the woman glared at her.

In the corner of her vision, familiar dark blue jeans stepped into view. Hayley pressed the knife closer to Cr0w’s throat. It was a subtle warning, communicated and received by the hacker, going by the tension simmering around her like a mirage.

Flicking her eyes up, Hayley watched Aiden re-holster his gun and remove a pair of flexi-cuffs.

“She give you any trouble?”

The sardonic amusement working its way to the surface turned her laughter into a dry snort. Hayley looked back down at the hacker and allowed a tight smile to emerge as she met her recalcitrant gaze.

“Not at all,” Hayley replied lightly, watching the lidded eyes tighten almost indiscernibly at her easy dismissal of their brawl.

Aiden crouched down next to Hayley, staring silently at the hacker. He might have been considering refuse on his shoe for all the disinterest showing on his face.

Cr0w however, wasn’t able to conceal her reaction as well as Aiden. She focused on his face, recognition slowly coalescing across her expression. She moved her head back, the first stirring of an emotion other than bored disparagement straining to break free. Hayley saw the barest flicker of something in those dark eyes, an emotion she was very used to seeing in the faces of others when in Aiden’s presence. Fear. Then like a cardboard box, she closed the lid on her emotions, affecting a fairly convincing manifestation of disinterest.

“Cr0w I assume?” Aiden asked as his lip curled in a humorless smile. “We have something to discuss.”

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They’d bundled the zip-tied hacker into the car to return to the abandoned house. Aiden had found a way in, and now he was booting up Cr0w’s rig. The hacker had taken a page out of Aiden’s book, using a run-down apparently abandoned house no one would look twice at, as her base.

The house itself was barely inhabitable. Sections of ceiling hung limp in the stagnant air. Plaster had fragmented and now lay damp over long untrodden floors. Cold water had seeped through window frames, rotten and blistered, encouraging the mildew to peel the wallpaper.

Hayley observed the woman who had yet to say a word. Deposited on the floor she’d crossed legs, then merely stared, face blank while Aiden tampered with her rig. Cr0w placed her zip-tied hands over her crossed legs in an oddly delicate gesture. Hayley’s gaze was drawn to the pale, fine-boned fingers laying across her lap, a stark contrast against the black material of her jeans, like bones in a grave. Hayley repressed a shiver at the image her mind conjured and looked away.

Three monitors flashed to life, a start-up screen requiring identification which Aiden didn’t attempt to
bypass. Instead, he turned around and leaned his hip against the computer desk. Pulling his phone out of his pocket he flicked through it casually, never acknowledging Cr0w’s presence.

Silence spun a web between them, gossamer threads of tension tightening around the three of them. The wind battered the house, the cold spread across the room, wicking heat from their bodies.

“You’ve been a busy little hacker,” Aiden remarked suddenly, gravelly voice a low resonance, rasping like sandpaper against the tension in the air. “Selling information to Blume about me. You should have asked Gardner for more money. I personally think she would have paid more than 20 k. But, I suppose it was difficult for the interim Mayor to justify the cost when it came out of her own bank account.”

Watching Cr0w closely, Hayley caught the shift in the hacker’s expression. Fleeting hints of fear and shock chased each other across her face before she was able to stop the reaction. Slipping the phone back in his pocket, Aiden crossed his legs at his ankle and titled his head. The side of his mouth lifted, not enough to turn into a smile, but enough to indicate some inner amusement.

“Oh, you didn’t think I knew about your deal with Gardner?” Aiden gave a little chortle, a sound of sinister amusement which scratched against Hayley’s nerves.

Using his hip to push off the table, Aiden began a slow walk towards the hacker. It was an easy, graceful movement which just seemed to highlight his predatory litheness.

“I don’t like people digging into my business. I like it even less when they use that information against me. Now I’ve got to decide on an appropriate compensation for the forfeiture of the Bunker.”

Apparently unconcerned by the threat, Cr0w cut Aiden a hard look before settling on Hayley. With a thoughtful expression, the hacker raked an appraising gaze over her, a probing assessment Hayley felt like barbs under her skin.

“I see you’ve found a new sidekick,” Cr0w spoke for the first time. Her voice held a silken edge, almost like she spoke with a mouth full of too many teeth. “Maybe that might help with your loss,” she smirked.

The hacker flicked her gaze towards Aiden. He was looking at Cr0w like the patient predator he was, biding his time as the animosity ebbed and flowed like a tide, waiting for the precise moment to strike.

“Oh, you didn’t think I knew about Clara?” Cr0w repeated Aiden’s words back to him.

Looking over at Hayley, a small, sardonic smile flirted with the corner of Cr0w’s mouth. “Pretty in an obvious way I suppose,” she rated, a sneer creeping into her voice. “I preferred the darker beauty of your previous acquaintance. Clara had that Goth chick vibe to match though didn’t she? I’d watch out if I were you,” Cr0w warned Hayley, “the Vigilante has an unfortunate habit of allowing his friends to meet rather ill-fated ends.”

Hayley crossed her arms and worked hard at relaxing the muscles in her face, adopting what she hoped was a bored expression. She risked a look at Aiden. His expression had shuttered closed, sealing off any thoughts or feelings so effectively she wondered if she’d imagined the flicker of emotion to begin with.

Who was Clara? Aiden had never mentioned her but that was hardly surprising considering how obsessively he guarded his secrets. Going by Cr0w’s insinuations, it sounded like Aiden had a history with her.
But Cr0w didn’t know about her relationship with Aiden, despite her speculation, it was an educated but unknowingly accurate guess. Hayley could just be a Fixer he’d hired, any number of professionals he used. Because she couldn’t risk the hacker thinking anything else. Cr0w was obviously untrustworthy, had proven she liked selling information.

Aiden let his gaze rest on the hacker. The parched amusement drying across his expression made the violence lurking in the back of his sharp, intelligent stare all the more prominent.

“It’s not just my friends who meet ill-fated ends,” Aiden replied, the lack of inflection in his voice more disconcerting than the veiled threat.

Dropping down into a crouch, Aiden leaned forward into the hacker’s personal space. To her credit, Cr0w didn’t move, just endured his looming, faintly threatening presence, although she couldn’t hold his eroding stare for long.

“Actually, the Bunker is really a secondary motivation,” Aiden remarked as he leaned closer to Cr0w, voice dropping into a low register, a subtle vibration like a distant train chugging along the tracks.

A small frown wedged between Cr0w’s eyes as her gaze reluctantly swept up to Aiden’s. His expression was locked into place, that perpetual indifference stained across his face as he gave a carefully calibrated smile.

“I need access to Klockwork.”

Cr0w digested this last statement with the same bored disparagement which had plagued her expression throughout their conversation. If Aiden’s knowledge of Klockwork surprised her, Cr0w was hiding it well.

“Then get a watch,” the hacker replied dismissively.

Aiden let out a tight laugh, the sharp sound crackling like static electricity across Hayley’s skin. It wasn’t a smart move on Cr0w’s part, pretending to have no knowledge of Klockwork. In fact, Hayley got the feeling the hacker was more surprised by Aiden’s awareness of her deal with Blume.

“I’m going to tell you this once,” Aiden began, voice teetering between a whisper and a growl, “I ask questions, you answer them.”

Reaching over, he lightly traced his finger over her bound hand. Cr0w flinched at the touch, her chest rising and falling in rapid succession.

“Continue to test my patience and I’ll start breaking your fingers. Try typing with both hands in a cast.”

Aiden was a connoisseur of interrogation. As others could roll a glass of wine over their tongue and wax lyrical about its provenance and subtly, so he knew exactly how to interpret human behavior with the same intricate knowledge. The hacker’s lack of cooperation wasn’t a road block. In fact, to Aiden it was a direct challenge. He knew how to coerce information from people; by massaging their egos, through oblique intimidation, or through more physically painful methods. In the end, they all gave up their secrets, most daunted enough by his presence and the threat of what he’d do to them.

“Klockwork,” Aiden pressed.

Cr0w looked up, uncertainty shadowing her expression. In the dim light, Aiden’s outline melded with the shadows, a dark, hostile presence ready to inflict violence.
“I don’t know what that is,” Cr0w replied. Her face, although smoothly expressionless, held a coldness that her voice only hinted at.

Hayley clenched her hands into a fist, fingernails digging into her skin when she saw Aiden’s expression. He smiled, a satirical twist of his lips echoing the same lack of warmth frosting his eyes.

With startling speed, he whipped his hand out, grabbed the hacker’s index finger and twisted. Hayley heard the crack of bone, more startling than a clap of thunder. For a small moment, shock engulfed her expression, before the pain registered and a strangled cry was ripped from Cr0w’s throat.

The finger was sticking out at an awkward angle. The hacker’s hand was shaking and she was staring at her finger like it might miraculously repair itself. Hunching over her hand, Cr0w gasped. The pained groan wound like an invisible ribbon around Hayley’s body, squeezing the breath out of her as she struggled to remain indifferent to the situation.

Shifting uncomfortably, Hayley stilled when Aiden looked over, eyebrows drawn down in a flare of irritation. She expected the interrogation to be a slow burn, Aiden degrading the hacker’s resistance with his usual imperious methods. Instead, he’d bypassed persuasion and gone straight to what could only amount to torture. It was the almost retaliatory violence which disturbed her. Not that he followed through with the threat, Hayley always knew what Aiden was capable of, but that he’d not even tried to reason with the hacker. Because realistically, this woman wasn’t a hardened criminal, just got herself caught up in something bigger than herself.

“If I have to repeat myself, you won’t like the consequences,” Aiden said, wrapping the words in a tone so menacing that Hayley felt the sting of his irritation.

Slowly, Cr0w lifted her head and stared at Aiden, matching dislike rolling across her expression.

“How do you even know about Klockwork?” Cr0w asked.

Aiden gave the hacker a quick smile, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “The same way I knew about your deal with Blume.”

It wasn’t an answer, but the message was received, going by the tightening of Cr0w’s expression. You have no idea the information I have access to.

“I don’t really have access to Klockwork.”

The moment lengthened, the seconds overlapping as Aiden stated silently at the hacker. The change to his expression was minimal, but the undercurrent of volatility in his hard stare made Cr0w flinch.

“You designed the Botnet linked to the site, so I find that highly unlikely.”

She shrugged, dismissing the issue with the same ironic superiority which had characterized the entire conversation. Cr0w pulled her hand close to her chest, wincing in pain.

“I’m assuming you’ve tried to access the site? It’s impossible. You need to access the servers controlling the IRC. I was hired to create the Botnet, I had nothing to do with the site. I don’t even know what it is.”

Aiden made a non-committal sound in his throat. “Why hire you?”

If the hacker was insulted by Aiden questioning her reputation, she hid it well. Instead, she just let the false humor slide off her face, rebounding into a sneer which suited her surly expression.
“Because my work causes the most mayhem.”

Aiden let out a dismissive laugh, but the aggressive sound burnt out any traces of amusement.

“You may not know what Klockwork is, but you were still hired by someone. Who?”

Lifting her shoulder, she gave a delicate shrug. “Again, I don’t know. Clients generally email me with what they want. I never met anyone, just uploaded everything onto a proxy server and was paid using Bitcoin.”

“Show me.”

Cr0w blinked. “What?” she asked, perplexed tone vibrating with irritation.

Turning, Aiden nodded towards Cr0w’s rig. “You log on and show me everything you’ve been working on.”

The denial was already forming on her lips before Aiden turned back around. He dropped his gaze to her hand, finger sticking out at a nauseating angle. His lips formed into the appearance of a smile, but it was malicious, devoid of warmth and full of intent.

“I don’t…” Cr0w stopped, the words melting under the heat of Aiden’s antagonism.

She shook her head. “Why do you even care? It’s a Botnet linked to some site. I thought going after small time hackers was beneath you these days. Raise your standards a bit, I’m sure there are Judges out there with kiddie porn on their computer who you can extend your moral exactitude on,” Cr0w said tartly.

The hacker’s normally silken voice was prickly, the thread of her confidence slowly unravelling as she rapidly lost the conviction that this encounter would end in her favor.

If Cr0w was to be believed, then she had no more access to Klockwork than they did. Hayley wasn’t sure the hacker was being honest with them, she was difficult to read anyway, that sneering countenance wasn’t just an act, she actually had a backbone. Not many people had stood up to Aiden the way she was.

Aiden made an impatient sound as he stood up. The movement sent a ripple of unease across her face, which quickly turned into indignation as Aiden leaned down to grab Cr0w’s arm and pull her up. She dangled like a puppet, scrambling to find her feet as Aiden roughly dragged her towards the rig. He shoved Cr0w down onto the swivel chair, likely giving her whiplash as he roughly jerked the chair towards the desk.

Looking across at Hayley, Aiden held his hand out. “Your knife,” he demanded.

With a brief hesitation, Hayley walked over and placed her combat knife in his hand. Aiden cut the ties around the hacker’s wrist. She winced, rubbing the red marks. Handing her back the knife, Aiden dismissed Hayley with a wave and turned around. Hayley clenched her teeth together in irritation but withdrew grudgingly from their space.

Pointing with his finger at the keyboard, the threat in Aiden’s tone wound through each word.

“You have two choices. Log on voluntarily and give me access to everything you have on the Botnet and Klockwork. Or, I break every one of your fingers and hack in myself. Both options I get what I want, but at least with the first option you can type.” Aiden smirked as he looked at her hand.

“Well,” he corrected, “marginally.”
Cr0w fixed Aiden with a glare, hostility and apprehension carved across her face.

“Only the Botnet files. You get access to nothing else.”

One brow lifted in silent challenge. “You think this is a negotiation?” Aiden asked, the warning flashing across his green eyes like lightening ripping across the sky. Then he laughed, a low, mocking sound which still managed to contain shades of real amusement. “I don’t give a fuck about what other viruses you’ve created. I just want the information I came for.”

The hacker’s lips thinned when Aiden laughed at her, fingers tightening briefly around the wrist held against her chest.

“Fine,” she hissed, although she really had no other option but to agree.

Awkwardly, she began logging on to her system, the process laborious considering she only had one hand to type with.

Aiden rested his hip against the desk beside her, watching the process closely. Cr0w glanced at Aiden, jaw tightening so hard Hayley imagined she heard the molars grinding together. The concept of personal space appeared to elude Aiden at this particular time. It was deliberate of course, not only was he using his proximity as an intimidation tactic, but he’d need to make sure Cr0w didn’t try to contact anyone.

The hacker’s arm kept brushing against Aiden’s leg as she typed. Cr0w paused, looked over but didn’t meet his stare, seemingly on the verge of saying something. Aiden kept his gaze fixed on the hacker’s face, an uncompromising smile ghosting his lips. Carefully, Cr0w tucked her elbow closer to her body, but lacked the resolve to fully pull away.

In the silence, a low crackle of thunder rumbled, rolling across rooftops to the pattering of tiny raindrops.

“Here’s the code,” Cr0w tapped on the monitor.

Aiden leaned forward, a small frown marring his features as his eyes darted across the screen. Reaching over, Aiden slapped the hacker’s hand away from the mouse. Without seeking permission, he minimized the window to click on the desktop screen. He made a low sound in his throat and clicked on a program. Tapping on the screen, Aiden turned his head to let his gaze settle on Cr0w’s face.

“You’re running the CGI web proxy. You were lying, you do have access to Klockwork.”

“No. I told you, I don’t have access. I was paid to create the Botnet, that’s true. You never asked about a proxy. I was paid extra to create that added layer of encryption so the data wasn’t sniffed out by unwanted third-parties. But you still need a username and password to access the site. Which. They. Never. Gave. Me,” Cr0w punctured each word by rapping her knuckles against her chair.

“Lose the attitude or I’ll start breaking limbs instead of just fingers.”

Cr0w blanched when Aiden tilted his head towards her. From this angle, the computer’s pallid light touched on part of Aiden’s face, the rest was shrouded in darkness. His green eyes were far too bright against the shadows of his face, creating a disturbing manifestation of menace fixed in place like some garish Halloween mask.

“Plug in the drive,” Aiden demanded as he placed an external hard drive on the table.
In rebellious silence Cr0w took her time reaching for it, but plugged it into the port nonetheless. As soon as she did, Aiden grabbed the swivel chair and swung Cr0w out of the way. The hacker’s chair slid across the floor, the wheels grating across the wooden boards until it came to a complete stop.

Cr0w hissed, sounding like a roused serpent as she attempted to get up from the chair. Hayley took two quick steps, grabbed her shoulder and shoved her back down.

“Seriously?” Hayley asked, shaking her head in cynical amusement. “Did you have a transitory lapse in judgment and forget who you were dealing with?”

Aiden looked over, his frown lifting as one eyebrow was pulled up into a reluctantly amused arch. A glimmer of a smile crossed his face as he turned away, leaving Hayley to deal with the obstinate hacker.

Cr0w lifted her head slowly, reminding Hayley of an animal testing the air for the scent of a predator.

“No,” Cr0w replied quietly, “I know exactly who I’m dealing with.”

Something dark moved in the depths of the hacker’s eyes, like the shadow of a shark beneath the surface of the ocean. Hayley frowned, but didn’t engage in further conversation. Removing another pair of flexi-cuffs, and with no resistance from the hacker, Hayley tied her hands together again, then waited for Aiden to finish at the computer.

Removing his phone, Aiden flicked his thumb over the screen before placing it against his ear. He waited patiently for the call to connect, fingers tapping a steady rhythm against the desk.

“I have a job for you,” he said in greeting.

A small smirk lifted the corner of Aiden’s mouth as he listened to the other caller. “Well, I figured you’d suffered enough.”

More silence, before Aiden gave a careless shrug. “I didn’t go out of my way to kill you, that’s why.”

Hayley lifted an eyebrow, wondering who Aiden was talking to.

“Cut the shit, do you want the job or not?” Aiden asked impatiently.

Listening to the reply, unguarded amusement flashed across his face. “Actually, it’s Maurice all over again….No I’ve done the bag and tag. Only this one requires closer monitoring. I’ll text you the location.”

Without a farewell, Aiden disconnected the call. Removing the hard drive, Aiden flicked his eyes towards them. Cr0w had crossed her legs, sitting leisurely in the chair like being bound and tortured was an everyday occurrence.

When Hayley met Aiden’s gaze, he jerked his head, motioning her over. Hayley made sure the hacker’s hands were tied securely before she walked over to stand in front of Aiden.

“What are you going to do with her?”

Aiden shifted his attention away from Hayley, looking over her shoulder at the hacker in amused appraisal. Settling his gaze back on her, he lifted one brow in silent challenge.

“Well, I can’t kill her. She may still be useful,” he said making no attempt lower his voice.
Hayley closed her eyes briefly and convinced herself that his words were merely a strategy to unnerve the hacker.

He shrugged with that deceptively indolent air he'd cultivated and continued in a lower voice, “So I’ve organized alternative accommodation.”

The implications of this statement sunk like a stone in her mind. “You’re kidnapping her.”

An amused smirk crept over his face. “Technically, I won’t be. I’ll leave the details to an associate of mine.”

Hayley absorbed this in silence. Cr0w was devious and untrustworthy, so she could see the logic behind Aiden’s decision to keep the hacker sequestered away until their investigation was completed. Considering Aiden’s treatment of her, Hayley expected her first move would be to warn whoever hired her for the Klockwork job, that Aiden had paid her an unwelcome visit. Most likely just out of spite.

“Is that wise?”

Aiden looked down at her, sharpening his irritation against her hesitancy until her it was filed down into nothing. He grabbed her arm and dragged her further away from the hacker. Hayley pulled her arm out of his grip irritably.

“So it’s acceptable for you to commit certain crimes. Grand theft auto, manslaughter, aggravated assault, trespassing, that’s all ok, but your hill to die on is kidnapping?” Aiden asked in a voice so low it sounded like his vocal chords were made from sandpaper.

Hayley let out a slow breath, aiming for calm but missing the target entirely. “You can be a real asshole Aiden. I understand the necessity, it’s just…this life of crime is an ill-fitting second skin for me. And you misinterpreted my question. I meant, is it wise to give this hacker to just an associate? Can you trust them?”

The impatience in his green gaze alleviated slightly at Hayley’s explanation. “Don’t worry, my guy will make sure she’s tucked away securely.”

Hayley sighed. She had to trust that Aiden’s connections would net him someone if not trustworthy, then enticed by the money and aware of what Aiden would do if they betrayed him.

Aiden gave a small shrug and walked away, obviously believing their discussion over. Hayley took a quick breath in, cleared the annoyance out of her expression and walked back to stand beside the hacker while Aiden scrolled through the computer. Cr0w watched Aiden warily, but didn’t try to get out of the chair again.

The sound of a car outside had Aiden snapping his gaze outside. He stalked over to the boarded up window and peeked through. His shoulders tensed, relaxing only marginally when he recognized the occupant of the vehicle.

Walking over to Cr0w, he stopped in front of her. Apprehension crossed her face, chasing away her expression of manufactured boredom.

“Time to go.”

Hayley could almost feel the moment the hacker’s affectation of indifference snapped, recoiling like a live wire as sparks of her fear ignited in her eyes. Cr0w shook her head, opened her mouth but Aiden ignored her sputtering and just hauled her off the chair.
She cursed Aiden, some rather inventive ways of how he could pleasure himself. Wrapping his fingers tightly around her arm, Aiden dragged the hacker across the room. She bucked wildly, trying desperately to get out of his grip.

Raising her leg, Cr0w attempted to stamp down but Aiden quickly withdrew his foot. She stomped on the floorboards, but this didn’t seem to deter her, instead she swung her arms around, using the hands that were bound together like a human bat. Aiden let out a frustrated growl, blocked the clumsy attempt, grabbed her throat and slammed her against the wall. Taller by at least a foot, Aiden leant into the hacker squashed against the wall and easily restrained her despite her continued struggles.

“Relax. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The now aspect of the sentence was hanging precariously.

Aiden let his words sink in before he spoke again. “I can’t trust that you won’t shoot your mouth off about our visit, so you’re going to stay with a colleague until I sort this shit out. That’s the consequences of your actions. It might make you think twice about crossing me in the future.”

