

HER COVERT PROTECTOR

(Preview Chapters)

by Victoria Paige

PROLOGUE

John Garrison was a beast between the sheets.

Though, technically they were not between the sheets.

Currently, he was wrecking Nadia against the couch. He had her back against the armrest, thighs spread, her right foot on the floor while he used his body to keep her left leg pinned against the back of the couch.

He thrust.

He grunted.

He rode her hard.

“Don’t lock me out,” he ordered.

“But it’s so good like this,” Nadia moaned, her legs squirming at the pleasure pulsing below her pelvis, her body arching to meet his hammering hips. His cock slid in and out of her pussy, its girth stretching her inner walls to pleasurable extremes. The throb was so exquisite, it made her a slave to the relentless pounding of the man between her legs.

“I’m not ready to end this,” he groaned. His words triggered a distant alarm in her head, but the heat that flared between them since they crossed that line minutes ago had incinerated all sense of logical thought. John wasn’t a man to let your guard down around. But when he opened the door, and when she saw he was alive, nothing else mattered. Not even her pride. He scoffed at her tears of relief, then turned his back on her, leaving her standing in the foyer. She probably shouldn’t have followed him. It should have been enough to see him alive. But she needed more assurance that he was okay, never thinking it would have gone this far.

That she would surrender herself to his animalistic way of fucking and loving it.

“Gonna come, babe,” he grunted above her, his cock growing impossibly hard as he drove her harder into the couch. “Fuck.”

Babe.

That was the first time he called her that. She was usually Powell to him. Like just moments ago, when he made her see red so soon after feeling relief that he made it out of

Mexico in one piece.

“Part of the job, Powell. Don’t get sentimental.”

John climaxed and collapsed on top of her, his weight heavy on her chest, much like the remorse that started pushing itself forward from the back of her mind. He must have felt her stiffen because he raised his head, still breathing hard, a sheen of sweat on his brow.

“You’re still an asshole,” she whispered.

An arrogant brow arched. “An asshole who’s given you an orgasm.”

She pushed against his chest and he exhaled a heavy sigh, pulled out of her and rolled away. He stood and disappeared to the bathroom, presumably to get rid of the condom.

Nadia sat up, glanced around for her panties and spotted them under the coffee table. She picked up the evidence of her momentary lapse in judgment and tucked them into her backpack. She straightened her tight skirt, thankful that John didn’t rip it apart when he shoved it to her waist. Her cheeks burned at how shamelessly she’d submitted to him. It was the guilt, she told herself. The guilt that it was her failure that stranded him and his team in Mexico, running for their lives.

When John returned to the living room, he was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, board shorts, and flip flops. He was fastening a giant watch on his wrist, a duffel slung on his shoulder.

She rose to her feet on unsteady legs. “Going on vacation?”

The levity of his outfit belied the expression on his face. A stoic mask. “I need to leave. Take all the time you need. Just lock up behind you.”

“You trust me to lock up?”

He shrugged. “I don’t keep anything of importance here. This is just a place to crash.”

Somehow Nadia doubted that, and yet somehow she knew he was also right. If there was something the CIA officer kept here, it would be useless to someone who planned to steal it, because it would be protected by several layers of security.

“So, that’s it?”

His jaw hardened. “This can’t happen again.”

A bitter taste saturated her tongue, before she managed a humorless laugh. “You need to be clearer about that, John. *This* as in dragging me into your clandestine ops any time you please or *this*”— she motioned to the couch—“which was a normal reaction to us blowing off steam because of Mexico.”

He regarded her steadily. “So you’re clear, then, that this is just us blowing off steam? A one and done?”

A corkscrew twisted at the center of her chest, making breathing difficult. Obviously, this was just another casual encounter