All that could be heard was elevated breathing, slowly calming as the hacker considered Aiden’s words.

“And what about the consequences of your actions?” Cr0w sneered eventually, anger making her words come out sounding like a snake’s hiss. “Are you really making a difference? Or just making powerful enemies with the ability to take you out?”

“You done?” Aiden asked, boredom reflected in the flat-lined resonance of his voice.

Aiden let out an unimpressed snort as he removed his fingers from her throat. Hayley took a step forward to follow Aiden out of the room. Noticing her movement Aiden turned to her.

“I got this. No need for you to come out.”

Hayley halted immediately. Aiden’s tone was casual, but the low rasp of his voice scratched a warning in her mind.

Cr0w allowed herself to be pulled out of the room, unwisely taking Aiden’s word that he wouldn’t harm her. If it suited him, he’d put a bullet in her head and think nothing of it. In Aiden’s mind, assurances would last only as long as he thought the hacker was useful.

Moving over to the window, Hayley peeked through a gap in the boards. A man standing in front of a silver Camero. So this was the Fixer Aiden had hired.

Hayley wasn’t sure what she was expecting, but a man wearing a dark grey tailored and rather ostentatious suit, with what she believed were very expensive leather shoes, was not what she expected. Despite his jacket, Hayley spotted the familiar bulge of a weapon around his hip. He was tall, muscular, although Hayley couldn’t quite make out his face, but she thought she saw a dark goatee.

Aiden walked towards the Fixer, he appeared relaxed, but he’d let go of the hacker, one hand stuffed in his jacket pocket, the other hanging loosely by his side. Hayley couldn’t hear what they were saying but the tension lapped against them like a tide pool.
As he talked, the Fixer seemed to be in perpetual motion, a hand wave or a lazy shrug. He reminded Hayley of a shark, not just because he hadn’t stopped moving similar to the needs of a shark, but a very dangerous man swam beneath the surface of that polished veneer. Now she knew why Aiden preferred she stayed inside, he didn’t want this Fixer to know about her.

After a brief exchange, Aiden bundled the hacker into the car. He watched them drive off, but Hayley couldn’t tell whether he was having misgivings or was just relieved to be rid of the hacker. Walking back into the house, Aiden headed straight for the computer.

Hayley walked over, leaning against the table.

“Could you find anything?”

Glancing over at her, Aiden shook his head. “No, from what I can tell, she’s got no access like she said. Cr0w’s computers are designed to chain multiple proxies to connect to each other to act as a security buffer. It hides Klockwork’s I.P. So if someone does manage, like we have, to track the Botnet to its source, they’ll only encounter these proxies.”

“But…” Aiden trailed off as he reached for his phone. Putting the call on speaker, he placed his phone in front of him.

“Get any leads?” Ray asked in greeting.

“Maybe. We found the hacker, and her computers. She’s using a CGI web proxy to shield Klockwork’s I.P and distribute the Botnet.”

“Well fuck me sideways. That ain’t good.”

Aiden snorted in amusement. “No, but I’ll connect you to her system, see if you can spot the irregularities.”

Taking out a lead from his pocket, Aiden plugged his phone into the computer.

“I’ve been digging around the Botnet, there’s only a dozen emails there.”


“Why is that interesting?” Hayley asked.

“I think these emails are being used for a specific reason. A botted systems periodically checks in with the server for instructions. These Bots are due to contact the server in two days, in which these emails will be bombarded with spam. But it’s odd, Botnet’s are used to send thousands of spam emails, not just to a few dozen, that defeats the entire purpose of a Bot.”

Hayley let her eyes rove over the list. “So you’re thinking these emails might be a lead? Can you find out who these emails belong to?”

Putting his head to the side, Aiden considered her question. “Possibly. Although people can be difficult to track through emails alone.”

“So,” Ray interjected, “We could send some spam out of our own. Only with our own little virus attached to try and get remote access to their device. See what fish takes the bait.”

Aiden grinned. “Exactly.”

“So what’s the plan? Wipe her hard drive and shut down the Bot?” Hayley asked.
“No,” Aiden replied sharply. “I doubt Cr0w wouldn’t have a backup system in place if something like that did occur. This is our only direct access to Klockwork and if we shut it down, we risk alerting whoever created the site that something’s wrong.”

“Okay, so what is the plan?”

With his fingers, Aiden tapped a slow rhythm on the table, expression contemplative.

“The emails are the key,” he said finally. “For all Cr0w’s blustering about me just accessing her Botnet files, there’s remarkably little here. There’s some nasty viruses she’s cooked up but, I don’t think this is her main rig.” Aiden gave a dismissive shrug. “Anyway, my instinct is telling me those emails are the key.”

“I agree,” Ray piped in. “I’ve cloned her system so we can track the commands the Bot sends.”

“Thanks T-Bone,” Aiden said as he ended the call.

“What now?”

A glimmer of a smile curved his lips. “We follow the digital dust.”

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“Click on the free virus protection link,” Aiden instructed.

“How do people fall for this?” Ray asked shaking his head as he clicked on the link.

“Now click on the renew section of the page,” Aiden said as he looked down at the tablet in his hand.

Two days after they’d found Cr0w, the Botnet had sent what looked like regular spam to the dozen email addresses on the server. Aiden and Ray had both tried to access the Botnet email accounts and despite the hidden viruses they’d sent under the guise of either porn or official looking emails, none of the people associated with the accounts had clicked on them.

Hayley scooted closer to Aiden’s chair and re-read the spam email.

__________

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am writing to provide you with a free version of our new virus protection system. Follow the links and you can download our program for free.

freevirusprotection. com /webhp?hl=en&sa=X&ved= 0ahUKEwjJ8IfOv6jQAhUCH5

Renew / Premium Installation / Android / Activation Assistance

Best regards,

Hudson934563385

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And that was the entire contents of the spam email. They’d all sat there, blinking in confusion. Hayley wasn’t sure what she expected from the spam, maybe the usual; ‘Dear Sir/Madam, permit me to introduce myself. I am an Arab Prince with a few months to live, and I want to gift you my inheritance ….’

Ray had sat staring at the screen intently for a few minutes before he was a flurry of activity on the keyboard. He’d opened up the file which held the original Botnet code from Malcom. He pointed out that the web address from the spam email was one of the ones embedded in the original Botnet file.

Hayley had watched the thoughts run across Ray’s face as he flipped ideas through his mind like a Rubix cube, finally clicking into place. It was what made him a brilliant hacker; intrinsic ingenuity combined with his innate skill to see beyond the normal parameters.

“It’s not really spam,” he’d insisted. “It’s cleverly disguised as spam but the email is a set of instructions on how to access Klockwork.”

It fit. If they’d stumbled across the site accidentally, how were others supposed to access Klockwork without a detailed set of instructions? So they’d followed the instructions provided by the Botnet spam email, hoping it’d give them access to Klockwork.

“How are you going to pay up if you’re wrong?” Aiden asked as a smile danced across his normally impassive expression.

Giving a little chortle of amusement, Ray turned back to his monitor and typed in what he believed were the credentials. Again, Hayley held her breath, waiting to see an error. Instead, the site connected.

Hayley gave Ray a companionable tap on the shoulder. “At least your reproduction organs are safe.”

“Final link,” Aiden said. “Bottom of the page, click on ‘Activation Assistance’.”

Hayley held her breath as the webpage loaded. But any doubts about Ray’s hunch fell away as the Klockwork site loaded on-screen.

“Shit, you were right,” Hayley remarked quietly.

Aiden grunted. “We’re still staring at a log on screen with no credentials.”

A wry smile unveiled itself across Ray’s features as he leaned over and plucked the tablet out of Aiden’s hand.

“I do believe we have the credentials. Watch,” Ray instructed.

The older hacker scrolled to the bottom of the spam email and pointed. “Under regards, see that?”

Ray pointed at the random assignment of numbers and letters Hayley had dismissed.

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“I’d bet my left nut that those are log on credentials,” Ray pronounced, nodding vigorously.

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“What is it? What is Klockwork?” Hayley asked.
Shaking his head, Ray shrugged. “I don’t know. There’s a video here. Do you want me to play it?”

Aiden gave an impatient sigh. “No, keep us in the dark a little longer, I just love the suspense.”

Letting out a low sound of annoyance, Ray sent Aiden an exasperated look before pressing play.

The video revealed one man standing in front of a camera. Dressed entirely in black, his suit fit impeccably. Hayley blinked as she recognized him.

“That’s Michael Quinn,” she whispered.

“Welcome,” Quinn said, extending his arms out in a hospitable gesture. “I regret the subterfuge which has necessitated the concealment of this new business endeavor. The collapse of certain powerful factions in Chicago combined with Blume’s current methods of digital surveillance have meant that the nature of our business require a more covert approach.”

“However mildly inconvenient the methods needed to access this site, it has provided the opportunity to not only trial our new product, but also appreciate how difficult it will be for unwanted third parties to discover our venture.”

“The future of criminal enterprise resides in the digital world. Our upcoming auction is a trial, a way for old and new players to understand that the Quinn legacy is still very much a relevant force, adapting to new technologies and learning from past transgressions. My grandfather made a mistake collaborating with the Viceroy’s. Uncivilized, irresponsible, and under the tempestuous leadership of Iraq, their partnership was doomed to failure. The last auction my grandfather held was an unmitigated disaster. I stand before you today to show you how different the Club’s leadership and business deals will be from here forth. Lucky resisted new technology. I won’t make the same mistake.”

“The Chicago South Club, under my leadership, is embarking on a new venture. With this auction, I’m offering more than just pliable flesh. I’m providing the future of domestic servitude.”

As Quinn paused and gestured for someone off-screen, Ray gave a low whistle. “He’s just shitting all Granddaddy Quinn. That’s a bold move and I ain’t sure that’ll go down well.”

Hayley watched as a woman was dragged on-screen. She was mostly naked, wearing only a thong. Pretty, with blonde hair and a lovely figure, her skin was milky pale. A man wearing a mask over his face, pulled the woman towards Quinn. She was wearing a device around her wrist, looking much like a Smart Watch but much thicker.

Quinn wrapped his hand around her forearm and lifted until her wrist was in front of him. Hayley’s chest constricted as she watched the woman. Her face was expressionless, a vacant echo of anguish resonating in her features. Only her eyes showed any emotion, dulled with the depth of her despair.

“Most of you are likely speculating on what Klockwork could be,” Quinn paused as an anaemic grin flitted across his face. “I’d like to introduce you to a device I’ve named Klockwork. It’s the world’s first Bio-Harness.”

Tapping on the watch, Quinn angled it so they could see the screen lighting up. The person behind the camera zoomed in on the watch face. Quinn continued to talk off-screen.

“Bluetooth enabled, the device comes with a 180 bit encryption. Each girl purchased at the auction will come equipped with a Klockwork device.”

“And just what is the purpose of this device?” Quinn asked his audience as the camera panned
towards him. An unpleasant smile shaped his face into something repellent.

“Like everything else in this world, prostitution has gone digital. This device can be controlled from an app on your smart phone. The device can’t be removed by anyone who doesn’t have the controlling app. If the girls try, an alarm is tripped and a small, non-lethal dose of Ketamine is released. Since the device measures heart rate, breathing, skin temperature, the correct dose will be injected based on the girl’s biometric measurements. If needed, the app can also instigate a lethal dose of ketamine. The watch will self-destruct, leaving no evidence. Dead girls can’t talk after all. That feature of Klockwork isn’t the primary purpose of the device. During the auction I’ll unveil the real function.”

Quinn paused and had the audacity to allow an amused smirk to crawl over his face.

“By now,” he continued, “you would have tried our latest venture, the digital drug Gnaural. I know many of you doubted it was possible, but the Club has a silent partner able to provide the latest in digital advancements. Gnaural will be the drug of the future. Each attendee will have the opportunity to invest in this new drug.”

“Our auctions must remain undetected. Too many people knew of Lucky’s last auction, and he relied too heavily on Police bribes to keep them secret. I’ve devised a different, more secure approach. Once Gnaural hits the streets, all you’ll need to do is install the digital drug on your device. The app will do the rest, sending out a spam email, much like you received to log on today, which will provide a set of instructions for logging on to the Klockwork. Different log on credentials will be used for each auction, ensuring the safety of our business.”

Michael Quinn clasped his hands in front of him and smiled.

“Once this video ends, you can download the file which will reveal the location of the auction. I look forward to showing you a new era of the Chicago South Club.”

The screen faded to black and a file popped up on screen. None of them spoke, just sat there in silence staring at the screen.

Eventually, Ray coughed. “Well….now we know what Klockwork is.”

“Not completely,” Hayley contradicted. “It sounds like it has another function besides injecting a drug into those girls’ system.”

“Yeah, well that’s bad enough,” Ray conceded. He turned around, away from the computer screen. “That was a risky fucking move though, appearing on camera like that. Quinn must be very confident in whoever created the site’s security. Admittedly, it’s a brilliant stratagem. Who’d have thought that instructions to log on to a human trafficking website would be hidden inside a Digital Drug? Gnaural will be more popular than Digital Trips so it’s like hiding in plain sight. It sounds complicated but all they have to do is download the app, let it install a virus so they can receive spam from the Botnet and they have a way of logging on to the site. No way to be tracked by the Cops either.

Hayley made a noise of disgust. “The silent partner Quinn mentioned, that has to be Julian Collins. At Blume he’s got access to all the latest tech. He’d have the means to set up such a complicated firewall.”

Turning in her chair, Hayley looked across at Aiden who had yet to say anything.

“We have to infiltrate that auction,” Aiden remarked. There was a tight, controlled edge to his voice,
like he was finding it difficult to hold in whatever emotion he was feeling. “If Quinn pulls off that auction, the Club will start to rebuild their shattered empire. I’ve worked too hard to let that happen.”

“And rescue those girls,” Hayley insisted.

Aiden looked over at her, that famously blank expression he’d cultivated into an art form, registering no reaction. Hayley had never learnt that trick, hiding her emotions. Carved across her face, her feelings were an open canvas for all to see. And she could feel the incense start to push tight across her skin. Because she knew that Aiden’s priorities weren’t those women, it was ruining the Club.

“Right,” Aiden confirmed after a meaningful pause.

“Aiden, we’re rescuing those women. That’s non-negotiable. They’re just as important as shutting down this auction.”

He cut Hayley a hard look. “I disagree. Disrupting this auction is the priority. Making Michael Quinn look incompetent will hinder any future auctions. There’s a reason why the Club has struggled to gain any type of traction since Lucky died. Niall couldn’t fill his shoes, and with his death there’s even less confidence in Michael’s leadership. This auction isn’t just a clumsy grab for power, Quinn has been setting this up for months. He’s got the digital drug and this new device. He’s made some deal with Blume’s CIO so he’s got the technical backing. Now he just needs to prove his leadership and the Club will be back on top. We’re sacrificing a few lives for possibly hundreds of others.”

The problem was, strategically, Hayley could understand Aiden’s point. Sacrificing the lives for the good of the many. She’d had to make similar choices while on assignment. It was Aiden’s apparent indifference to the lives of the women currently being held was what Hayley had issue with.

Shaking her head, Hayley looked over Ray, seeking his support. Ray’s jaw clenched as anger fluttered briefly over his face.

“That ain’t gonna fly Aiden. You can do both; shut down the auction and rescue those girls. What if this was your sister they were holding?” Ray asked.

Aiden glared at Ray, letting the heat of his anger rest on him.

“These women can’t just be cannon fodder. We have to at least try. Promise me that we’ll try. Please.”

In quick succession irritation and antagonism skipped across Aiden’s expression like a stone bouncing across a lake, before finally landing on resignation. He gave her a long appraising stare, nothing showing on his face. Then, Aiden gave her a stiff nod. It didn’t escape Hayley’s notice that he didn’t verbalize his promise.

“Okay,” Hayley gave an irritable shrug, choosing not to push the issue. She’d rescue those women with or without Aiden’s help. “What about Julian Collins, what are we going to do about him? If we take out Quinn, that still leaves Blume’s CIO. What if he’s not at the auction?”

Ray stroked his beard in contemplation. “I hate to say this but we gotta take a chance. There’s no way to know if he’ll be there and we have to deal with this auction now. From what Quinn is saying, it doesn’t look like Gnural is on the streets yet. He’s taking this opportunity to push his new product at this auction, so we can pop two balloons with one dart. You can always go after Collins later.”

“So where is the auction being held?” Hayley asked.

Scooting around, Ray clicked on the file.
“Son of a bitch,” Aiden muttered. “He’s holding the auction at the last place Lucky did. It’s a boat storage lot at Brandon Docks.”

Ray let out an appreciative snort. “This kid’s got balls, I’ll give him that. It certainly sends a message doesn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Aiden agreed, barbed apparition of humor vanishing to be replaced by a sober expression. “Well he’s not going to like my response.”
Lights glittered like stars had dropped to the earth, lighting the buildings of Brandon Docks as they appeared to collide in a mixture of shadow and geometry. Aiden swiped across the screen of his phone to change camera feeds. He watched as a Club enforcer patrolled the edge of the docks, automatic weapon held tightly in his hand.

Two days. That’s all he’d had to prepare to infiltrate the auction. The first time he’d penetrated the building had been under the guise of Nicholas Crispin. That had taken days of behind-the-scenes planning and he’d still barely escaped with his scalp intact.

Brandon Docks covered a large area; businesses operated during the day, while loading vehicles were in perpetual motion moving shipping containers, both day and night. Club security could not physically cover the entire region. Even after taking over ctOS’s surveillance cameras, there were far too many workers to keep track of and assess as potential risks. That was the weakness of the auction’s location. And their way inside.

Footsteps crunched behind Aiden. He quickly dropped the phone in his pocket and swung the rifle around on the shoulder strap. Hayley stepped around a shipping container and Aiden relaxed his grip.

A tactical vest was strapped across Hayley’s chest, ammo pouches with Velcro lids on the right side bulging with spare M16 magazines. On the left, a pistol holster held her Glock, angled for easy access. A few grenades were secured to her belt, and he knew she had a knife strapped against the back of her vest.

As Hayley walked towards him, M16 held in a loose grip, he watched the effortless way she carried herself under the weight of her vest. The gear seemed like a natural extension rather than an encumbrance.

He’d originally only partnered with Hayley out of necessity and to keep her safe. The irony of that idea wasn’t lost on him, Aiden knew he’d endangered Hayley more than protected her. Now, months later, he realized that he’d become to depend on Hayley, on her skill in combat and in the knowledge that she’d always back him up. Hayley may not have the same technical capacity as his last partner, but he could always contact T-Bone for that kind of support. Hayley’s solid dependability was far more valuable to him.

For years, Damien had been his backup, an acerbic voice in his ear, guiding him through dangerous situations. He missed that aspect of their partnership. But unlike Hayley, Damien had never risked anything beyond a case of Carpel Tunnel. Sitting behind his computers, Damien viewed the world through the safety of a screen, so he never really understood that Aiden was the one risking everything.

But after tonight, when they took down this operation, Aiden had decided he wouldn’t allow Hayley to take any more risks for him. Despite the appeal of a continued partnership, he’d go back to operating alone. She had a life to live, a life without the danger which accompanied him. While Hayley had made it clear that she wanted him to be part of her life, he would make sure she didn’t have to sacrifice anything more to be with him.
“Ok kiddies, I’ve tagged all the security around the main building and uploaded it to your phones. I’ve had to be careful about moving the cameras. The little bastards have taken over ctOS access so I don’t want to interfere too much. If they discover someone’s inside the system it might spook them.”

Retrieving his phone from his pocket, Aiden scanned the map T-Bone uploaded. Small red dots moved slowly around the area, showing the exact location of each Club guard.

Aiden suspected that the Club had hired mercenaries for the auction, because Profiler revealed most of the security personnel had some type of Military background. It was an added complication. Being a Club enforcer didn’t always require a security background, just a propensity for violence and a willingness to kill without hesitation. The auction was crawling with security, so just breaking into the area was going to be difficult enough without escaping from a well-armed security force.

Over the last few days of watch the Club prepare for the auction, it became apparent that every Club guard used an ear piece and checked in on a semi-regular basis. Another complication. They couldn’t take out any guards without alerting the others there was a breach. To circumvent this he’d purchased a radio scanner capable of monitoring dozens of frequencies. The frequencies the Club used were encrypted but it hadn’t taken much to bypass.

After monitoring their frequency, T-Bone had recorded the conversations digitally. With T-Bone monitoring Club comms, and even after a guard was neutralized, he’d be able to replicate their call sign without raising an alarm.

Hayley blew out a slow breath. “You ready?”

Aiden completed a final scan of the area, making a mental note of roughly where the guards were. Pocketing his phone, he cast an eye over the docks. Dusk had firmly settled across the landscape, weaving red and gold like spun cotton across the sky.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Aiden paused around the corner of the nearest shipping container and waited for the Club soldier to walk towards him. As he rounded the corner, Aiden delivered a vicious strike to his throat with the V of his forefinger and thumb. The move temporarily collapsed his oesophagus, making him drop like a stone.

Hayley moved out from the darkness, a spectral shadow until the light fell across her face as she bent towards the fallen Club soldier. He gargled, eyes rolling back in his head. She eased her knife into his neck, killing him instantly. Grabbing an arm each, they dragged the unconscious guard into the nearest open shipping container.

Palming his phone, Aiden opened the schematics and noted the location of the next guard. At least at the outer edge of the auction’s perimeter the guards were scarce. They needed to be vigilant the closer they approached the auction. One slip up and they could forget ever entering the site.

“Move five yards down and hold,” T-Bone ordered.

Hayley obligingly moved forward, and Aiden trailed behind. T-Bone had wanted to accompany them inside the auction but Aiden needed an eye in the sky. He hadn’t really pushed the issue beyond a few grumbles. The older hacker didn’t have the same level of experience in infiltration as Aiden or Hayley did. Privately, Aiden wasn’t assured T-Bone wouldn’t slow them down. Besides, T-Bone was far more useful behind his rig, guiding them through this minefield of Club security.
“Two guards north of your position,” T-Bone warned.

Keeping low and tight to the corners, they advanced fluidly like two lethal components controlled by the same brain. Without a word, Hayley peeled away from him, the darkness swallowing her form as she circled around, in front of the two guards while he flanked them.

Peering around the corner of a container, he watched the two men approach Hayley’s position. Looking up, he saw the nearest camera being angled away from him. Carefully, he stepped out into the open. Both men had their backs to him and he saw the glint of a semi-automatic. Both guards’ heads swivelled slowly as they assessed their environment.

Aiden moved forward, careful to keep in the middle of both of them, narrowing their peripheral awareness. In that half second when Aiden sensed the guy would whirl around, he reached out and seized the man’s wrist, yanking it away from the assault rifle while deliver three successive punches to the man’s face.

The man’s companion reacted quickly, confirming Aiden’s suspicions these were not ordinary Club soldiers. He’d tangled with enough of them to know they rarely had those types of reflexes. But out the corner of his eye, Aiden saw Hayley strike. The blade was already tearing across the man’s throat before he could yell, he fell to the ground clutching his mangled neck.

Aiden brought his rifle around and squeezed the trigger. The suppressor gave a muted cough and the soldier, still reeling from his punches, collapsed, dead before he hit the ground.

Aiden watched Hayley bend down, knife poised above the man’s chest. He gargled wetly and reached out. Hayley struggled to remain indifferent, jaw clenching in agitation as she eased the knife into his heart. While grisly, Aiden knew it was necessary to stab him because men did not die instantly from knife wounds to the throat. It took a while to bleed out, but flooding their throat with blood ensured he wouldn’t be screaming for his comrades as he inevitably drowned. Hayley was saving the man from undue suffering but she wouldn’t really see it that way. Withdrawing the knife, Hayley making a face as she wiped the excess blood on his sleeve and stood up.

Grabbing the now deceased guard, Aiden followed Hayley as she dragged her own dead weight out of sight of the cameras.

“What’s our status?” Hayley whispered, the sound of her voice carrying despite the cloth covering the lower part of her face. Her eyes glowed faintly in the darkness, almost like a cat’s reflective gaze.

“You’re cutting it close,” T-Bone informed her. “The attendees are entering the auction. A lot of the security have converged towards the main building. You should be able to skirt the majority of the patrolling guards.”

“And the comms?” Aiden asked.

A slight pause. “Only one has made contact. I’ve relayed the call sign. No alarms have been tripped so I’m guessing there’s no issue.”

Aiden grunted distractedly, mentally reviewing the route they’d planned. He checked the suppressor, impressed by the reduction in volume from the round he’d discharged. He hadn’t used that suppressor before and liked that it was almost unidentifiable as a gunshot.

Hayley gripped her knife, preferring to use it in close-quarter combat. And she was very good at it. If anyone could bring a knife to a firefight and potentially win, it’d be Hayley.

“Alright, we’re on the move again T-Bone.”
Grey clouds had swooped into the air like an armed patrol and surrounded the moon from all sides, imparting a claustrophobic tension. Visibility was low, the world around etched in charcoal. It was ideal conditions for infiltration, the darkness working for them like an unintended ally.

In her ear, Hayley listened for Ray’s instructions, following at a discreet distance behind Aiden as they manoeuvred between shipping containers. A metallic taste had lodged in her throat; Hayley wasn’t sure if it was the result of being near so much iron or just a physical manifestation of her heightened adrenaline.

Aiden stopped and Hayley froze. He looked behind and signalled her to come forward as he crouched down. Bending down next to him Hayley observed two guards.

The only point of entry they’d identified as even remotely plausible was a chain linked gate at the very rear end of the building. It was a back entrance for loading boats into the yards. Every other entrance close to the auction building was too heavily guarded.

A few minutes passed as they waited for the guards to move away from the area. But it became apparent very quickly that they’d been ordered to remain outside the gate.

“Fuck,” Aiden muttered, hand clenching impatiently around the rifle’s grip. “T-Bone, can you access the cameras above them?”

“Nope. I don’t even know if it’s on. It could be and it’s operating on a separate network.”

Irritation swam across Aiden’s expression.

“We need to draw them out,” Hayley surmised. “Away from this area. Then take them out and get inside. We have to take that risk. Hopefully whoever is manning the cameras will be too involved with the auction starting to notice.”

Jaw clenching, Aiden considered her suggestion. Eventually he nodded.

“T-Bone, I’m going to hack their phones, draw them away from that gate. You need to block their outgoing communications. I’ll make it seem like they’re needed elsewhere, but I need them to walk away from the area relatively calmly. Any sudden exit will look suspicious.”

“No problem,” Ray acknowledged.

Looking across at her, Aiden fixed her with a hard stare. “Be ready. They’ll probably know something’s not right when they can’t contact anyone.”

Hayley nodded. She watched the men’s reactions as they both received a text simultaneously. One of them jumped, startled, then looked at his companion and gave a small, sheepish grin. Digging their phones out, they both read the message. She could just see the frown form on both their faces. The taller of the guards reached up and pressed his ear, obviously trying to contact someone. His companion tried his earpiece but received the same result. Both men grabbed their guns, agitation settling over their features.

Tapping her shoulder, Aiden signalled her to withdraw. Hayley positioned herself at the end of a shipping container near the walkway and watched Aiden disappear behind another on the opposite side.

The two guards strode out a few moments later, sidearm drawn, demeanor agitated. Aiden stepped
out as soon as their backs were turned to him. The taller one must have sensed movement because he swung around quickly. Aiden deflected the gun and punched the guard so hard she actually heard the cartilage in his nose crack.

As the other guard brought his weapon up, Hayley lurched forward, grabbed his wrist and spun him around. She rammed the knife up through the bottom of his jaw to penetrate so deeply into the brain that the knife scraped the inside of the top of his skull. The guy was dead on his feet, though his body hasn't gotten the same memo, twitching spasmodically as she pushed him over.

They moved the bodies away from the area but could do nothing about the large puddle of blood. The light from a nearby lamppost highlighted the stain almost mockingly.

Moving to the very edge of the fence, hopefully away from the camera’s line of sight, Hayley removed plyers from one of her vest pockets and handed them to Aiden while she watched the perimeter.

The cessation of the neat clipping sound indicated that Aiden had cut through the fence. Handing the plyers back to her, Aiden ducked inside, holding the chain-link up as she passed under. Inside, beached boats lay in their cradles, their stark white undercarriages looking like whalebones she’d seen in Chicago’s Field Museum.

A few large ramps led up to roller doors, all the same grey color of unburnished silver, dull and spotted with years of water damage. Aiden ignored those entrances, instead continued to walk amongst the boats, coming to a stop in front of a door, a console flashing red beside it. Already with his phone out, he hacked in.

“Okay T-Bone, we’re in.”

“Good luck.”

The hallway was dark, only a few of the fluorescent lights had been left on. Hayley looked up instinctively, seeking out the familiar outline of a camera. She blew out a relieved breath when she discovered none. They had made a calculated risk that the inside of this particular building wouldn’t have many, if any, cameras. They were taking many calculated risks and it sat uneasily with Hayley. Two days of disjointed planning wasn’t nearly enough time. Gaining access to this building was the easiest part of their plan, and just because it was going relatively smoothly so far, didn’t mean it wouldn’t turn to shit at any moment.

The glow from the screen lit up Aiden’s face. He frowned slightly and Hayley bent her head over the phone. Hayley watched as his program searched for other phone signals in the area. As soon as the signals were found, they were overlayed on the buildings schematics giving them an accurate location of everyone in the area.

Pocketing the phone, Aiden unslung his rifle and looked over at her, the smallest smile flirting with his mouth. Forgoing his normal attire, Aiden wore the same tactical gear she did, only it made him look sleekly graceful and inherently lethal.

“Try and leave one guy alive,” Hayley reminded him, not liking the predatory gleam she saw reflected in his gaze.

The noise he made was too low for her to tell whether it was a scoff or a laugh as he turned and walked down the hallway.

It was eerily silent as they made their way through the building, the darkness throwing odd shadows
across their path. Despite knowing the auction was in the building opposite, Hayley remained alert as she followed Aiden through the long hallways.

The sudden light spilling across their path indicated they’d reached their destination. Aiden retrieved his phone, swiping across the screen. He angled the screen towards her so she could see.

“There are two stationary signals outside the door. Likely security. In the room there are another three signals moving about,” Aiden whispered as he tucked his phone back in his pocket. “Ready?”

Hayley took a deep breath and nodded. Gripping her M16, she followed Aiden towards the end of the corridor. He gave the signal and they both walked out of cover.

The men at the end of the hallway jerked their gazes towards them, latching on to their weapons. The men reached for their own guns but Hayley squeezed the trigger, felt the M16 jerk against her shoulder. The suppressor gave a subdued cough, and a small red hole appeared on the man’s forehead before he crumpled to the floor. The guy next to him mimicked his fall, like both their strings had been cut.

Aiden reached the fallen men before her, reached down and rolled one over. He snatched the keycard hanging from his belt. He looked over at her and Hayley nodded as she set herself up to enter the room.

Reaching over, Aiden swiped the keycard and pushed open the door for her. As Hayley entered, she swept her gaze around the room, ignoring the impressive amount of computer equipment and marking her targets.

Two men sat at the rear of the room, typing on their keyboard and didn’t even glance up. She ignored them, instead sought out the other occupant in the room.

The man glanced across at Hayley, blinked once, twice, clearly trying to discover who she was. On the third blink, his training kicked in and he was bringing his weapon up. It didn’t matter, Hayley had already fired, and the bullet tore through his eye socket. A small sigh escaped as he slumped forward over the table.

Finally, the two other men reacted. One of them, a small guy barely out of his teens, spun around on his chair, mouth hanging open. He looked dumbly down at the dead guy on the table, then back up at Hayley. He threw his hands up in the air as Hayley trained her gun on him.

The second guy was older, probably mid-thirties. His initial shock had worn off and he’d stood up, the fear starting to peel away as anger edged into his expression. He clenched his fists and took a step towards Aiden. What he hoped to achieve Hayley didn’t know. Aiden merely walked towards him, lifted his rifle and struck him across the head. The guy collapsed on the floor, letting out a thin moan. From his pocket Aiden retrieved a pair of flexi-cuffs and tied his hands behind his back.

Aiden walked over and stood in front of the young guy. He tilted his head and the scarf wrapped around the lower part of his face appeared to fuse with the shadows around him. It had an odd affect, making him look like some ghostly apparition with glinting green eyes.

Slowly, Aiden reached up and pulled down the scarf, a smirk revealing itself as his face was exposed. The I.T guy jerked like he’d been electrocuted and made a gasping sound.

“Good. You know who I am,” Aiden said as a rueful smile danced across his normally intractable expression. “What’s your name?”

“Luke, I need access to those systems. Can you get me access?”

Aiden waited as Luke gaped at him, impatience lurking beneath his benign expression.

Luke shook his head in the negative. Aiden’s arm shot out, grabbed his neck and forced his head towards the dead soldier on the table.

“This guy got off easy. I’ll start shooting body parts unless you get me into your systems.”

Keeping Luke’s face pinned near the dead guard’s head for a few seconds more, Aiden suddenly let go of his neck. Luke hunched his shoulders inwards and let out a pitiful groan.

“What’s your decision Luke, you have about ten seconds to decide…” Aiden remarked, letting the sentence fade away, leaving the distant echo of a threat in the unspoken words.


Aiden let out a satisfied chuckle. “Good choice.”

A groan from the other I.T guy interrupted whatever Aiden as about to say. He’d started to regain consciousness but Hayley had neither the patience nor the attention to spare. So she just unslung her rifle as she walked over to him and used the edge to strike his head again. His eyelids fluttered and he let out a soft sigh. Aiden quirked an amused eyebrow at her but she just shrugged.

“Just a heads up Luke,” Aiden started, tapping him on the shoulder in a falsely amiable gesture, “try to warn someone that we’re here and you will be the first person I shoot.”

Luke grimaced away from Aiden’s hand as he dug his fingers into the younger man’s shoulder.

“Bring up the cameras from the auction. Is there audio?”

Hesitating, Luke nodded his head in affirmation and hit a few keys. The screens showed a small gathering of people around a large stage. The low murmur of voices glided around the room, expectation and reservation joining forces to create a subdued atmosphere.


They didn’t have to wait long. As Quinn walked up the stairs and on to the stage, his overwhelming confidence, if not subtle arrogance, was immediately apparent.

“Gentlemen, thank you for coming. I know you’re all aware that the Chicago South Club has undergone a shift in leadership recently and you’re understandably wary about the future of our organization. I stand before you today to demonstrate a new era for the Club.”

Quinn gave an impatient wave of his hand to someone off stage. They watched as a woman, wearing nothing but skimpy white underwear, was dragged on-stage. Grabbing the woman’s arm, Quinn lifted her wrist with the Klockwork device attached.

“As I’ve explained before, this device, Klockwork, acts as a bio-harness, GPS tracker and can inject a dose of Ketamine. All these features can be controlled by an app. But the real function of the device is to reinvent the way prostitution is delivered to clients. Klockwork uses state-of-the-art technology to provide a virtual pornographic experience.”

“The path of evolution for sex technology is already obvious. As others are just seeing the dawn of
virtual reality with clumsy headsets, we've created the ultimate sensory experience. The Klockwork device acts as a transmitter, conducting images onto contact lenses which will allow the client to experience any number of sexual scenarios. There are hundreds of sexual fantasies we've developed which the client can choose from and immerse themselves in. Only unlike current VR tech, where the experience is purely digital, we offer the girls as part of the immersive experience. Imagine being able to offer clients their most craved after sexual fantasies. The appearance of the girls can even be changed, what matters is that it offers the full physical and sexual experience.”

Looking over the small crowd, Quinn a glimmer of a smile curved his lips. “Who’d like to trial it?”

A small murmur went through the crowd, the darkness making it seem like there was a contorted black wave in front of Quinn as they shifted restlessly.

One guy stepped onto the stage and Quinn handed him a small case. Opening it, he placed the contact lenses in his eyes and looked expectantly at Quinn.

“T-Bone, make sure you run Profiler over every single person. I want a list of everyone in that room.”

In their earpiece, Ray grunted in affirmation.

“Take a look at the list,” Quinn encouraged, “decide what you’d like to try and tap on it. Let me know what you think.”

The man spent a few seconds scrolling through the list and Hayley wondered how kind of depraved sexual fantasies they’d developed. Obviously having decided, he handed the phone back to Quinn, then blinked rapidly as he stared at the woman on stage.

“Holy fuck,” he breathed. “It works. I feel like I’m my ideal porn video.” He reached out and touched the woman. “And she’s not blonde anymore, she actually looks Asian.” As the man glanced around, around, it was obvious the virtual reality world had impressed him.

An exultant smile sculpted Quinn’s expression. “And it’s interactive. Imagine the potential, the money clients would pay to have their very own sexual scenarios played out for real? It’s one thing to provide VR porn, another to provide it with real women.”

“BYO brothel,” the man chuckled.

Quinn bared his teeth, “Exactly.”

“How do I end this?”

Handing the phone over, Quinn tapped on screen. “Just double tap on Klockwork’s screen. The phone is merely a list of what we have to offer, it just triggers the device. Klockwork has all the scenarios loaded and when activated, transmits it on to your lens. Just don’t wear them for longer than 24 hours. They’re not like normal contact lenses.”

As Quinn continued to talk about Klockwork, Hayley turned away from the screen.

“Fuck,” Hayley swore. “This is …. Sick.”

She swallowed her disgust and looked over at Aiden. His jaw was clenched and he looked frighteningly furious. When he looked across at her, his lethal stare felt painful.

“Is there a way deactivate those devices?” Aiden turned and honed in on Luke, who visibly flinched
when he saw Aiden’s expression.

He stuttered for a few moments. Aiden scowled, turned back and set himself up in front of the screen.

“T-Bone, I can establish a connection for you to hack in. Once you’re in, download as much data as you can, and I’ll try and find if we can deactivate the ketamine trigger on the device.”

“No problem,” Ray confirmed.

Hayley paced nervously, watching distractedly as Quinn and the others vacated the area. Aiden grunted, the sound triumphant.

“I can’t switch off the device, but I can interrupt the specific frequency it will use to send the overdose command,” Aiden informed her.

“Do it, we have to get moving.”

Standing up, Aiden looked over at Luke. “Thanks for your help,” Aiden remarked, smashing his rifle into the side of the younger man’s head.

Luke grunted and fell forward, head bouncing on the table. Hayley dragged him off the chair and cuffed his hands.

“What now?”

Aiden shrugged and waved a hand towards the screen. “Knowing what Klockwork is changes nothing. We go still go ahead regardless. Let’s go.”

Hayley opened the door, ignored the bodies’ of the guards and turned right. Aiden trailed behind, concentrating on his phone.

“T-Bone, how’s the download coming along?” Aiden asked.

Walking towards the end of the hallway, Hayley waited for an answer beside the door. Their earpieces were silent.

“T-Bone?”

Nothing.

Frowning, he tried to call Ray on his cell, but it refused to connect. Hayley watched him access the cameras. He connected to half a dozen outside their immediate area but there was nothing suspicious.

“Something’s wrong,” she whispered.

Pocketing his phone, Aiden nodded. “I know.”

Ejecting the magazine, Aiden checked his ammo and clipped it back. “Outside’s clear. We need to move.”

Hayley reached over and opened the door, letting it swing outward. Tucking the stock of her M16 into her shoulder she stepped out after Aiden.

Danger brushed Hayley’s senses, a tingling awareness which immediately sharpened everything around her. Her gaze latched onto Aiden’s back, aware he’d taken a few steps outside but hadn’t
moved. When she felt the muzzle of a gun touch her shoulder, she realized why.

Her heart slammed inside her chest like a prisoner trying to escape its cage of muscle and bone as Hayley became aware of roughly a dozen men standing in a loose circle around them, all pointing automatic weapons.

She relaxed her shoulders slightly, enough to let whoever was pointing a gun at her know she wasn’t going to resist. *Yet.*

“Drop your weapons,” the man next to her demanded, giving her shoulder a slight push for emphasis.

Turning her head slightly, Hayley risked a look at Aiden. She could only see half of his face, but she recognized the stony expression, could almost feel the rage simmering beneath the surface. He didn’t react to the order, just stood immobile, hackles raising until the air bristled with tension.

The men in front shifted restlessly, Aiden was taking too long to act. The guard next to Aiden shoved an M11 into his head, hard enough to make Aiden grunt. Slowly, Aiden took his hands away from his rifle and let it swing on the strap.

“Slowly,” the guard growled, “put it on the floor and kick it towards me.”

Aiden did as he was told, and Hayley followed. She kept her arms up, feeling far too exposed without a gun in her hands. Scanning the men in front of them, she marked their weapons and positions.

Movement caught her eye and she watched a man walk casually past the men to stand a body’s length away from Aiden. She sucked in a surprised breath.

Michael Quinn.

“Finally, we get to meet face to face,” Quinn said, locking eyes with Aiden, an unpleasant smirk crawling across his face. “The famous Vigilante, killing my family under the guise of justice. I’ve waited a long time to shove your hypocrisy down your throat.”

Quinn swept his gaze towards her and bared his teeth in a poisonous smile.

“Lieutenant Parker,” Quinn acknowledged with a mocking nod of his head.

The use of her previous rank fell like ice water down her spine, freezing all her muscles as they contracted painfully in shock. The scarf covering her face felt suddenly and irrationally suffocating and Hayley felt hard pressed not to reach up and remove it. Dozens of thoughts sparked, careening around her mind until they all tumbled together, creating one panic induced thought; they knew who she was.

Shifting his gaze back to Aiden, Quinn cocked his head and gave a low, satisfied chuckled which just oozed with malevolence. He took a step forward in his expensive shoes and delivered a brutal punch across Aiden’s mouth. Quinn punched Aiden three more times, once in the head and twice in the stomach.

Hayley took an unconscious step forward but froze when the muzzle of a rifle bumped her head in warning.

Aiden dropped to the floor on one knee and took a few breaths. Whipping his head up, blood flowed from a split lip and dripped over his chin. His green eyes flashed dangerously, violence forecasted in
Quinn's patronising smile dropped slightly as Aiden continued to stare at him, no doubt feeling the heat of Aiden's anger as it burnt away his arrogant veneer. Dropping his gaze, Quinn took a few steps back. Hayley snorted quietly, not fooled by the deliberate distance he put between himself and Aiden.

“You’re not the only one who can fuck with ctOS. You walked right into a web I’ve been spinning for months. I knew you’d come here. I’ve cut you off from your tech, used it against you.”

If Aiden had accessed the cameras to this courtyard and seen none of the men surrounding them now, it meant that Ray also had no hope of seeing them. Or if he did, couldn’t help because Quinn had jammed their communications.

Over the initial shock, Hayley’s mind was running through scenarios, trying to determine weak points and possible escape routes. A dozen heavily armed and trained mercenaries were carrying a lot of firepower. But that there was a weakness there, something she could exploit. These men were not familiar with each other, had likely not trained together and wouldn’t risk injury to help another. If she could scatter them, it’d take a while for them to regroup, enough for her and Aiden to escape.

“It was fun to twitch the threads and watch you dance,” Quinn shrugged languidly. He had a slow, measured manner that seemed to put the echo of a sneer into everything he said and did. “That I’ve been able to trap you so effectively means you haven’t figured it out yet have you?”

Quinn seemed to be posturing like a peacock in front of his men, drawing out this confrontation as a way to assert his dominance. Hayley half expected him to start pissing on the shipping containers to mark his territory.

Aiden’s head would be a trophy piece for Quinn to cement his leadership. Because Aiden was a constant thorn in the Club’s side, disrupting their entire organization, their finances, drugs, weapons, even the legal businesses they ran were fair game to him. There was also a score to settle, Aiden had killed both Michael’s father and grandfather. No one else had come close to touching Aiden; so if Michael Quinn rose to power while dealing with the Vigilante, it would elevate his position as leader of the Club.

Aiden cocked an unimpressed eyebrow. “Your partnership with Blume’s Julian Collins?” Aiden sneered.

Quinn’s low laugh rippled through the air, the raucous sound grating because it was so insincere. He waved a hand airily. “Yes, yes,” Quinn remarked impatiently, “I know you’re aware of my deal with Julian. Just who do you think let you know we were working together?”

Hayley swallowed apprehensively when she started to realize they’d been played from the very beginning. Aiden kept quiet, Hayley could sense his patience unravelling like a ball of yarn.

“Don’t worry,” Quinn assured Aiden, “when you discover who’s helped set this up, you’ll start to understand a lot more. You don’t have a clue what’s been working behind the scenes for tonight to happen. You really thought you could disrupt my auction. I admit, it was a gamble to let you in so close, but the payoffs worth it. It’s been too easy. I must admit, I’m rather underwhelmed.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” Aiden muttered.

Quinn stepped towards Aiden quickly, and without warning, raised his foot and viciously kicked Aiden in the ribs. He grunted, the sound specked with pain.
“Everywhere you go you leave bodies. Switch on the news and it’s not that hard to recognize the special kind of carnage you leave behind. If I didn’t despise you I’d actually be impressed. Taking you out is a fucking public service.”

Aiden let out a dismissive laugh. “Lessons in morality from a human trafficker. The moral high ground is expensive real estate. Trust me, even with all your money, you can’t afford land there.”

Looking down on Aiden, Quinn’s eyes narrowed as animosity blackened his expression. Hayley shifted restlessly. The situation was rapidly tipping against them; they needed to act now, before Quinn implemented whatever he had planned. Better to get a bullet then have no avenue of escape. Hayley was under no illusion that what Quinn intended for Aiden wouldn’t be pleasant.

“Aiden,” Hayley called softly.

The man behind her grunted in irritation and said, “Shut the fuck up bitch or I’ll shoot you in the fucking head.”

Hayley ignored him. She stared across at Aiden, still hunched over. He titled his head slightly and met her gaze.

“We’re not bulletproof.”

For a few seconds, nothing happened. Hayley’s throat constricted as uncertainties tangled like vines in her mind. Then three simultaneous explosions roared across the night.

She had a second to watch Aiden push himself off the ground like a striking cobra. It was an easy graceful movement, grabbing his own rifle near the Club soldier to shoot him in the face.

Hayley reached behind her back where her combat knife was sheathed. The guy hadn’t disarmed her beyond taking the rifle. Maybe they thought she wasn’t a threat. Their mistake. The man behind her had moved the arm holding the rifle away from her head and was looking around for the source of the explosion.

Tucking the knife against her forearm, Hayley slashed across the man’s throat, felt the warmth of his blood splattering across her face. His hands came up instinctively to cup his throat, dropping his weapon. Hayley ignored it as it landed at her feet. Instead, she shoved her knife back in its sheath and scooped down to grab her own rifle. The AK-47 wouldn’t match the M16’s ammunition she carried and she knew she’d need every spare mag if she was going to escape.

Pressing the selector to automatic, she opened fire in a wide arc on the men in front of her. Her aim was off slightly as she ran away, but she noted with satisfaction that a few of the men, including Michael Quinn, went down.

Hayley ran, seeking the safety of the darkness at the edge of the courtyard. The Club soldiers recovered from their shock and opened fire. Hayley could feel the surge of high-octane adrenaline snaking through her veins, like a fast acting drug. She rode that precision as it heightened everything around her, felt like the sheer edge of a cut diamond.

Bullets bit into the bitumen around her feet, but then she was around the building and running fast. Hayley could hear the shouted commands of the men behind her, so she increased her pace. Darkness pressed in around her as she ran between the buildings. Slowing towards the end, Hayley tucked the stock into her shoulder and bent low to peek around the corner.

Bullets struck the brick near her head and she withdrew, looking nervously behind her. She could hear the men pursuing her. Hayley retreated behind some stacked wooden pallets, trying to give
herself time to think.

She watched the approaching men through the slats, too many to engage. She withdrew one of her grenades. Hooking a thumb in the pin, Hayley waited, sweat dripping down her face. Then she yanked the pin out, waited three seconds and threw it towards the men. The grenade rolled and landed almost flawlessly in the middle of them.

One of them shouted, but Hayley didn’t wait to see their fate, just kept low and ran towards the edge of the building. The blast created the perfect distraction, Hayley fired a few blind shots into the dark and escaped around the corner.

Shots peppered her position but she managed to duck behind an industrial size shelf holding dozens of smaller boats. Hayley bit out a curse. They’d blocked her in, to her left was the wall of another building, right the lines of shelves. She couldn’t go back, the grenade wouldn’t have taken out all the men.

And those gunshots, they’d come from three different positions. They were higher up, hidden. There was no way she could risk crossing the open to the gate, they’d pick her off. There was also no way those men could have got into position so quickly. They must have already been set up around the perimeter, waiting for them to be herded into an ambush.

Hayley clenched her teeth, worried that Aiden hadn’t followed her. But she had to believe he’d escaped and was unharmed.

Ejecting her magazine, Hayley checked the ammo, noted it was half empty and clicked it back into place. Keeping low, she ran the length of the shelves, halting at the edge. She was confronted by a huge warehouse and no other exit.

The sound of men’s voices filtered to her position. Hayley jerked her head around and sought out the location. From the gate she wanted to access, half a dozen men walked though. Hayley knew she couldn’t stay there, they were boxing her in and without Aiden she had no hope of taking on so many soldiers.

With no other option, Hayley sprinted towards the warehouse door, felt the percussive roar as a bullet whizzed past her head, missing her by mere inches. If the door was locked, she was dead.

Cold fingers of anxiety danced across her body as Hayley reached for the doorhandle. She pushed hard, felt resistance even as another bullet slammed into the door. Then it swung inwards and she threw herself inside. Hayley dropped low immediately and scanned ahead of her. Seeing no one inside the warehouse, she turned and looked for something to jam against the doorhandle. She spotted a flimsy looking chair, grabbed it and rammed it against the door.

She fled further into the warehouse, the echo of her footsteps matching her heartbeat. Hayley eyed the metal balcony above her, running the entire length of the warehouse. Jogging further into the building she tried to locate the stairs that would lead up to the balcony, training and instinct making her seek out a higher and better tactical position.

Finally spotting them, she was halfway up the stairs when she heard the door blast open. Sprinting the last few yards, she hid behind a desk on the balcony. Taking a deep breath, she ejected the magazine and slammed a fresh one in, not wanting to reload mid-fight.

Hayley knew she needed to take the men out quickly, surprise the majority and pick the rest off. As much as she liked the higher position, she was also aware that she’d trapped herself on the balcony as well.
Getting her phone out, Hayley ran a quick scan, and Aiden’s program identified the phones in the area. Quinn might have jammed cell signals but her phone and all its programs still worked.

Placing the phone near her shoe to keep an eye on the men’s positions, she set herself up on the desk. Darkness gathered around her like a black ocean as Hayley waited, finger curled around the trigger.

Hayley watched as three men entered the space below her, spread out enough that she’d probably only be able to take two out before the other reacted. The moment seemed perfect, and firing down at a sharp angle decreased the amount of bullet drop, placing the odds of a better shot in her favor.

Blowing out a breath, she sighted the weapon, curled her finger around the trigger and watched the man jerk back as a bullet struck his chin. Immediately, Hayley swung the muzzle and sighted the next man, just had time to squeeze off a few rounds, hitting his shoulder as he tried to escape. The next shot hit his vest, jerking him to the side. Finally, she hit flesh, shearing through his neck. Even from her position she saw the arterial spray from his jugular as he slumped to the ground.

The other guy had probably detected her muzzle flash so she withdrew behind the desk just as bullets struck the metal desk, resounding with little pings.

“Two down,” she muttered, taking a quick look at the phone to assess where the other four were.

The last guy on the floor was moving towards the stairs, Hayley couldn’t see him properly behind cover but was able to track his progress. Hayley waited until he’d reached the halfway mark in the stairs. She popped out behind the desk, watched as the Club soldier had to turn his back to her to round the stairs. Hayley took her shot, shearing the top of his head off, like an Indian scalping. She retrieved the phone and pocketed it.

Time to move.

Hayley ran along the balcony, the metal underfoot making more noise than she’d like. Bullets struck underneath, sparking against the metal as Hayley skidded behind some shelves. Hayley fired blindly down into the warehouse, heard a pained scream and in her heard counted off another she’d neutralized.

The magazine clicked empty, and she ejected it, scrambled for her last one, and slammed it in.

To her right, Hayley heard footsteps, realized she’d taken cover near another set of stairs. The moment swept by in a noiseless vacuum of slow motion. The two Club soldiers were already firing as they stepped up on to her level. Hayley felt the sting as a bullet burnt across her outer thigh.

Hayley opened fire herself, emptying her mag into the men. Their bodies jerked convulsively as she hit arms, legs, neck, anything not covered by their protective gear.

Hayley’s breathing was ragged, adrenaline and pain engulfing her senses. Reaching down, she felt the wound on her thigh. Luckily just a flesh wound but it fucking hurt like hell. She took an experimental step. Pain shot down her leg but she could walk.

Retrieving her phone, Hayley tried to contact Aiden again but the signal was still being jammed. So even if people heard the gunfire, they’d be unable to call the Cops. Not that she needed that complication, but still wasn’t sure if that was a positive or not.

Bringing up the schematics of the warehouse, Hayley was able to see a few exits. Ignoring the pain in her thigh, Hayley walked down the stairs. The silence after the deafening roar of automatic weapons was almost too much for Hayley’s nerves.

Finding a door on the other side of the warehouse, Hayley walked out cautiously. Shadows stretched
in the pale moonlight, making it hard to get her bearing. Accessing the phone, it took Hayley a few moments to orientate herself.

Staring at the schematics, she realized exactly where she was. Just around the corner from the warehouse was a building where the women were being held. During their reconnaissance over the last few days, they’d watched men bundle a few dozen women into that building. Hayley had deliberately marked the location. Their plan had always been to disrupt the auction, take down Quinn and rescue the women.

But what now? Their plan was in tatters, Hayley had no idea where Aiden was, and more importantly, had no back up. It was dangerous to stay in the area, it was crawling with Club security. Hayley checked her ammo, and discarded the M16 in disgust. So she had her Glock and one more clip.

Uncertainty cemented her legs to the ground as she vacillated between decisions. Escape or attempt a rescue? Was her safety more important than lives of those women? Their plan had failed, and Hayley knew that after tonight, getting to Quinn, Collins, those women, would be impossible. They’d take their operation underground and she’d spend probably months trying to find them again. Hayley wasn’t even sure how Quinn knew they were coming. So their attempt to disrupt the auction hadn’t been achieved, but Hayley was in a position to help those women.

Ultimately, Hayley knew she had to live with whatever decision she made in that moment. Already she lived with enough regret without adding to it. She couldn’t turn her back, her safety wasn’t any more important than the safety of those women. She’d been on ops to rescue Iraqi women and children who’d been taken from their villages, raped and sold into slavery. The devastation and suffering of those people had left a lasting impression.

Taking a quivery breath, Hayley chambered a round in her Glock and moved forward. Keeping to the shadows, the edge of the structures, she made her way towards the building holding the women.

Two Club soldiers stood outside the entrance. Hayley felt a sense of urgency nipping at her back. She didn’t have time to circle around and take the men out silently.

As Hayley stepped out of cover, Glock up, the moment swept by in a noiseless vacuum of slow motion as the guards spotted her. She pulled the trigger, before they had the chance to raise their weapons.

As the bullet passed through his forehead, the Club soldier’s head slammed back into the wall and he crumpled to the ground. Adjusting her aim, Hayley shot the other guy and he jerked liked a marionette, brains splattered over the back of the building.

A keycard reader barred her from entering. Swearing under her breath, Hayley took a quick look around as she dug out her phone. She initiated Aiden’s program, impatiently tapping her foot as she waited for the program to open the door for her. One beep and she was in.

The foyer was brightly lit, fluorescents lighting the way over the white tiled floor. The hallway led towards a door. Reaching out, Hayley was surprised when it opened. Gun up, she stepped into the room.

The room was enormous, two distinct levels with stairs at the end. If she was expending guards or any type of resistance, there was none. On each side of the walls were dozens of glassed partitions, and inside housed the kidnapped women.

One of the women closest to Hayley turned around and stared. The emptiness of her gaze was
disturbing, there was no recognition, like whatever she’d experienced had slowly drained away whatever reserves she had all that was left was a shell.

Hayley looked away, fury snapping through her synapses even as a sense of despondency clung to her. How the hell would she get these women out of here? Aiden had shut down the device on their arm, so at least she didn’t have to worry about it sending a lethal dose of ketamine into their systems if someone discovered they were gone. There were more women here than she knew what to do with. There was no way she could escape with so many.

And how did she get them out? The glass partitions had no door or handles so they must be controlled electronically. Regardless of the technicalities, Hayley had committed to this path and knew she had to see it through.

Slowly, she made her way towards the stairs, hoping she could find a way to open the doors upstairs. Walking on the second level, Hayley tried not to look at the women inside each partition. Their despair was almost a tangible presence, congesting the air and sinking into her skin to clog her pores. The silence was eerie, the lack of any guards making Hayley increasingly nervous.

At the end of the second story, next to the last partition, was a separate room. It looked like an office and had a keycard reader attached to the door. Hayley grabbed her phone, and once again Aiden’s programs allowed her entrance.

Snapping her gun up, Hayley entered the office, expecting to find someone but was greeted with the quiet whirr of CTU fans. Dozens of screens sat above computer equipment. Some showed security footage, others were cameras inside the women’s cells.

Walking over, Hayley placed her Glock on the desk beside her and tapped on the keyboard. The screensavers disappeared on the monitors. Hayley tried to access the programs, but knew she was out of her depth. Frustration and tension tightened her throat as the minutes ticked by and she still couldn’t find the program to open the partitions.

Danger edged into her awareness. Hayley lunged for her gun, but it was too late, she saw her weapon disappear as whoever was behind her grabbed it. Slowly, Hayley turned around. It took a few seconds for her to really focus on the two people in the room.

Julian Collins stood a few feet away, a sinister mask of amusement settling across his handsome face, lips wresting up into a conceited smile.

Hayley couldn’t spare him much attention, her gaze kept being drawn back to the gun. Her gun, pointed at her chest. Hayley looked up into the face of the person holding the weapon. It took a few long moments to recognize her but when she did, Hayley felt an instant burst of ice cold clarity. Like a strobe light illuminating a darkened room full of glittering diamonds.

“A…” Hayley’s voice caught on the name, her tongue having trouble forming the letters. She didn’t even get the chance speak before she shot her.

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Muted gunfire stitched up the wall, Aiden could feel the rounds thumping into the ground behind him. Despite the volley of bullets raining down around him, Aiden heard a muted thump not far from him.

Grenade.

He had no choice but to dive to the floor, grunting as the grenade exploded and flung him to the
ground. Pain spiked his belly and the world shrunk disconcertingly around him, vision fading in and out.

The moment came down like an avalanche, and barely conscious of his movements, he was already on his feet, digging in deep with more gunfire trailing. He ripped free a grenade of his own, pulled the pin, and tossed it over his shoulder without looking.

Ducking around the corner, he spared a small smile as screams rebounded in the warehouse, echoing simultaneously with the blast.

Sliding behind the nearest cover, Aiden took a moment to catch his breath. His head pounded, body aching, but he took a moment to breathe in slowly, counted to four, and then let a slow breath out. Combat breathing; it helped the body absorb fresh oxygen, coping with the adrenaline dump he was experiencing.

Crouching down, he risked a look out of cover, watched as men slowly converged on his position, darting between cover. He needed to disrupt their flow, give him time to get away because their pursuit was relentless and he had a limited amount of ammo.

Looking through the attached scope of his rifle, he sighted the forehead of the nearest Club soldier, then panned right to the next three yards back. The second man was there, leaning out from behind cover.

Aiden knew that once he fired the first round, the second guy would switch positions, ducking for cover—but the guy’s cover wasn’t quite wide enough, and so when he did try to hide, Aiden would exploit that reaction.

If he did it right, gripped the weapon firmly with his right hand, gently with his left, then exhaled halfway, every shot would be a surprise. There was no conscious pulling of the trigger, only pressure until the round exploded from the barrel. The guard’s head snapped back as Aiden was already shifting to fire at the second guard—who moved exactly as predicted.

Aiden caught him in the side of the head. The other soldiers detected his muzzle flash and sent volley after volley of automatic weapons fire in his direction. Rounds tore apart his cover and ricocheted off the wall behind him. At the next pause in fire, he was on his feet, gritting his teeth and clambering for the more suitable cover, the gunfire resuming and ripping past him. The bullets sounded like sand thrown into a fan, and a round or two might’ve struck his back, he wasn’t sure, The Kevlar was certainly protecting him at this range, but he wasn’t sticking around to tempt fate any further.

The Club soldiers continued to hound him, an incongruent fact which, despite the seriousness of the situation, pulled a smile from him. The fox and the hounds. Rather poetic really.

Movement caught his eye ahead, Aiden dove for cover as bullets sailed past his body. He didn’t move quickly enough, pain sliced just above his elbow, but he ignored it, rolling neatly and coming up, rifle in hand. He ducked down, instincts screaming at him. That movement saved his life, bullets soared above where his head had been.

He swung around blindly, pulling the trigger but knew already that the angle was terrible. Bullets sparked off two Club soldier’s Kevlar, causing them to stagger back. The mag clicked dry, he didn’t have time to reload.

Launching himself from the floor, Aiden discarded his rifle, reached for his baton at his belt. With a practiced flick of his wrist the baton retracted. Aiden swung across his body, catching the guy in the face, the crunching sound indicating he’d just broken the guy’s jaw.
The other Club soldier recovered enough to try and bring his gun towards Aiden’s head. There wasn’t much space between them, the other guy made the mistake of trying to sight his weapon in such close quarters. Aiden took a quick step forward, slammed the baton onto the top of the gun, drew his head back and slammed it full force into the other man’s face. The hard, thick portion of skull right above his eyes caved in the brittle bones of the man’s nose and eye socket with a sickening crunch.

Aiden grabbed the AK-47 out of the Club soldier’s slackening grip as he wavered on his feet. Aiden reached forward and gave him a push, the guy gave a soft sigh and slumped to the ground. Ducking low, expecting further resistance, he waited long enough to determine no one was around before slowly coming out of cover. He discarded the AK-47, picking up his own rifle, ejecting the magazine and slamming a fresh one in.

His arm burned uncomfortably. Reaching over, Aiden inspected the wound. Just above his elbow, the bullet had ripped through part of his bicep muscle. It had gone straight through but was bleeding steadily.

Delving into his pocket, he retrieved some Celox gauze, something which Hayley had insisted he take and was now thankful for. Pressing the haemostatic dressing onto the wound, Aiden knew the gauze would work as a clotting mechanism, effectively preventing further blood loss.

As he made his way out of the warehouse, Hayley weighed on his mind. They’d, unintentionally, been separated after the confrontation with Quinn. Still, thinking about Quinn caused his teeth to ache as he clenched his jaw. He didn’t really have the time or energy to contemplate everything Quinn had said, his cryptic comments about who had helped set Aiden up. They’d have to regroup, figure out what went wrong and hopefully salvage something from tonight.

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“Hayley,” he whispered.

Silence.

“Fuck,” he muttered through clenched teeth.

She knew the location of their pre-arranged rendezvous if they were separated, that she wasn’t here worried him.

Hayley’s planning had saved their lives tonight. Before they’d entered the docks, she’d planted three sets of explosives around the area. The explosives were designed to be a diversionary tactic rather than do any real damage. Each set of charges had a smartphone attached. Hayley’s phone used voice recognition software to send a signal, via Bluetooth, which activated an app on the phones attached to the explosives. The app he’d coded was designed to overheat phones, which when attached to explosives, would act like a detonator.

‘We’re not bulletproof.’ Such an innocuous phrase which, if in trouble, would seem like a surrender to others when it was far from it. They were lucky the app was activated through Bluetooth. The jamming of the cell signal would have voided their failsafe.

He hunched behind a shipping container and waited. Worry slowly started to edge into his thoughts as the minutes ticked by. Pulling out his phone, Aiden tried to call her. No signal. He dropped the phone back into his pocket and began to pace.

The Police were conspicuously absent. No sirens could be heard in the distance. The explosives
should have sent Cops to the scene, let alone the blatant gunfight which would have been heard. Quinn likely had quite a few Cops in his pay, but even those Cops couldn’t stop Dispatch from receiving any 911 calls. The device jamming the signal had an impressive range, he’d love to get his hands on it.

The adrenaline was slowly fading, leaving Aiden aware of the numerous aches in his body. His arm still throbbed, but at least it had stopped bleeding. He’d taken two bullets to the back of his vest and it hurt to breathe.

When he felt the vibration of his phone, Aiden scrambled to answer it. Relief flooded through him as he saw caller I.D.

“Hayley,” he answered, irritation sharpening his voice. “Where are you?”

Silence greeted him. “Hayley?”

“She can’t come to the phone right now,” a male voice responded.

Dread lodged in Aiden’s chest, constricted his throat so that words couldn’t push past the obstruction.

“Who is this?”

The man on the phone let out a laugh, rasping like dry tinder. “You’ve been chasing after me for months, which I admit is rather flattering, and you don’t even recognize my voice?”

Julian Collins.

The air grew still, the night seemed to wrap more tightly around Aiden as his mind worked through numerous scenarios.

“Where’s Hayley?”

“She’s here. Of course, if you want her, you’ll have to come get her. She’s not really the one I want after all.”

Aiden snorted. “Naturally.”

“Meet me inside the Skipsun boat storage office, I believe you’re familiar with the location? I’ll call off Quinn’s men and you can mosey on down uninhibited.”

“I need proof of life,” Aiden demanded.

Silence greeted this request and fear squeezed Aiden’s throat closed.

“I need you to speak darling, I don’t think Pearce believes I’ve let you live.”

Collins sighed. “Not that talkative this one,” he said, unnecessarily cheerful. “Oh well, new tactic.”

A pain wrenching scream filled the phone which had Aiden jerking his head away from the receiver. The phone cracked as he held it tightly, burning rage hissing through his body like acid, screeching a demanding release in the form of violence.

“Aiden, don’t…..” Hayley began before he heard her grunt and fall silent.

Relief temporarily compressed the fury snapping through his brain as he discovered Hayley was
alive.

“See, she’s alive….” Collins left the sentence unfinished, the threat ‘for now’ unspoken but no less existent.

“Fine,” Aiden acknowledged through clenched teeth.

“Don’t be too long,” Collins chuckled.

As soon as the call ended Aiden tried to contact T-Bone but he couldn’t connect. Collins had jammed communications again.

Aiden considered his options. Unsurprisingly, few presented themselves. It had become apparent to him that Collins had been aware of their activities for some time. He just didn’t know how. Possibly DedSec, but there were too many variables and he just couldn’t spare the concentration. What mattered was that Collins had Hayley. Only a handful of people could ever be used as collateral that he didn’t consider expendable. Hayley was one of them. Aiden didn’t even try to keep up that pretence, Collins obviously knew more about their activities than he liked.

Months of picking apart the tangled webs, following tenuous connections, getting shot at and taking risks, only to realize that everything had been manufactured. A clever and slow manipulation to draw him out. There was something he was still missing, a variable he hadn’t accounted for which meant Collins and Quinn had been aware of his plans all along.

There was one option, which might give him an advantage or cage him in even further. But he had no other play. Tracing the outline of his phone, Aiden shrugged.

“Fuck it,” he muttered and initiated his backup plan, as likely to blow up in his face as assist him.

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Julian Collins’ sense of irony was titled firmly towards the mordant. The spot he’d chosen to meet was the exact place Aiden had disrupted Lucky Quinn’s first human trafficking ring. Except last time, there had been more people inside the building. As he walked through the front door, no one was there to greet him.

The hallways were just as dark and oppressive as he remembered, the taint of human misery contaminating everything. As he opened the door from the hallway, he was greeted with silence and empty space. Only a handful of hours ago he’d watched Michael Quinn make a presentation on the same stage that now stood empty.

He climbed the stairs to the upper landing, the sound of his footsteps echoing around the room. He’d expected guards, at least some resistance and was faintly surprised to encounter no one.

The door at the end of the landing was closed. Outside the door he hesitated, making a final run though of contingencies in his head. Tightening his grip on the rifle, he reached over and opened the door.

As he stepped into the room, everything slowed and sound drowned away like a low tide, as if his instincts had automatically switched off all interference so he could focus. He counted four people in the room, marked their positions quickly before focusing on Collins. He held Hayley in front of him, her combat knife so close to her throat, a small amount of blood had beaded on the sharp blade.

Aiden stilled as he watched a large guy move towards him and aim a handgun at his head.
“Move and I’ll shoot you. Drop the rifle.”

He did as instructed, letting it swing on the strap. The man stepped forward and Aiden tensed, knew that was the moment he could take him down but resisted. The strap was slipped from his shoulder. He watched the guy holster his own gun and point Aiden’s rifle at him.

“Thank you Levi,” Collins said.

JERKING his gaze to the front of him, Aiden stared at Hayley. Now that he could spare the concentration, he was disconcerted by what he saw. Her skin was ashen, face tightened in pain as she locked eyes with him. He couldn’t see what was wrong until he looked closer. Her left shoulder, just past where her vest ended, was covered in a large wet patch and he could just make out the sight of a bullet wound. Aiden’s gaze was drawn down to her hand, watching as blood dripped over her fingers, hung precariously for a moment, only to drop on the floor. Wearing black, he couldn’t see how much blood she’d lost but he was alarmed by the growing puddle it on the floor.

Aiden felt his fury rise, crawling up his throat to lodge there. He squashed it down, trying for calm even as he felt the rage seep into his bloodstream so that it beat with the same intensity of his increased heartbeat. He took a quick breath in, had to remind himself of the stakes and the fine line he walked. But in that moment, he would have shot Blume’s CIO in the head if he had his gun. He was marked for death either way.

Collins chuckled. “I didn’t do this to her,” he nodded towards a woman standing in the corner. “She did.”

Slowly, Aiden swivelled his head and looked at the woman Collins had indicated. He blinked a few times, not quite believing who it was. The woman shot Collins an annoyed look before she turned to stare at Aiden, a familiarly defiant tilt to her heard.

“Angela Balik,” he growled, animosity vibrating in his voice as it scratched past the anger sitting in his throat.

Angela’s gaze settled on his, a challenge lurking beneath the surface of her brown eyes. Aiden clenched his jaw, fighting to control the violence swirling through his veins like a drug. Whatever she saw in his expression caused a reaction. The thin layer of Angela’s poise bled away, and he watched with petty satisfaction as doubt pressed into her face. By slow increment, all the loose threads were tying together and he didn’t like picture that was knotting together in his mind.

Angela was pointing what looked like Hayley’s Glock at him, but there wasn’t much conviction in the way she held it.

“You set me up,” Aiden remarked as he let the heat of his gaze bore into Angela.

She held his stare for the space of a few heartbeats, but then her gaze dropped as she shifted uncomfortably.

Collins scoffed. “Angela doesn’t have the foresight. Blume’s had Angela on their hit list for a while. Knows too much you see,” Collins paused and bent Angela artificial smile. “No, my men picked her up on the outer edges of Chicago.”

Aiden turned away from Angela to concentrate on Collins. He stole a quick look at Hayley, who seemed to be having trouble keeping upright. She’d leaned back further into Collins, but the knife at her throat never wavered. Her face was an unhealthy shade of white, but still, something burned in the back of her slightly glassy gaze.
“You’ve worked it out now haven’t you?” Collins asked.

Blume’s CIO looked at him with a smile of porcelain, smoothly curving and molded perfectly in all the wrong ways. It was a brittle attempt at humor, something that looked like it’d shatter if provoked. So Aiden answered, playing Collins’ game because he’d as likely slit Hayley’s throat on a whim. Like that small concession from Aiden, just saying the words, was some type of victory for Collins.

“Angela was your mole inside DedSec.”

Collins’ derisive laugh dried like parchment on his face, fortifying his mocking expression.

“When some of Blume’s Fixer’s found Angela, she just couldn’t wait to name drop. Of course I was intrigued. That little stint you pulled at Chicago’s Public Library worked against you. I wouldn’t have been able to corroborate her story otherwise. So I had Angela spilling all types of interesting information on DedSec and the Vigilante. It was the perfect opportunity to reel you in. You don’t seriously think DedSec has the wherewithal to discover what I’m up to? They had no clue Angela had been compromised.”

The aspects he’d had been struggling with were finally untangling themselves to crystallize in his mind, and he certainly didn’t like the shape they were taking on. Aiden realized he’d made a few incalculable errors, Hayley being injured was a contingency he hadn’t foreseen and it made the already precarious balance tip firmly into the unviable.

“So you used DedSec to draw me out. Angela sent them the picture of you and Quinn,” Aiden surmised, careful to keep any inflection from his voice.

Reluctantly, Aiden had to concede, Collins hiding behind DedSec and using them to manipulate the situation was a masterful stroke. From the start, he’d suspected DedSec. They always seemed to be hovering in the periphery. They sent the original photo of Quinn and Collins, and while that was a surprising development, Aiden would have eventually discovered their partnership. It really was just meant to make sure he’d follow the script, come after Quinn and Collins like they wanted him to.

It was also meant to split his focus, make it difficult to determine other’s motives, making him suspect DedSec and keep his attention on them, not Quinn or Collins. Because he’d burnt a lot of bridges with DedSec, it wasn’t unreasonable to think they’d make a move against him, even if it meant pairing with Blume to do it.

Collins had the audacity to allow an amused smirk to crawl over his face. The knife didn’t waver from Hayley’s throat.

“Exactly. I knew you’d connect the dots.” Collins grinned at him, a canine smile showing too many teeth. “Did you know Malcolm Deodato and Angela worked together before she defected from Blume?”

Aiden merely started at him, hiding the true extent of his anger behind a mask of contempt. He should have just taken Angela out, she was a loose end and it had come back to bite him in the ass.

“So was Malcolm an accomplice or unsuspecting victim?”

Cold amusement snapped across Collins’ expression. “The latter. A mole inside DedSec is quite useful. It provided an opportunity. All it took as a little manoeuvring. A few hints dropped to Malcolm, some evidence,” Collins sneered, “left in my office and Malcolm thought he’d struck gold. Add in Angela’s emails to her DedSec contact Dave, a few nudges from her to convince him to get you involved. Get a few guys to follow Malcolm, let his own instability and fear work against him
and I had the perfect opportunity.”

Drawing his lips back into a snarl, Collins tightened his grip on Hayley’s shoulder as she slumped back further into him, forcing him to relax the knife ever so slightly against her throat.

“But then Quinn had to go and fuck it up. I told him to send more men to that train yard. It’s not surprising you got away. It was a profitable partnership when Lucky was alive. Niall was supposed to take over when his Father died, he was at least marginally more capable than his son. Michael doesn’t have the foresight or the pull his Grandfather had, but you gotta work with what you got right?”

“Right, and you do?” Aiden mocked. “You’re just riding on the back of Lucky’s original ideas. Using Bellwether to influence those women to attend your clubs so you can kidnap them for your auctions. But it’s really Lucky’s auctions isn’t it? You don’t even have the originality to get a new venue. And Lucky was the one who discovered Genentech’s data on Digital Drugs. All you did was patent the idea as your own.”

Collins’ grey eyes sharpened, almost smoky with the same barely concealed ferocity of a firestorm.

“If it fits with your internal monologue, then by all means run with that impression. Even without Blume’s psychological profile on you, it’s obvious you’d rather believe everyone else is inept than think you’ve been successfully outmanoeuvred. I know you’d love to think I wasn’t the one manipulating you like a puppet, but it’s far from the truth. And Lucky’s ideas were just that, ideas. I re-worked Bellwether’s code to suit my needs. I came up with the idea to use it to lure women out so Quinn’s men could kidnap them. Sure, I may have used the Club’s resources and Blume may have provided the hardware but I created Klockwork. Using a Botnet hidden inside Gnaural to hide Klockwork was my idea. So you must have found Cr0w, did you leave her alive by any chance?”

“Why?”

A lazy smirk tugged on the corner of Collins’ mouth. “She’s a loose end. I wasn’t entirely forthcoming about her assignment.”

Aiden tucked that particular piece of information away to examine later.

“And the Digital Drugs?” Aiden asked, an edge creeping in to his voice as the internal timer clicked down in his head.

“Already being distributed I’m afraid,” he said with a sardonic twist of his lips. “You couldn’t stop the auction and you can’t stop the drugs.”

“What now? What do you want from me?” Aiden asked, playing for time, feeling the fuse burn out far too slowly.

“Your scalp. Fucking Charlotte Gardner is on my back. If I bring you in, she won’t be able to touch me. Imagine the accolades I’d get if I capture the Vigilante. Dead of course, can’t have you telling any secrets. Must really grate on you that I’ve been two steps ahead this entire time. I…” Collins stopped, cocking his head slightly.

Aiden tensed, shifted his body slightly. He’d heard it too, and was waiting for Collins to react, a coiled readiness in his body as he took a gamble that he’d be faster than the other three people in the room.

Faintly, sirens floated almost languidly to their position. A frown dug into Collins expression, Aiden could almost see the thoughts as they appeared on his face.
“How did you call the Cops?” he hissed, the first hint of alarm pushing through the mask of arrogance which, up until a moment ago, had been permanency affixed to his face.

While Collins had managed to jam normal cell signals, Aiden had connected to ctOS’s satellite network which let him send 911 messages and GPS coordinates to emergency services. The satellite operated via Bluetooth and didn’t need a normal cell signal to connect. He’d sent a message saying that the Vigilante was in a shootout at Brandon Docks. He knew that the Cops would discover cell signals had been jammed, and make their own connections.

He pulled the knife away from Hayley’s throat and pointed it at Aiden. “You’re fucking dead.”

The next few moments happened devastatingly fast, threading together until the sequence of events became almost indistinguishable.

No sooner had Collins finished speaking than Hayley reared her head back. She struck Collins in the nose, stumbled out of his grip as he lurched back clutching his face. She used her hand to chop down, the clumsy movement not having any of her usual grace but was effective regardless. His entire frame went rigid, unable to prevent his body from toppling to the floor. Hayley wavered, took one step back, hit the wall and collapsed down it like a drop of water.

Aiden couldn’t spare her any more attention. Instead he launched himself at Angela, watched as shock rolled over her face as he came at her. Belatedly she seemed to realize she actually had a weapon. Her finger jerked half-heartedly against the trigger. Aiden was lucky she was such a terrible shot. He felt the pluck of a bullet against his sleeve, nicking him, before he was on her.

He grabbed the top of the gun and pushed it away from his torso. He had a brief moment of satisfaction when he felt her cheekbone give way as he delivered a brutal punch to her face. Angela let go of the gun, stumbled sideways, head striking the wall and crumpled to the ground.

“The fuck…”

Spinning around, Aiden watched Levi try to fire the rifle. The trigger kept clicking but no bullet came out.

“It’s a biometric rifle asshole,” Aiden snarled.

Understanding and horror lit up Levi’s expression as he dropped the rifle and scrambled for the gun in his holster. It didn’t matter, Aiden was already squeezing the trigger of Hayley’s Glock. Levi’s head jerked back as the bullet struck his eye socket, dead before he could blink.

Swinging back around, he stalked towards Collins as he sat up and looked around for the knife. As Collins’ fingers found the hilt, Aiden stamped down, grinding bone. Blume’s CIO shrieked with such force that it sounded like his vocal cords might snap.

Reaching over, Aiden grabbed Collins hair and wrenched his head back. Blood from his broken nose had dripped down his face, over his chin and was beginning to dry like cracked red paint. Lips pulled back into a snarl revealed stark white teeth stained with flecks of blood.

“I bet you think you’ve won right? Go ahead, kill me, but then you’ll never know what else Quinn had planned. This auction is just the tip of the iceberg. Plus I know how he’s distributing Gnaural. I may even have a way to stop it.” Collins taunted, thin lips tipping up into a humorless half-smile.

“What’s it going be? Kill me and you’ll spend months chasing your tail again.”

Collins let out a guttural sound resembling a laugh which ground like broken glass in Aiden’s ear. He wasn’t certain Collins wasn’t making a last ditch attempt to save his own life, but it still made
Aiden pause as he considered his options.

But the compulsion to retaliate was slowly consuming him, engulfing the rational part of his mind and destroying the boundaries of any coherent thoughts still existing. It was like a purification but more twisted and distorted, creeping up his spine, leaving a trail of acidic retribution burning deep inside him.

“I don’t care.”

A small frown wedged between Collins eyes. Grabbing the knife, Aiden indulged in the fear he saw in Collins’ eyes when he realized he’d misjudged the situation entirely. Slashing across his throat, Aiden felt the hot spurt of blood across his face. He wiped his face in disgust, watching Collins choke on his own blood.

Standing up, he swivelled to face Angela Balik.

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Leaning against Julian Collins, Hayley felt a surreal sense of dislocation, like her skin had been picked clean until all she felt was the uncoordinated effect of her bones trying to support her. Through the haze of meandering consciousness she was trying to concentrate on the dialogue between Aiden and Julian.

She leant further back into Julian, forcing him to prop her up using both hands. Despite it being a deliberate tactic on her part, it wasn’t entirely feigned as she waited for an opportunity, when the steel of her own knife wasn’t pressing into her skin, tightening her airways like a noose.

There were moments where muscle memory and reflex took over. Where the almost animalistic instinct to survive snapped like a loud retort. Hayley didn’t even remember her brain sending the signal, she just snapped her head back into Julian’s nose when he lifted the knife away.

Pain flared to life as soon as she moved, shooting an intense fire up her spine to explode like a grenade in her shoulder. Her uninjured arm blindly shot out, hoping to strike the vagus nerve in the side of Julian’s neck. She must have succeeded because he dropped to the floor.

Hayley took one step backwards felt the wall and slid down it, utterly spent and in a tremendous amount of pain. Her vision darkened until all the saw was tiny pinpoints of light, echoing black as she fought to retain her precarious hold on consciousness.

In the end, she must have passed out briefly, because when she next opened her eyes, the room’s dynamic has shifted. The bodyguard was dead. Her gaze crawled along the floor, up over Julian Collins’ legs to stare at the large slash of red across his throat.

Aiden walked past her field of vision, towards Angela Balik huddled against the wall. Angela was shaking her head, moaning quietly, the white of her eyes shining with terror even as resignation fused to her expression. Like she knew pleading with Aiden wouldn’t change her fate.

“Please, I had no choice. Look,” she held out her wrist where a Klockwork device was attached. “I was trapped, I couldn’t escape because of this fucking thing. I had to do what they asked or he would have killed me.”

Aiden’s lip twitched, his mask of controlled calm slipping to expose the roiling fury beneath.

With absolutely no change in expression, Aiden raised the gun and pointed it at Angela. She tried to scramble to her feet but the bullet exploded from the chamber and seared though her head, brain
matter and bone splattering across the wall as she slumped forward.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Hayley jerked awake when the deeper baritones of Aiden’s voice drifted to her.

“Hayley.”

She jerked her head up. Aiden settled down in front of her, she could sense his urgency even as concern tightened his expression.

“We have to move. Come on, I’ll help you.”

Just the thought of moving was agonizing, and already her body was sending sharp warnings that it wasn’t the best idea. She was pretty sure her clavicle was broken, the bullet buried inside her still causing some type of internal damage.

Reaching down, Aiden gently pulled her into a standing position. Hayley hissed and groaned, knew she sounded like a wounded animal. Putting his arm around her, Aiden gripped her hip and moved towards the door, essentially taking most of her weight.

Searing, fiery bursts of pain pulsated through her shoulder, intensifying and jarring. With each step the pain amplified, the bloody muscle quivering as her consciousness ebbed.

“Aiden,” she groaned. “Stop.”

Sirens screamed outside the warehouse, pounding into her skull.

“No,” he grunted and continued to pull her along.

A strangled cry was ripped from her throat as he jostled her shoulder. She wasn’t even sure her feet were moving, everything felt numb and raw.

A groaning sound filtered through her awareness until Hayley recognized she was making the sound. Maybe Aiden realized he was doing her more damage because he stopped. He looked down at her, she felt his probing assessment even if she didn’t have the energy to meet his gaze. Aiden lowered her against the wall. Despair turned in her chest like a bird shifting in its nest, scratching its needle-like claws into her body to rake its hurt further into her mind.

“Aiden, you have to go.”

He shook his head, made a low snarling sound. “No. Not without you.”

Hayley blinked and tried to focus on Aiden’s face. “Please,” she begged, mouth so dry she felt like the words were sand scraping their way up her throat. “We can’t both escape.”

The truth of her words sunk into Aiden’s expression, charred with the bitterness of defeat.

Hayley’s heart jumped into her throat as her brain registered that the wailing sirens were even closer. The Cops would be inside the warehouse in minutes.

“I need a hospital,” Hayley insisted. “Not just some Mob Doctor.”

For the first time since she’d met up with Aiden, he looked truly panicked and uncertain. Chicago PD had entered the building, Hayley could hear them shouting. Anguish etched into Aiden’s
expression as he looked down at her, impotent rage lashing in his eyes.

“You need to go Aiden. You’re not abandoning me. It’s survival.”

He hesitated, even as his window of opportunity was closing until she almost heard it slam shut.

“I’ll fix this. I’ll come for you,” Aiden promised.

Hayley nodded, really more of her head drooping, she tasted blood in her mouth. In the back of her mind, she wasn’t even sure she’d survive. She’d lost a lot of blood and she was having trouble breathing. Words like hypovolemic shock and pneumothorax ran through her mind as the world darkened along the edges, like ink bleeding into her vision.

Hayley watched Aiden get up and run, heard the shouting, the shooting. But at that stage, it was easier to close just her eyes, drift into the darkness as it wrapped all around her.

Chapter End Notes

Authors note:

1. Virtual Reality porn is a growing industry. With the invention of headsets like Occulus Rift, porn websites now offer an immersive VR experience. It’s not beyond the realm of possibility that a technology similar to Klockwork (but hopefully without the darker themes) will exist someday. As a side note, while researching VR Porn, I’d hate for someone to see my browsing history. Do you think they’d buy my excuse; “It’s for research purposes?”

2. Apologies for the delay in updating. I was 2/3 the way through writing these chapters and my computer decided to crash and refuse to turn back on. *Without* me backing it up. Insert numerous profanities at my stupidity, add in a week-long sulk and I got back to *re-writing* the entire thing. It’s done. One more chapter to go.
It was late; well past midnight when a lone BMW’s lights cut a bright swath through the darkness. The light from the lamp posts dotting the street seemed to emphasize the smattering of stars scattered across the heavens.

Stretching out of sight on either side of the road were almost identical houses, each with a path running down the side. They might, she thought, be architecturally undistinguished, but at least they were modern and in-built with the best technology had to offer.

The front windows of her house were square and turreted, a long vista of ramparted respectability. Even the landscaping was part of the appeal and contracted to professionals for maintenance. Attention to detail and minimal involvement in upkeep was what drew Charlotte Gardner to the housing complex. She had too much to do already, it was easier to just write a cheque and not have to worry about micromanaging people for a change.

The car glided smoothly up the driveway, idling quietly as she pressed the button on the automatic garage door. For a moment, Gardner closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax into the heated seats, her shoulders protesting as she tried to disturb the knot of muscle which seemed to have taken up permanent resident in her spine.

Taking a deep breath in, she opened her eyes and watched the garage door silently unravel. Easing her foot off the brake, the car slipped across the threshold. Grabbing her bag, heavy with devices, paperwork and seemingly weighed down with all her not inconsiderable worries, Gardner exited her vehicle.

As the wintry air swirled around her, Garden pulled her coat closed and tucked her chin downward. Pressing the button to close the garage door, she blew out a breath, visible in the air. The icy walkway crunched beneath her heels as she walked quickly towards the front door.

The door was metallic, opening with a subdued hiss as the biometric scanner and numeric keypad accepted her credentials.

She’d set the heating to kick in before she left the office, the gentle warmth like a soothing balm after experiencing the midnight frost. Lights turned on intuitively as Gardner walked through the hallway.

Her house looked like a cut out from an Architects Today magazine. Everything was geometric, which she guessed others could say about almost any abode with square windows, but on this house you couldn’t help but notice it. The windows took up entire walls with only polished steel beams to break them into yet more rectangles. The look would have been entirely metallic, like a mini downtown skyscraper had it not been for the cedar beams of the external porch and the matching raised plant beds that contained only white blooms. Despite spending an inordinate amount of time at work, she was actually quite house proud.

Dumping her bags on the kitchen table, Gardner shrugged out of her jacket, poured herself a well-deserved glass of red wine and made her way into her office.

The computer set up was impressive, but only in-as-much as the cost of the technology and software. She was not a hacker, in fact she found the very idea distasteful. It soured the wine in her mouth
enough for her to leave it on the table.

She respected Blume’s engineers, valued their experience and expertise. It wasn’t the technology which was dangerous, it was the people who used it for their own purposes. And she was getting tired of saying the same practiced lines in front of the cameras while feeling her face about to crack.

Having to fix that genial expression on even though she’d love to roll her eyes at the inane questions from journalists. What did Chicagoans want? CtOS had made their lives better, had improved the functionality of the city. Never did they speak up when an ambulance saved a life because ctOS-controlled traffic lights made their route quicker. But like heckling piranhas they swam to the surface and bared their teeth when there was a minor hiccup. It was exhausting defending a system she wholeheartedly believed in.

And then there was DedSec, hacktivists who created anarchy because they believed Blume was some evil empire. Maybe if they built a moat around Blume’s building and created a castle they’d have better luck selling their children’s stories that monsters lived inside.

She believed that the real monster lurked like a benign presence on the streets of Chicago. Aiden Pearce was a monster camouflaged as an antithesis hero. The public applauded the havoc he wrecked upon the streets, silently, and sometimes not so silently, approving of his efforts to demonstrate how inept CPD was. And the sticking point? CPD hadn’t ever really come close to capturing him. She’d seen the video footage, meshed together from Police dash cams, ctOS footage and wobbly video from the public as his blurred image attacked and evaded like some kind of distorted ghost. But a ghost with the technical capability to outwit CPD’s finest.

It wasn’t like they hadn’t tried to capture him. What seemed like the entire Police force had hounded him through the streets recently. Despite helicopters, squad cars, even ctOS’s own system working against him, Pearce appeared to flow through obstacles like they weren’t even there. How he’d managed to bury himself so deeply inside their systems was a mystery. None of Blume’s techs had been able to figure out how he used ctOS for his own whims. Every time they tried to deny him access, Pearce just found another way to bypass their attempts. It was infuriating. The man had no scruples, and used Chicago’s streets as his own person playground for whatever vendetta he’d locked on to.

The people were the key. If the tide turned against him, he’d find himself swimming amongst sharks willing to sell out his location for a mere thousand dollars. But even Blume’s attempt to influence the public against him had back fired. Showing footage of him fleeing from the Police, the cars he hit slowed down for effect, the faces of people as they witnessed him shooting in the middle of Parker Square. Gardner had been proud of that presentation. But her smugness soon turned to bitterness as polls showed people had pointed out CPD’s incompetence to catch one man, and shone a spotlight on Blume’s failure to keep ctOS safe from hackers.

Sitting on the computer chair, Gardner felt a tired sigh scrape past her lips as she booted up her computer. As late as it was she still had work to do. The last few days had been a nightmare. Another human trafficking ring had been exposed and once again the Club were in the middle of the controversy. Not to mention Blume’s own CIO Julian Collins found dead, throat cut right in the middle of this whole fucking mess.

“Working late?”

Hearing the words, Gardner let out an involuntary shriek and pitched to the side. The handle of her desk chair groaned as she dug her fingers into the plastic. The chair wobbled precariously but held, obviously made of sterner stuff than her nerves.
Spinning around awkwardly, her legs flailed dramatically as she tried to find any purchase. Her heartbeat stamped up her throat, catching there and making it hard to breathe. Her eyes sought out the aberration, latching on to a dark figure sitting quite at ease in her chaise lounge chair tucked into the corner of the room.

She reached up to her neck, massaging her throat in an attempt to knead the anxiety down to an acceptable level. She watched as the dark figure reached over and flicked on the lamp next to the lounge.

Light spilled over the stranger’s face, and any attempt at calm slipped like a silk ribbon between her fingertips.

Aiden Pearce was in her house.

How the fuck did he get in? Not that it mattered, he was inside, but concentrating on that inane fact let her mind grapple with the idea that the very man she’d been musing about was here. As if her thoughts had conjured him, like some demon made flesh.

As he leant forward, Pearce’s eyes caught the light. They were the most startling green, like emerald stones only cut from the same hard exoskeleton as a diamond. Sometimes it was difficult to believe he was real, like the Vigilante was an urban legend carefully constructed as a warning to criminals to keep them in line.

Only Pearce was real. If she so desired she could walk over and touch him, but since she rather liked her hand attached to her arm, she resisted.

“What are you doing here?” Gardner asked, swallowing past the lump of apprehension which seemed to have permanently wedged in her throat.

Though Pearce didn’t exactly smile, his mouth quirked in a way that suggested he knew exactly the effect he was having.

“Let’s just call this a mutually beneficial exchange,” he said in a deadly caressing purr, deep voice wrapping around her with a faintly threatening manifestation.

Nervousness lined the back of Garden’s throat, grating unpleasantly as she attempted to reorganize her concerns in order of priority.

“You have nothing I want,” she remarked, pleased with the level tones.

Crossing her legs, Gardener placed her hands in her lap and met the Vigilante’s gaze. Slowly, she felt able to reel her confidence back in, wrap it around her tightly. It was like showing fear to a predator, the less they sensed you were afraid, the more power you had over the encounter.

Pearce chuckled quietly. Despite his obvious amusement, there was something distantly intimidating about the sound. Anger was slowly surpassing the fear she felt. How dare he come into her home and think he could intimidate her. Pearce wanted something, that was obvious, he wouldn’t have exposed himself otherwise. Well, she’d do her best to deny him.

“You’re running for Mayor.”

Garden remained silent, even as her mind ticked over like a cooling engine. Was that what he wanted, to hinder her campaign?

He didn’t seem to require her answer, and continued in his deep, almost hypnotic voice, “You’ve got
a lot going for you. First woman, black woman,” he amended but she got no sense that he was being racist, just stating facts, “to run for Mayor. The backing of Blume, polls show people support your stance against hackers, people seem to actually like you,” he said, putting an insulting emphasis on actually. “The public are fickle creatures, if something came out which might make them reassess their opinion of you, it might impact on your campaign. This is all purely speculative of course.”

A quick smile cut across Pearce’s face, having the same kind of threatening effect as if he’d flashed a weapon. Tilting his head, his face settled into a comfortable frown, which looked far more natural than the smile he’d flashed moments ago.

A surge of indignant anger clenched her teeth together as the implication of Pearce’s insinuations slowly tricked through.

“You have nothing on me,” Gardner hissed, leaning forward for emphasis but also making sure to scoot closer to the drawer.

Gardner locked eyes with Pearce, but immediately realized who she was tangling with. She found the emptiness of his gaze disturbing. It wasn’t a blank look or even an uncomprehending one. Just utterly devoid of anything resembling emotion. Eventually, his stare eroded her own challenging gaze, ripping apart the layers of her resistance.

Glancing away, Gardner smoothed out her already immaculate skirt, trying to restore the cracks in her poise.

“You think the public are stupid enough to buy into whatever it is you think you have on me. Blume will discredit it within hours,” Gardener paused and looked over, even as a sliver of doubt impacted her statement. “So whatever it is you think you have, it’s worth nothing. However, you obviously need something from me. It might, as you suggested, be mutually beneficial for me to consider the prospect, especially since you’re in my house, but I need assurance that you won’t harm me. I’m sure we come to some agreement …”

Swinging the chair around so she could angle her body towards the desk, Gardner had started the conversation by building some animosity, then injected some amiability and hopefully piqued his curiosity with the trailing sentence so she could try to reach the desk without him noticing.

“It’s not loaded,” Pearce remarked, amusement lacing his tone.

Gardner froze, looked over and watched the corner of his mouth tuck into a smile.

“Maybe you can stop playing games and we can get to the real reason I’m here. But by all means, don’t trust my word, go for the revolver you keep in the top drawer.”

Straightening her shoulders, Gardner used her heel to spin the chair around to completely face Pearce. She didn’t give him the satisfaction, didn’t bother with trying to reach for the gun. Even though her skin itched with the compulsion to just check.

“What I said still stands, you have nothing on me,”

“Maybe not,” he conceded, “but I’ll let you decide how it might affect you regardless.”

Retrieving his phone, Pearce looked down, attention on whatever he was doing. She contemplated running, launching herself from the chair to reach her phone she’d foolishly left in her bag, in the kitchen. But it was a fleeting consideration. Even as he’d taken his attention away from her, she wasn’t able to fool herself into believing he wasn’t aware of her movements, or that she’d likely even make it to the door.
Startled, Gardner flinched as the screen behind her brightened suddenly. Turning her head, she watched as the cursor appeared to scroll over the screen as if by itself. Even as she felt a seething resentment at this invasion of privacy, it was followed almost immediately by a deeper disquiet as she tried to think of what Pearce had access to. The Blume engineers who’d set everything up assured her that it’d be almost impossible to hack into. Impossible for anyone but Aiden Pearce. It was a belated worry because he’d likely downloaded whatever he’d found of interest. Blume’s private security contracts, laws they wanted passed she could help with as Mayor.

Shaking those thoughts off, Garner realized that her most immediate concern was the criminal sitting a few feet away and what exactly he had planned for her.

A media player app appeared on screen. With a lingering look in Pearce’s direction, Gardner, interest piqued despite herself, turned her back on him to concentrate on the screen. She felt his gaze on her and repressed a shiver because she didn’t like not knowing his whereabouts. But, if he wanted her dead, he’d be unlikely to engage in small talk about some media file.

The app was paused. Gardner frowned and leaned towards the screen, trying to identify the people in the room. Her lip curled when she recognized Julian Collins holding a woman hostage, a knife at her throat.

As the file played, and Julian implicated himself so completely in the human trafficking ring that Gardner realized it would be impossible to untangle the web he’d woven, no matter how she spun it.

“…. Lucky’s ideas were just that, ideas. I re-worked Bellwether’s code to suit my needs. I came up with the idea to use it to lure women out so Quinn’s men could kidnap them. Sure, I may have used the Club’s resources and Blume may have provided the hardware but I created Klockwork.”

As Gardner suspected, Julian was using Blume’s resources for his own gain. She could never prove it, and even in death he was screwing her.

“And the Digital Drugs?” Gardner heard Pearce ask on-screen, surprised by the anger she heard in his voice.

“Already being distributed I’m afraid. You couldn’t stop the auction and you can’t stop the drugs.”

Digital Drugs? What was Julian talking about?

“What now? What do you want from me?” Pearce asked.

“Your scalp. Fucking Charlotte Gardner is on my back. If I bring you in, she won’t be able to touch me. Imagine the accolades I’d get if I capture the Vigilante. Dead of course, can’t have you telling any secrets.”

The media player paused and Gardner suppressed a groan. The bastard just had to implicate her on camera didn’t he? Maybe, she might, a huge might, have been able to spin the story, play the ignorant card and appear contrite that a respected member at Blume’s employ had inappropriately used their resources to commit such heinous crimes. But Gardner already knew the media would crucify Blume, not to mention her specifically since it looked like she had knowledge of his actions. Even if it wasn’t true, the implication was there and it’d be enough for the media to make the connection, however tenuous it was.

Already the press was having a field day over another human trafficking ring being exposed, each tripping over the other to write clever little headlines. “How sex slavery is BLUME(ing) despite Chicago’s advanced digital surveillance”.
“Doesn’t paint a good picture does it?” Pearce asked, voice so close she felt it like a spiked stroke down her spine.

Gardner couldn’t help but wince at Pearce’s proximity. Unbeknownst to her, he’d snuck up to stand behind her chair. Turning slowly, she lifted her head to stare at him. He was taller than she realized, having to crane her neck to actually look at him. A candle flicker of a smile lit up his face, but as soon as it was extinguished, darkness settled over his expression.

“How did you get this?” she asked, waving towards the screen. “I was told the video was unrecoverable.”

An uncompromising smile ghosted his lips. “Does it matter?”

No, she supposed it didn’t.

“What is it you want?” she asked, the muscles in her jaw aching from the anger she was suppressing. It would do her no good to antagonize him, even if the urge was there.

“Like I said, this can be a mutually beneficial exchange. If you agree to co-operate.”

Her reply sat heavy on her tongue, dissolving slowly to leave a bitter aftertaste as Gardner began to see the future she’d so carefully planned out, shatter into a million shards at her feet.

“And if I don’t?” she asked, but it was a verbal reflex to deny him and she lacked the resolve to put much hostility in her tone.

One brow arched in silent challenge and Pearce didn’t bother to answer. Looking back down at his phone, Pearce loaded another screen. Gardner let out a small sigh and turned back around, took her time reading.

“So you want me to do what exactly? Because of this video you think I’m going to help you, because Julian made some vague reference to me?” Gardner asked, crossing her legs, pasting a synthetic smile on her face.

This was an interesting development. She could use this material for her own gain. To certain types of people, giving them personal information was the same as giving them a loaded weapon. And Aiden Pearce had given her just that.

Pearce remained silent, an indomitable figure staring at her with those disconcerting green eyes. She could see the calculating intelligence, far too perceptive for his own good, but even more frightening was the violence clinging to him, fitting him even more seamlessly than that battered coat he wore.

“Is that a risk you’re willing to take?” Pearce rumbled. “Especially when it’s revealed this video was leaked from your home computer. Blume’s been able to conceal the fact that one of their employees was involved in human trafficking so far, but that could change….”

He’d chosen the words carefully, wrapping them in a tone so casual that it took her a moment to comprehend the implication behind it. Gardner sucked in a surprised breath. She was just now beginning to feel the sharp edge of all the angles he’d covered.

“I can’t do it,” Gardner motioned towards the screen and the documents he’d loaded, “you’re asking too much.”

But even as she refused, Gardner knew there was no use trying to outmaneuver Pearce, she’d played his game and was intelligent enough to understand that she’d lost. If she didn’t give instead of try to
take, he’d destroy her career. And that was far more important to Gardner than some small, fleeting victory over the Vigilante. She had a small starting point anyway, whether he realized he’d given her that or not.

“No I’m not. This is what I need and you’ll do it. I’ve already set up the connection to upload this video to SystemsLeaks and WKZ News. I’ve made sure it’s an easily traceable connection which will lead right back here. It’s completely up to you whether this is made public or not. As long as you keep up your end of the deal, so will I.”

Gardner snorted. “Right, so you have this video you can release at any time and I’m just supposed to agree to your terms.”

Pearce shrugged. “You can take the chance, you might just be able to sidestep the fallout, but I doubt your Mayoral ambitions would survive.”

So she’d been outfoxed. The random thought made a laugh graze up her throat at the witticism but she stopped it before it reached her lips. It wasn’t particularly funny, in fact, it felt like there was a slightly hysterical edge to the humor. Gardner wasn’t even sure she could do what he was asking.

“It’ll take time. I’m…not sure how to go about it,” she admitted. “If it’s even possible. The Cops are involved, there’s an investigation now.”

“It’s sure you’ll manage,” Pearce said, his hardened tone alluding to the consequences if she didn’t.

Fixing her with a penetrating stare, Pearce cocked his head to the side. “We have a deal?”

It was like agreeing to a verbal contract with the Devil, Gardner could already feel the flames burning her as she signed her soul away.

“Yes,” she nodded.

Tucking his phone away in his pocket, Pearce turned away without another word.


Pearce stopped but didn’t turn around, tiling his head slightly towards her, the only concession he’d made to her request. He was silent so long, Gardner didn’t think he’d answer her.

“It’s called Gnaural. I tried to stop it hitting the streets but…it’s already out there. Don’t mistake Gnaural for Digital Trips. It’s digital dopamine, giving a similar high to a heroin hit. The Club were the distributors, but since I’m not sure what’s left of them….”

He shrugged, but it was a quick jerk of his shoulder and Gardner sensed anger in the movement.

“I’m working on it.”

“And Klockwork?” she asked.

Pearce made a low sound in his throat. “You figure it out.”

Gardner watched Pearce walk out of the door without a backward glance. She blew out a breath she wasn’t aware she’d been holding. The tension he’d left in his wake felt suffocating, so much so it took a full minute before Gardner felt able to stand.

Making her way to the kitchen, she picked up her phone and called 911.
“Tony’s Pizza, how can I help you?”

Gardner opened her mouth, mumbled an apology and disconnected the call. With slightly shaking hands, she redialled 911.

“Tony’s Pizza, how can I help you?”

This time Gardner disconnected without saying anything.

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Even the light conspired to imprison her, teasing her as it cast striped buttery shadows over the wreck of a mattress and thin wool blanket. At night the light would disappear into the blackness so she felt completely trapped. Trapped with the cold and the ever-present draught under the thick oak door.

Cr0w had been in her ‘cell’ for what she thought was a little over a week. Time seemed to have an odd type of elasticity to it. Pliable, it stretched and pulled, moving slowly only to quicken at other times, until she’d lost track completely.

The room was completely reinforced, with no way out. And she’d tried. There was one window, too high for her to reach. Covered with steel bars there was no way, even if she could reach it, she’d be able to squeeze through.

Eventually Cr0w resigned herself to her fate. Because the more she thought about the situation, the more it became apparent that while her imprisonment wasn’t exactly a step up in the world, she was at least safe. Well, safe was a relative term. Maybe protected from the outside world and the fuck load of trouble she’d got herself into.

It wasn’t like she’d been abandoned completely, left to rot and starve. The man with the goatee, Jordi, appeared haphazardly with food. Always with an air of amused indifference, a crooked half smile on his face, almost daring her to act. Like he knew exactly what she’d been thinking about and found it entertaining.

And she’d considered testing him. Had built the moment up in her mind, knew exactly when she’d act. When he first entered the room, he was carrying a tray of food with one hand and had to take a step down. If she hid behind the door, tripped him in that unbalanced moment when he’d taken that step. But she had no warning of when he visited. Couldn’t hear him approach, the only way Cr0w knew he was coming was when the door creaked open. And she didn’t fancy sitting behind the door all day on the unlikely chance she’d surprise him.

Cr0w must have fallen asleep, because the creaking sound from the door pierced right through her unconscious mind. She’d sat up before her brain even registered she was awake. Instantly on alert, heart contracting as adrenaline spiked. Every time that door opened she expected death.

She was under no illusions. If Pearce decided she wasn’t of any use to him, this Jordi guy would have no compunction killing her. She’d seen it in the dark recesses of his brown eyes, that unsettling detachment as he gazed at her, completely unconcerned whether she died in this room. She was a job, nothing else.

It took a few moments for Cr0w to focus on the man who’d stepped into the room. It was dark, the light from the hallway spilled into the room, sketching a different outline to what she’d been expecting. She took a deep breath in and held it, fingers digging into the mattress as she waited.

Flipping the light switch, Pearce carefully closed the door behind him and stepped inside. Cr0w studied him silently. He stood there, all sharp angles with a languid apparition of danger, hardened
expression just as unyielding as she remembered.

Pearce slipped his hands into the pockets of his jacket, a careful movement designed to project a relaxed composure, but Cr0w nevertheless noticed the coiled tension he’d tried to conceal. The thin coat of indifference had been hastily affixed, but did nothing to hide the strain, the bruises on his face or the chilling volatility she saw in his gaze.

“Are you here to kill me?” Cr0w asked, finding it difficult to manifest the appropriate reaction to the prospect of her own death.

His gaze touched on her face with that disconcerting awareness, a brief smile flickering.

“Depends,” Pearce said, sounding like he’d swallowed gravel.

“On what?” she asked warily, hope flaring despite her best attempt to keep it banked.

“On your answers.”

Cr0w swallowed apprehensively, felt the brush of danger caress the space between them. She didn’t like looking up at him from her position on the floor, like some cowering foe he’d beaten into submission. She deemed herself far from submissive, but beaten? Well, she was lucky that all she’d sustained from their last encounter was a broken finger.

Pearce could have done a lot worse. Her finger still ached, she hadn’t been offered any medical assistance, so it hadn’t been reset and Cr0w knew she’d have trouble with it for the rest of her life. So seeing him standing there, oblivious or rather, unconcerned, with how she’d suffered, made her quietly furious. But if her tangle with Pearce had revealed anything, it was that he was the apex predator and could pick her off easily. She’d survived on the streets long enough to recognize a threat, so she wasn’t stupid enough to test him. Yet.

“Did you know who hired you to create the Klockwork site?”

Cr0w hesitated, but then shook her head. “No.”

Pearce arched a disbelieving brow.

“Not at first,” she admitted.

Cr0w had anticipated Pearce would ask about her involvement with the site, had cultivated some careful responses which would deflect him away from aspects of her life she’d rather he not look at too closely. But that plan seemed rather redundant now. Whatever answers she’d prepared were flimsy at best, using the holes in Pearce’s knowledge to redirect his attention away from her. Now that her continued existence was dependant on her responses, she was reluctant to tell shaded half-truths.

Pearce stared at her in expectant silence. It wasn’t a particularly comfortable silence, she could feel his impatience buffering against her, so much so that it was difficult not to feel uneasy under that unwavering gaze.

Maybe a week spent in this shitty room, with her mind conjuring all types of cruelties Pearce or the Fixer could inflict, had impacted more than she realized. She’d been so ready to tear into Aiden Pearce the moment she saw him again. But a creeping fear had untangled all that anger because she knew what Pearce was capable of. There was only one way out of this room and that was giving him what he wanted.
“Hindsight is the mother of all bitches you know, I never would have accepted the job if I’d know the fuck ton of shit I’d be in.”

Looking up at Pearce, she gave a renouncing shrug. “When I took the contract, it was good money, more than I’d ever earnt for just one job. I set up the Botnet, linked it to Klockwork, it wasn’t that hard. The CGI web proxy was a sticky piece of work though because of the security attached to the site. I got curious about who’d pay that much for a simple Botnet and traced the money back to an account, found out it was a holding corporation owned by the Quinn’s. It didn’t bother me, I’ve accepted money from worse people than the Mob. I got paid by the day too, so every day the proxy ran without interference they’d add 5k to my account. It seemed like easy money. But then…”

“Do you know what Klockwork is?” Pearce interrupted suddenly.

Cr0w looked at Pearce sharply, the deadly inflection in his voice melting across her senses to harden like ice.

“No. I could never hack in, it was too well protected.”

Pearce gave Cr0w a measured stare, weighing her words on the scales of his own assessment. She stared back, muscles bunched instinctively against the attack she thought was coming.

“Then the Club put a hit out on you.”

Cr0w sucked in a surprised breath, dizzy from trying to keep up with Pearce’s leaps in conversation. If he was doing it to keep her off balance, it was working, leaving her little time to compose her expression. Regardless, she must have passed his test. Cr0w knew, in that moment, her life was contingent on her answer.

“Yeah, I guess they must have.”

His head titled questioningly. “I … wasn’t sure,” Cr0w replied carefully.

Pearce grunted. “Because you’ve got Fixer’s on your tail too. It’s not the smartest move, blackmailing corporations.”

Cr0w felt a sneer pull her lips back. “And I’m supposed to believe you know what constitutes a smart move? From where I sit, you’ve got quite a few blemishes on your record. Just what exactly has your one-man crusade against the Club achieved, except to make you enemy number one? Because organized crime will always exist, regardless of your inconsequential efforts. Is it a smart move to piss off DedSec, because I think they hate you more than they hated Defalt. What about the Cops, they’d do anything to bring you down, since you’ve probably injured more than a few during one of your escape attempts. And of course, there’s Blume, who despise everything you stand for and your constant meddling in their systems. So I’d say that my effort to blackmail one person at Blume pales in comparison to your efforts. Forgive me if I don’t take advice from you.”

Her chest rose and fell, resentment extracting itself from her pores. No way would she let Pearce make such a cheap shot. Like he had the right to lecture her about the decisions she made in her life when he was the poster child for poor choices.

Sucking a breath in, Cr0w looked up at Pearce. She could map out the anger on his face, trace the lines of tension in his neck. Fuck being cautionary, she wouldn’t grovel for her life. She’d had enough of that in her teen years and resolved never to let it happen again. If Pearce was going to kill her, so be it.

But his lips tipped up into a humorless half-smile. “Touch a nerve did I? I own my life choices, what
about you?”

Cr0w glanced away, disconcerted by how easily he’d interpreted her outburst, brushed past the anger to reach right in to the true reason behind her bitterness.

Suddenly, Pearce took a step forward and dropped down onto his haunches, making Cr0w flinch away from his proximity. His gaze settled on her face, any animosity had dissipated and all she saw was that intractable expression which gave nothing away.

“I have an offer. Are you willing to hear me out?”

Cr0w’s head jerked back in surprise. Amusement teased his lips at her reaction but failed to reach his eyes.

“And If I don’t?”

Pearce shrugged. “I let you go.”

Cr0w choked on her response, but Pearce hadn’t finished. “But if I were you, I’d seriously consider what I’m offering. You’re running from very powerful enemies who have some skilled and ruthless people after you. If you take me up on my offer I can guarantee your safety. Or you can take your chance with the Club’s Fixers, or Blume’s private security. But we both know that’s not who you’re really running from. You’ve got some skill, that’s what kept you alive so far, but for how much longer?”

“You mean guarantee my safety like you guaranteed Clara’s?” she hissed, shielding her sudden vulnerability behind anger.

It was an ineffectual taunt, since she’d already tried using Clara against him. The insult didn’t seem to faze Pearce at it, it merely slid off him like water.

“Clara’s a cautionary tale. She’s what happens when people cross me. You want to hear what I have to say?”

Cr0w nodded.

After Pearce had finished outlining his plan, Cr0w merely blinked at him, incredulous. Her first instinct was to rebuff him. But the problem was, she’d run so far she was out of asphalt, there was nowhere else for her to go. Despite her dislike for Pearce, he was giving her options, maybe not any she’d have willingly chosen herself, but compared to the people who were chasing her, it wasn’t death. But his plan was worse in some ways.

Annoyingly, Pearce was right, she didn’t own her choices and the consequences were rearing their ugly heads. But if she took him up on his deal, could she trust Pearce enough to keep up his end? Did she have any choice?

Swallowing apprehensively, Cr0w nodded. “Yeah, we have a deal.”

The smile he flashed her wasn’t all that reassuring and it instantly made her regret her decision.

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Hayley knew she was in a hospital long before she opened her eyes. She’d spent a lot of time in rehab after she was injured in Iraq and somehow, hospitals all over the world managed to smell the same. Carbolic soap and disinfectant. Mix in despair and your mind assimilated the hospital ward
before you even opened your eyes.

Thoughts had a distinct fuzzy edge to them. There was only a distant sense of pain. Whatever injuries she’d sustained were being masked by some pretty strong narcotics. Not that she was complaining. The chemical drag of sedatives pulsed through her bloodstream, adding an unpleasant earthy taste to her mouth every time she woke.

Time moved slowly, seemed to have that thick, impenetrable feeling like molasses. Sleep overrode her more often than she would have liked. It was difficult to determine days, even hours. By the time she was able to stay awake for a sustained period, Hayley suspected she’d been out for quite some time.

Most times, she woke alone, baring the odd visit from a Nurse. So it surprised her when she opened her eyes to discover she had company. The pain was a distant throb, nothing too extreme but it was still there.

White coat, grey-flecked hair, stethoscope. She’d take a wild stab in the dark and assign this guy as her Doctor. Seeing she was awake, he gave her a quick, practiced smile and moved towards the bed.

“You’re awake. Good. My name is Doctor Flores.”

Hayley made a dubious sound in her throat, disagreeing with his assessment that being awake was good.

The Doctor flipped open a cover on his tablet and looked down. His eyes skimmed over the screen and Hayley waited for him to speak. She shifted, trying to lever herself up on the pillows but a sharp pain cut through the fog clinging to her mind and she hissed. The Doctor looked up at her, eyes narrowed.

“I’d try to resist moving too much, you’re lucky to even be alive.”

A mirthless laugh crawled up her throat. “Yeah,” Hayley agreed, “So I’ve been told before.”

And she had, by a Doctor in Iraq. That Doctor had the same gruff, aloof attitude as this one, and Hayley wondered if it was an affectation taught in Medical School. ‘Be superior to thy patients’ should be added to the Hippocratic Oath.

The Doctor looked over at her speculatively, clearly wondering what she was referring to. Or maybe thinking the drugs were affecting her adversely. She waved her uninjured arm.

“Sorry Doc.”

He cleared his throat, looked at the tablet then back at her.

“I was the surgeon who operated on you. Like I said, you’re a very lucky young lady. When you’d arrived at Chicago Med you’d already sustained a Class 3 Haemorrhaging. That’s a loss of four…”


She was lucky to be alive. The body only had about 7 pints in it, depending on the size of the person. The Doctor looked at her expectantly.

“I trained as a Nurse and combat medic,” Hayley explained.

Doctor Flores inclined his head. “Well I won’t pull punches with my explanation then. So the bullet
wound you sustained impacted your clavicle. The bone fractured and the bullet rebounded. I had to screw a metal plate on to realign your collarbone. There was no exit wound, so I had to remove the bullet fragments which resulted in some internal injuries. Your lung collapsed, the fragments causing a tension pneumothorax. So I had to insert a chest tube to drain the blood and air from around your lung, and to help your left lung to re-inflate. You’d also sustained another grazing shot to your right thigh but since that only required eight stitches, I’d say it was a relatively minor wound in comparison”

Hayley blew out a long breath and closed her eyes. Listening to the Doctor’s explanation was sobering. When Aiden left her, she never expected to wake up again. Had thought death had finally caught up with her, wrapping her cold fingers around her, dragging her away screeching a victory since she’d escaped her fate over in Iraq. But here she was, again lying in a hospital bed. Alive.

But what now? Where was Aiden? Was she under arrest? The lack of a Police presence or even handcuffs seemed to suggest not. Pain was slowly edging past the drugs, flowing through her body so it became difficult to concentrate. For such a short amount of time conscious, she was incredibly tired.

“...your other injuries. This isn’t the first trauma you’ve been involved in.”

“No,” she acknowledged quietly, “It isn’t. Being a soldier in Iraq isn’t conducive to good health,” she shrugged. “How long have I been out?”

Doctor Flores nodded like she’d confirmed his suspicions. “Almost five days. You’ll need to stay in here for a while still. I’ve put a sling on your arm so try to not to move too much. You’ll need physical therapy.” He paused, gaze passing over her face. “I’ll send the Nurse in, she can show you how to work the morphine drip.”

Flashing another, quick professional smile, Doctor Flores turned and walked away. Fatigue washed over Hayley, she fought it for a moment but then decided it wasn’t worth the battle.

When next she woke, she noticed two men in her room. One hovered near the doorway, the other sat opposite her bed. As soon as he saw she was awake, he rose. Hayley skimmed over his appearance, noticing a few important details. The suit the man wore was Department store quality, not shabby exactly but not expertly fitting either. She recognized a familiar bulge near his armpit – a shoulder holster.

Hayley sighed a little, unable to keep the wariness out of the sound. Cops. It wasn’t unexpected, she just didn’t really feel like dealing with them. The Cop closest to her approached the bed. His eyes, a clear blue color, roamed over her face.

“My name is Detective Sutter,” he paused and motioned behind him, “and this is my partner Detective Booth. Can we ask you a few questions?”

Hayley couldn’t prevent an amused sound from escaping. Despite the Detective’s polite demeanor, he wasn’t asking permission.

She shrugged, feigning a casualness she didn’t feel. “You’ll have to be quick Detective. I feel another nap creeping up.”

Sutter’s eyes hardened briefly, before he smiled congenially at her. Just as she suspected, the nice
guy act was just that. An act. Hayley gazed steadily back at the Detective, noticing out the corner of her eye, Sutter’s partner had walked further into the room and was watching her carefully. Tag-team tactics. One would ask the question, the other would watch her reactions carefully.

“Lieutenant Parker, I’m sure you’ve figured out why we’re here.”

Hayley gritted her teeth at the use of her rank. It needled that he’d addressed her that way but she couldn’t work out why.

“I’m guessing it’s not overdue parking tickets,” she quipped.

By the hostile glance he launched her way, she could tell the Detective didn’t appreciate her rather flimsy attempt at humor.

“Well, I gather it’s rather difficult to get parking tickets when you haven’t been tracked by ctOS these last few months.”

The Detective’s words settled across her skin like permafrost, seeping into marrow and freezing her in place. Hayley remained silent, despite the sudden influx of chaotic thoughts careering through her mind.

She feigned a yawn, giving herself time to gather her thoughts. Which was more difficult than it should have been. The pain meds were strong, messing with her mental faculties. She didn’t feel sharp enough to have this conversation. She needed to delay. She wasn’t even sure if she was under arrest. Might be if she fobbed off the Detective. Still, she’d make him for work any answers.

Detective Sutter stared at her steadily, letting the silence wrap around them. Hayley merely stared back, unaffected. As opening moves went, it was a clumsy one. Sutter might have scored a hit with the ctOS inference but using silence as an intimidation tactic wouldn’t work. She’d spent the last few months with a man whose use of silence felt stifling, like a choke hold. In comparison, the Detective’s silence felt like a warm summer breeze.

“Where have you been Lieutenant? CtOS logged you in at O’Hare where you took a Cab and visited your brother in Palin Correction Facility, but after that? No record. You simply vanished.”

Hayley shrugged. “I went to ground.”

Sutter’s brow quirked, but to his credit he kept the skepticism from his face. The incredulity in his tone, however, still managed to seep through.

“Indeed. And just what tech allows you to manage that?”

She smiled. “It’s Military in design Detective, I can’t disclose the specifics.”

It was utter bullshit and Sutter knew it. He was angling to catch her in her own net of lies. And Hayley realized that was far easier for the Detective to do since she had no knowledge of events after she’d passed out. Hayley felt like she was in a dark room, blindly groping for the light to try and illuminate the situation with any kind of accuracy.

But, Sutter could press her about her methods all he liked. If Hayley inferred she was using a Military device, then she was bound by laws and contracts he couldn’t hope to bypass. The Military guarded their secrets possessively, so the public really had no clue what kind of tech they designed or had access to. Even if Hayley was technically employed by the Army, she would still be unable to provide any enlightening information, the contracts she signed were legally binding even after her service ended.
Sutter’s jaw clenched, he looked set to argue then obviously thought better of it. Hayley was a little confused about his line of questioning, she expected to be read her rights and carted off to the nearest holding facility.

After all, she had been found in a room with Blume’s CIO, his throat slashed, and with two other people who died from obvious gunshot wounds. Not that she’d killed any of them, but given the opportunity... It was semantics anyway, and Hayley wouldn’t implicate Aiden in their murders. It’d make her situation worse, admitting to cavorting with Chicago’s most wanted criminal, and likely add more charges.

“Why?” Sutter asked.

Hayley breathed in deeply, the subdued fatigue which had plagued her throughout the conversation, was slowly building until she felt it trying to drag her down. She didn’t have the mental reserves to play these kind of verbal games with Sutter. So instead Hayley just stared, waiting for Sutter to clarify what he meant. The morphine was wearing off, she’d have loved to press the drip again but the pain had the odd effect of filing down the fatigue and sharpening her mind, if only for a brief time.

“Why go to ground?” Sutter clarified, no hint of the displeasure at her stunted responses.

“To search for Jenna Goodman.”

Sutter blinked, his gaze turning inwards, likely searching his brain for the name she’d provided. “My brother’s girlfriend had a cousin who went missing. He’d been trying to trace her whereabouts when he was *falsely* arrested. I was just trying to find her and clear his name. He suspected human trafficking with Blume involvement and he was right. Was Jenna one of the women rescued?”

In the time she’d spent awake, Hayley had created a cover story, knowing the Cops would eventually talk to her. It was flimsy at best, but Sutter himself had provided validation for part of her story. If he pulled the Prison audio logs of her talking to her brother, it’d confirm her story.

Sutter looked over at his partner, who scrambled for his phone. He spent a few moments thumbing through it before looking back up. Detective Booth flicked his eyes over to her before nodding at Sutter.

Hayley let out a shaky breath. It had been a calculated risk, but Jenna was the only tangible reason she’d be tied to this situation. Why else would she attempt to dismantle a human trafficking ring by herself? Of course the Detectives suspected, if not knew, she’d been involved with Aiden. But they needed evidence, and she wasn’t sure what the Cops had on her. Trespassing possibly, murder if they could pin Julian’s death on her.

“Regardless of your *good* intentions,” Sutter said, dubious emphasis on good. “You were still found in the same room as the now deceased Julian Collins, Blume’s CIO, his bodyguard Levi Marcello and ex-Blume employee Angela Balik. Not to mention the dead and injured men littered around the facility. It’s rather incriminating wouldn’t you say?”

“I didn’t kill them,” Hayley replied quickly. Too quickly really, she’d just slathered guilty all over her forehead.

The Detective let his gaze rest on her, blue eyes frosted over with the same warmth as a frozen lake.

“Who did then?”

Looking down, she avoided the Detective’s gaze and tried to school her features into blankness. It was difficult, memories flashed like a camera, fast and blinding. The pain of the bullet, taste of blood
in her mouth, the fear, waiting for her throat to be slit.

The panic built like a cluster of spark plugs in her abdomen. Tension grew in her face and limbs, her mind replaying everything. Her breathing became rapid, shallower. In these moments before her personal hurricane, she would do anything to stop the primal surge of adrenaline and loss of control.

The heart machine beside her beeped rapidly, but it barely registered. All of her fears tumbled out unchecked by her brain, like she was in some kind of mental free-fall, unable to analyze or assess risk. Hayley could hear the Detective talking but it was a hollow sound, the words muffled. Closing her eyes, Hayley shut out the world, let the suffocation reach a tipping point, body and mind fighting until it realized she wasn’t in immediate danger. She’d learnt not to fight the reaction, just rode it out until it passed.

When Hayley opened her eyes, the Nurse stood next to her, worry etched into her face. Glancing away, she saw the two Detectives had retreated to the furthest part of the room, eyeing her warily.

“Are you okay?”

Dragging her gaze back to the Nurse, Hayley nodded numbly. Sutter walked towards the bed but the Nurse turned, put a hand up.

“No. Enough questions for today.”

Sutter’s jaw flexed as he glanced briefly at the Nurse before turning back to Hayley.

“Look Detective, I really don’t feel up to having this conversation right now. I’m in a lot of pain and I’d prefer to wait until I’m out of Hospital to talk. Am I under arrest?” she asked, genuinely interested in the answer.

Detective Sutter didn’t bother to hide his contempt. “No,” he said, voice clipped, “you’re not. We will need to chat with you after your release.”

Hayley thought she did a poor job of hiding her shock, open mouthed surprise notwithstanding.

“I just have one question before we leave.”

The Nurse bristled beside her, glowering at the Detective, but he ignored her.

“Do you know Aiden Pearce? The so-called Vigilante?” He said the word Vigilante as if it was something he’d scrape off the bottom of his shoe.

“I know of him,” she replied non-committedly.

A defiant sneer crawled across Sutter’s face. “Yeah, I know you do. Talk soon Lieutenant.”

With that ominous insinuation left to simmer inside her head, both Detectives walked out. Hayley blew out a nervous breath, heart thumping wildly in her chest. The Nurse watched the men leave, a disapproving frown on her face.

Turning back, the Nurse cast an appraising gaze over her face. Emotionally drained, both from her confrontation with Sutter and her recent panic attack, Hayley didn’t have the reserves to keep up the façade. The effects of her PTSD hadn’t surfaced for months, but it wasn’t surprising that it was edging its way back.

“You’ve over-exerted yourself,” the Nurse stated. “Did you need me to get the Doctor?”
Hayley snorted, the sound flecked with tiredness. “No, it’s fine, I can handle it. Can I make a call?”

The Nurse pursed her lips. There was a landline next to her bed but Hayley had no hope of reaching it. Eventually the Nurse nodded, bringing the phone over to place it within easy reach.

“Thanks.”

The Nurse hesitated, eyes darting between Hayley and the phone. She let out a small sigh, nodded and walked out. Hayley watched her, unable to keep a small smile from escaping. Of course her phone calls were being monitored, that they had left her an open line of communication was suspicious enough. Not that the Nurse’s behavior didn’t tip her off. Hayley dialled the number that was in no known phone records.

“Identify yourself,” came the terse command from duty officer who answered.

“BC292.”

The duty officer was silent as the voice recognition program took a few moments to verify her.

“Lieutenant Parker who can I transfer you to?”

“Lieutenant Colonel White please.”

“Transferring now.”

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Sirens filtered through the inner city traffic, cars congested, horns blaring in ineffectual frustration. Hayley stood outside the hospital, watching the tide of patients flow through the automatic doors. Provided with a prescription for more pain killers, an after-surgery care plan, Cab voucher and clothes, since hers had likely been discarded, too caked with blood to be of any use.

Adjusting the sling, Hayley winced as her shoulder gave a sharp reminder not to move too much and the dull throb of pain accelerated into a persistent ache. She hadn’t heard from or seen the Detectives again and wasn’t quite sure what to do. But it was no use waiting outside the Hospital to be arrested. Hayley hailed a Cab.

“Where to?” the driver asked.

Opening her mouth, she caught herself just in time. Right, best not to give the address of Aiden’s safe house. Where to indeed. The driver glared at her in the mirror, so she gave the address to her apartment complex.

Hayley stared out the window, watching the city blur as the driver picked up speed. In a matter of minutes, one impulsive decision, and all of her careful plans for the future had unravelled. The universe was playing a cruel joke, likely laughing at her expense. What the point of everything then? All her suffering, struggles, literally life or death, to be left standing, barely, holding nothing but the tattered remains of a questionable future. Unlike her flesh, the threads of her life couldn’t be stitched back together so easily. So what now?

The Doctor had warned her she needed to be aware that she might relapse with her PTSD, and depression may be an effect of the trauma her body underwent. Hayley knew herself well enough to realize she wasn’t in the best frame of mind, but didn’t seem to have the energy to care. Of course she was grateful to be alive. But that didn’t mean there wasn’t a justified reason to feel disheartened, at again, having her future snatched away so cruelly.
There was a hard knot of hurt and self-recrimination inside her, bound together by trauma and tragedy, an intricate ball of pain and regret which she just couldn't untie.

Her body kicked into auto-pilot, numbly handing over the Cab voucher, waiting outside until someone with a keycard let her in. Barely even feeling the cold. Talking to the apartment manager, shrugging carelessly when he mentioned the $180 fee for a keycard replacement.

The apartment, which had been home once and was so familiar, felt stale, lifeless. The curtains had been left open, allowing light to stream through. Thousands of dust particles danced and swirled in each ray of light. It was cold, the central heating had been turned off. The refrigerator hummed quietly in the background, the only sound which permeated the saturating silence.

The past few months Hayley had become accustomed to background noise. The almost continual tapping of a keyboard, the whir of computers, sports coverage on the TV. Now she felt that absence, the lack of someone else’s presence. There was a cardboard cut-out, leaving a blank space where she was so used to Aiden’s presence. And Hayley felt it, acutely, the loneliness from the lack of heartbeat which irradiated an otherwise lifeless space.

Sighing, Hayley forced her limbs to move, to push past the heaviness to switch on the heating.

A knock at the door startled her. She looked over and wondered who the hell knew she was there. Likely the manager again. When Hayley opened the door and saw the two men she least expected, she let out a slow breath as her ambivalence slowly crumbled under the prospect of being arrested.

“Detectives, what can I do for you?” Hayley asked equably.

Detective Sutter’s gaze drilled into her, she could feel his animosity hidden beneath a genial smile.

“We need to take your statement. Can we come in?”

Hayley hesitated, considered calling a lawyer, but decided she could always request one if needed.

“Sure,” she opened the door.

The two men entered the apartment, she gritted her teeth as she felt their gazes roaming over her space, likely making judgements and assessments. Hayley walked past the men as they hovered in the living room and motioned to the couches.

The two Detectives sat down on the couch, but Hayley made a point of waiting for them to sit, a superfluous victory in this tug of war for dominance. She’d likely spent too much time with Aiden, everything was about superiority and it looked like she’d also adopted that trait. Sutter’s jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

Hayley sat down on the couch opposite the two men. Sutter reached inside his jacket, pulled out a USB and slid it across the coffee table. Her gaze was pulled down as it thudded to a stop against some books.

Looking back up at the Detective she traced her gaze over his face. Something flashed beneath the surface of his hardened expression, but it was gone before she could register what caused the sudden shift.

Sutter motioned towards the USB. “Would you like to know what’s on that?”

Hayley remained silent, feeling increasingly like she was sparring with an unknown opponent, dodging and weaving, unable to implement any kind of counter-attack.
“Nothing,” Sutter continued, cadences of bitterness lurking beneath the surface.

Looking up at her, one eyebrow quirked up. “But there was. Thing is, the file disappeared once I watched it. Curious isn’t it? And CPD techs say the file is unrecoverable.”

Sutter gave her a long appraising stare. “Would you like to know what was on the file?”

She bristled at the question, felt a wave of anger cresting over her seeing the contempt on the Detective’s face.

“You.”

Seeds of doubt spread dark roots in her mind as Hayley tried desperately to comprehend the significance of what the Detective had seen on that file. She had her suspicions but…

“It was security footage from the night of the auction. Specifically from the room the medics found you in.”

Her breath hitched slightly as Sutter continued. “I had no idea at first what I was looking at. I watched you enter the room and do…whatever…you were trying to do on that console.”

“Open the doors to the cells,” she whispered.

Sutter cocked his head and stared at her, a calculating expression settling across his face. “So Angela Balik shot you.”

Hayley shrugged. “I think so, I can’t remember much.”

Sutter let out a rumbling sound full of cynicism. “Do you remember Julian Collins sticking a knife to your throat?”

She snorted. “Unfortunately that memory is clearer than others.”

“That file was quite enlightening. Fortuitous for you actually. If it wasn’t for that video you’d be charged with numerous counts of murder. I guess we can just add those charges to Pearce’s rap sheet. There was no audio, so I couldn’t hear what Pearce and Collins were talking about. What I can’t work out is why Pearce would even bother to send me this file. The only conclusion I can draw is that you must mean something to him to do this. I didn’t get much of a chance to analyze the footage, but I saw enough. People are expendable to Pearce, I’ve seen the disregard he has for people’s safety. Yet he was concerned about you, I saw it in his expression, enough certainly to let himself be disarmed. Curious…”

The spectral essence of a threat wavered in the air, winding around Hayley and squeezing the breath out of her. But even as Hayley fought her instinctual reactions, she realized that Sutter was angling for answers, casting out a hook and expecting her to take the bait. He had no proof. If he did, he wouldn’t be in her apartment for a casual chat.

She scoffed dismissively, even if the foundation of her argument was held together with glue. “I don’t know why he’d send you that file. Maybe he didn’t want me to be charged for something I didn’t do. He’s called the Vigilante for a reason. Besides, if I meant something to him, why leave me there?”

“Exactly, why did he leave you there? Maybe you should think on that for a while. Pearce cares only about himself, saving his own skin. Might make you more open to telling me the truth about your association with Aiden Pearce.”
Hayley felt her patience stretch until it snapped and she barked, “What would you like to hear Detective? That I’d shacked up with the Vigilante? That we were sleeping together and the sex was fantastic? I told you why I was at the auction and it had nothing to do with Aiden Pearce. We just happened to cross paths. In fact, I’m glad we did, he saved my life.”

Sutter gave her an arch glance which seemed to suggest he believed nothing of what she’d just said.

“It’s a nice speech, well-rehearsed. It doesn’t matter, this subterfuge achieves nothing. We both know that you had a relationship with Pearce. Don’t expect me to believe you both separately happened to unravel the same human trafficking connection and be there at the same time.”

Careful of her shoulder, Hayley leaned forward and locked eyes with the Detective. Saw the anger he was trying to suppress in his blue eyes, little chips of ice cold fury. Dropping all pretence of innocence, she said very quietly, “Prove it.”

A ripple of resentment lashed across Sutter’s face. His jaw clenched, neck straining as he fought to control his reaction. Hayley knew she was skirting around dangerous territory, had let this Detective goad her more than she should have. But Cops operated within the bounds of the law, needed evidence and due diligence and all that entailed. Hunches crumbled under lack of evidence, even if Sutter’s suspicions were on point.

Hayley sat back and crossed her legs. “So I’m not being charged?”

Detective Booth sent a quick look at his partner who glowered at Hayley silently. Booth cleared his throat.

“No. The evidence we received clears you of the murders of Angela Balik, Julian Collins and Levi Marcello. Blume owns almost all of Brandon Docks and have decided not to press charges for trespassing.”

The rest of the interview was completed by Detective Booth, while Sutter’s acidic silence burned uncomfortably in the air around them.

Booth asked normal procedural questions. The trauma induced amnesia was a convenient way to distance herself. No, she was not involved in the shootout with the Club. Hayley figured if Aiden sent the USB to the Detective, implicating himself in the three murders, it was his way of giving her consent to incriminate him in order to keep herself out of prison.

When the interview was finished, and Hayley followed the Detectives down the hallway, she wasn’t the least bit surprised when Sutter stopped suddenly, turning around to take a quick step into her personal space. She craned her neck slightly to look him in the eye, not intimidated by the man, despite his bulk and the anger which burnt on an ever quickening short fuse.

“I’d be careful from now on. If we know you’re connected to Aiden Pearce, then others do too,” Sutter said, sinister threat sliding behind his words.

She felt the implication penetrate through her, despite her determination to remain stoically indifferent to Sutter’s taunts. He didn’t need to threaten her with anything, the inference was enough; she was a target now. Without another word, both Detectives left.

Dread slipped up from the pit of her stomach to close its vice-like grip around her throat. Her hand shook slightly, the adrenaline from the confrontation with Sutter draining away to leave her feeling weak and light headed.

The knock at her door made her jump. Sutter’s warning rebounded in her mind, but Hayley refused
to be scared in her own home. Slowly, she opened the door.

A young guy stood outside, mid-to-late teens, chewing on a piece of gum. Loudly. It smacked annoyingly with every chew. He tossed his hair back over his head and dragged his gaze over her but said nothing.

“Can I help you?”

He chewed on the gum for a few seconds more, and appeared to contemplate her question. The kid looked like someone whose brain automatically went into screen saver mode when someone wasn’t punching his keys.

He grunted and nodded. Hayley sighed and despaired for the future. It seemed this generation of teens were actually regressing, using primeval grunts to communicate in lieu of any available electronic screen. The teen reached into his jacket pocket and Hayley tensed, but he just pulled out an old flip phone and held it out for her.

“I think you have the wrong apartment.”

The kid shrugged. “You Hayley?”

A little bemused, she nodded. “Yeah.”

He shrugged again. “Then this is for you.”

Reaching out, Hayley grabbed the phone. She flipped it open, looked back up, but the teen was already halfway down the hallway. She closed the door and walked inside, inspecting the phone. The message tone beeped. It was so unexpected she fumbled and the phone dropped to the ground. She winced as it thudded on the floorboards.

Picking it back up, she blew out a relieved breath when it still appeared to be functional. She read over the message.

Parking garage. 7:00 PM

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Hayley was armed. A Beretta 93 FS hidden in the back of her jeans. Not that she could do much besides point and shoot. She felt safer with it, regardless. But, Sutter’s implication shadowed her, hushed as the night, dancing between the flickering lights from the cars in the garage.

Maybe it was the case of a self-fulfilling prophesy. All that energy and time spent worrying that someone would discover her relationship with Aiden had actually willed it into reality. While it may only be conjecture at this stage, there was enough there for others to make the connection, certainly enough speculation to make Hayley feel uncomfortable. Like she was swimming in a shark tank full of predators she couldn’t see.

The cold stung her skin as Hayley shifted restlessly, trying not to jump at every sound. Behind her back, her clasp tightened against the pistol’s grip, flexing in agitation every time a car drove past.

When she looked over to her right, Aiden was no more than a distortion of the light, a human cut out of blended color against the melting darkness. All of her worries peeled away, like shedding an outer layer of skin.

As if pulled by a magnet, she walked towards him, a figure so familiar to her she could close her
eyes and map out every curve of him like an artist melding clay. She reached out with one arm and wrapped it around him. As Hayley settled her face against his chest, she felt Aiden bring his arms around, careful of her injured shoulder, and lay his cheek across her forehead.

She held on tight, face pressed against his chest. Hayley let herself relax, soaking up the warmth from Aiden’s body like osmosis, chasing away the lingering chill from the fear, worry, and anxiety of the past few weeks.

The screech of tyres perforated their cocoon, made Aiden jerk his head up and unwrap his arms. He stepped away from her, gaze sweeping the garage before turning back to her. His eyes lingered on her sling. Aiden reached out, settling a hand on her back and Hayley let herself be guided further into the parking garage.

“Where are we going?”

Aiden looked over at her briefly, before he let his gaze rove over the garage in restless scrutiny.

“We shouldn’t be out in the open,” he replied tersely.

Hayley snorted. “You sent that kid to me with a flip phone? I suppose it’s better than carrier pigeon.”

Looking over at her, Aiden’s mouth crooked into a half-smile. “They’re harder to hack,” he explained.

“Pigeon or the flip phone?”

Aiden let out a dry laugh. “Both.” He gestured towards an SUV. She missed the move he made on his phone but the car beeped.

When Aiden opened the passenger door, Hayley raised an appreciative eyebrow. “If I’d known getting shot was the key to you being a gentleman…”

Immediately, she regretted her flippancy as his face lost any traces of amusement, dissolving to set into hardened stone. Hayley sighed quietly and felt Aiden put a hand on her elbow and help her into the seat. He closed the door, walked around the front of the car to sit in the driver’s seat.

The car was parked well into the corner, the lights barely reacing them. Aiden didn’t start the car, just sat quietly next to her.

“Are we going somewhere?” she asked uncertainly.

Aiden glanced at her, shook his head. “No. Your apartment is being watched. I can’t risk it.”

She looked around in alarm. Aiden made a soothing noise in his throat. “It’s ok. Just the Cops, they’re sitting outside the building.”

That certainly didn’t make her feel any less threatened. Although it wasn’t unexpected, it was still unsettling.

“The Cops know Aiden. About us. I don’t think they can prove it.”

An uncompromising smile ghosted his lips. “No,” he confirmed, “they can’t.”

It was said with such conviction, Hayley couldn’t help but he persuaded. But then, she’d always had a tendency to be swept away by Aiden’s certainties.
“Two Detectives came to see me today.”

“I know.”

Hayley looked over at Aiden sharply. He shrugged. “I hacked into their phones, switched on the audio to listen. I must thank you for your glowing recommendation.”

She looked at him blankly.

“The sex was fantastic,” he quoted, amusement curling around the words.

Hayley laughed, but it was clamped off quickly when she realized exactly what Aiden must have heard.

“Aiden, I didn’t mean what I said. About you leaving me. I told you to go. I don’t blame you.”

His expression betrayed nothing, but Hayley knew better than to believe Aiden felt nothing. She reached across tentatively and put her hand on his thigh, felt the muscle jump and the immediate transference of tension.

“I don’t blame you,” Hayley reiterated.

Aiden looked over at her, met her gaze. “I know,” he said, the growl in his voice doing little to convince her. His eyes flashed, a dangerous concoction of emotions, but he looked away before she could say something. Hayley sensed all the loose, unraveled threads get reeled back inside, clamped shut and tucked away more tightly than before.

She let out a wistful sigh and pulled her hand back. In some ways, Aiden’s steely composure was more alarming than the anger and outright aggression. She’d learnt that the razor edge of control was there for a reason. Because his mind was busy planning whatever atrocities he’d conjured up for those who had the audacity to challenge him. She wondered what he had planned for the Detective, who had obviously succeeded in pushing Aiden’s boundaries. Sutter had set his sights on Chicago’s most wanted criminal, for whatever reason; accolades, it gave him a hard on, wanting career advancement. Hayley got the feeling Sutter would have set her on fire, figuratively speaking, waiting for Aiden to come and put it out. She was just lucky he could get none of the charges to stick.

“Are you okay?” Aiden looked across at her, eyes darting quickly to the sling before landing purposely on her face.

“The pain’s not too bad. I’ve had worse. I’ll need physical therapy. The surgeon bolted a plate onto my collarbone,” Hayley explained quickly, trying to gloss over just how seriously close she’d come to dying. “You sent the Detective that USB. I’m guessing you’ve been working hard to keep me out of prison?”

Aiden inclined his head. “He’s a tenacious bastard that Detective Sutter. Blume,” Aiden smirked quickly, “had been putting pressure on him not charge you. He wouldn’t let it go, he was going to charge you with manslaughter and trespassing. I suspect it was more about trying to lure me out to see what I’d do if you were charged. So I had to provide proof you didn’t kill Collins.”

“Why would Blume not want to charge me?”

Aiden smiled. It was a knowing, dangerous smile which sharpened his expression and allowed violence to beat like a pulse in his eyes. “They were persuaded otherwise.”

Hayley grunted and looked away. Chose not to ask about what he’d done, who he’d threatened or
whose career he’d ruined so she could walk free.

“Oh, what about my phone? The Cops have the phone you gave me. Their technicians must have broken the encryption by now.”

The phone hadn’t been returned to her, and there were enough illegal apps Aiden had loaded on to it, to charge her. Least of which included breaches of ctOS. Odd that the Detective hadn’t mentioned it.

Aiden’s mouth twitched into a smile. “No,” he disagreed, “they wouldn’t have. The phone will be a charred mess by now.”

He chuckled in genuine amusement. “It’s a failsafe I install on all my phones, in case they fall into someone else’s hands. There’s an app on there, it wipes the phone then overheats the battery, conveniently destroying any evidence even on the off chance the wipe doesn’t stick.”

“Right,” but she said, not overly surprised. “What’s happening with the Club?”

“Well, Quinn’s dead. Complications during surgery.”

It took a long few moments for Hayley to understand the relevance of Aiden’s last statement. His voice was toneless, hollowly indifferent but with enough inflection for Hayley to feel the hairs on her arms stand to attention as a militia of chills marched down her spine.

It felt like the breath had been sucked out of her lungs, not because she knew somehow, Aiden had caused Quinn’s death, but because the sudden influx of relief was so overwhelming.

She supposed it would be easy enough to do. Blume had outfitted Chicago Med with all the latest medical devices. And Aiden knew Blume tech probably better than their own developers. Slip in to their system, cause a fatal overdose, it was relatively easy for someone of Aiden’s skill. Was it wrong to feel grateful that Aiden had committed murder for her? To keep her from prison, from being charged for crimes she had committed? Regardless, Hayley found she just couldn’t bring herself to feel guilty that Quinn wasn’t walking around, able to hurt anyone else.

“That doesn’t upset me,” she said, lightly dismissive.

Aiden passed a critical gaze over her face. There was the barest glimmer of a smile, but it was more a rueful acknowledgement of what she wasn’t saying, rather than any expression of humor.

“And Gnaural?” Hayley asked. Aiden’s jaw tensed until the bone was silhouetted through his skin like old ivory.

“It’s been released. I can’t find the distribution point.”

“I’m starting to wonder if we achieved anything. Sure, Quinn and Collins are dead, but the digital drugs have been released, my brother is still in prison and half of my collarbone is now metal.”

Aiden gazed at her steadily, eyebrow raised in silent but potent disapproval.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, she raked a hand tiredly over her face. “I’m sorry.”

Silence settled around them, uncomfortable as a prickly jumper. It made her want to itch her skin.

“You’re not staying in Chicago.”

Hayley jerked her head up, sucking breath in between her teeth when her shoulder reacted to the sharp movement. It wasn’t voiced as a questions and Hayley realized that the idea had been there for
a while. Slipping like a ghost into her mind, wavering and indiscriminate at first, but gaining traction and form the more she gave the idea life.

“I …. It’s … I don’t...” she stumbled over the words, her tongue refusing to form the letters. “I don’t know yet,” she said honestly, looking over at Aiden. He’d sat back in the seat, darkness veiled his expression, conveniently cloaking what he was feeling.

“I feel vulnerable, too many eyes on me.”

A mirthless laugh crawled up her throat, but the artificial humor burned out before she could express it. If she was in any other city but Chicago, her last statement would sound like the ravings of a paranoid schizophrenic, but Hayley knew all too well Blume’s almost unlimited access to people’s lives.

“I phoned my CO. He was a little … annoyed at me. Anyway,” she waved a limp hand, “he’s offered me a position. Training a new team. After I heal. And pass the physical. And psych test,” Hayley felt her lip peel back at that prospect.

“Are you going to accept?” Aiden asked, voice bare of any inflection, like he was asking her if she thought the weather was nice.

“Do you think I should?” she countered, a sharp sting to her voice.

“I think you need to do what makes you happy.”

The words were delivered tonelessly, the lukewarm sentiment falling flat between them.

“This doesn’t make me happy Aiden,” she snapped, pointing a finger at her shoulder. “Or this,” she waved a hand indicating the two of them. “Knowing if it wasn’t for my impulsive decision none of this would have happened. Everything is complicated because of my fuck up. So no Aiden, happy is not the word I’d use.”

She was breathing hard, the pain in her shoulder slowly creeping into her awareness.

“I don’t know how you managed to keep me out of prison, but I am grateful. It’s just … I don’t think I can stay here. Looking over my shoulder, wondering if a Fixer might try to grab me to get to you. Knowing Blume and the Cops are watching me. It’s not a life I wanted. I can’t be here, be in the same city as you and not see you,” Hayley commented quietly, feeling her voice break on the sharp edge of pain in her throat.

For a brief moment, the desire to throw caution to the wind, to stay in Chicago with Aiden, rose like spectre, insubstantial but fleeting. Hayley realized Aiden had probably done the least selfish thing in his entire life, working behind the scenes to keep her out of prison, probably knowing that it’d mean they couldn’t be together.

He could have just let nature take its course, let the Cops charge her and organize to take her from the Hospital before she was transferred to prison. But that would have meant she’d be a fugitive, and that was something she didn’t want. As much as it hurt to know she couldn’t be with Aiden, the thought of a life on the run was infinitesimally worse. Two decisions which had life changing consequences regardless of which one she picked.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“You don’t need to be. This isn’t all on you, it’s not just your burden to carry. It’s easier to sit back and pick apart our choices now.”
Hayley got the distinct impression he wasn’t just referring to their raid on the auction.

Aiden shifted in the seat so he could face her. “I’m working on getting your brother’s sentence reduced. But, Chicago isn’t safe for you. And you’re right, you’ll be monitored closely. Maybe in a few months’ time Blume or the Cops might back off slightly, but you’ll never have the same freedom of movement. There might not be evidence of our relationship but there’s enough speculation for others to make the connection. If you stay in Chicago you’ll be living like a fugitive anyway. I can’t guarantee your safety, I have too many enemies who would use you against me.”

Without Hayley really noticing, a tear had escaped to roll down her cheek. Maybe that’s what she’d been waiting for, not permission as such, but acceptance from Aiden. To leave him, to move on with her life without him.

As much as it was about self-preservation for her, she realized it was also Aiden’s way of distancing himself from her decision. Sure, he was shifting the pieces on the chess board so that she could see she was out of options, but ultimately she was making the choice to leave. She should be angry that Aiden was still playing these kinds of games with her, but if it was his way of coping, did it really matter?

Aiden’s phone beeped once, sharply. He looked down at the screen, a frown tightening his face.

“I have to go.”

But neither of them moved, reluctant to part, knowing they’d likely never see each other again. Aiden rolled his shoulders irritably, like he was trying to shake off the last of his reluctance. He got out the car, but Hayley was slower. When Aiden came around to help her, his hand closed around her arm and she felt the warmth from his fingers.

He didn’t let go of her arm when she got out. The air crackled between them with something too passionately volatile to touch. Leaning down, Aiden kissed her. It was bittersweet, she could taste the regret on his tongue. Then he pulled away and all that she was left with was the lingering sense of him on her lips.

When Aiden cupped the side of her face with one hand, she felt an unexpected emptiness inside, like every emotion had slowly been leaking through her skin and there was nothing left. The last two times she’d left Chicago, Hayley had been running from something; her mother’s death, then from Aiden. Sure, she may be running again, but this time felt different. For all his faults, Aiden had never abandoned her. He’d even helped her heal her fractured mind. Had changed her, for better and worse.

Aiden turned around, but stopped when she spoke.

“Don’t get yourself killed,” she remarked, forcing levity into her tone.

A small, sardonic smile flirted with the corner of his mouth. “You either Hayley.”

As Aiden’s form was swallowed by the darkness, Hayley knew they would both need to reassess the direction of their lives. Like the same process used in defragmenting a computer. It was about maintenance, but rather than identifying and discarding unusable files, it was about cleaning up the fragments of their plans. Systematically categorizing what was viable for their own futures. It might not be together, but they were alive. That’s the most they could ask for.

Chapter End Notes
Author’s Note:

I have mixed feelings about finishing this story. I’ve been working on it for 2 years. That’s a long time to complete a story and I’ve grown rather attached to the characters. But, I’ve decided to continue writing in the WD universe and will continue Aiden’s story with a series of shorter arcs. I’m aware there are a few loose ends but they’re deliberate. They’ll lead into other stories I have planned. If you’ve read this story, thank you for taking the time. It’s been a pleasure to write, sometimes frustrating, but I’m happy with the way it turned out. Please feel free to leave a comment, and for those who have left reviews/likes - thank you, I really appreciate it.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!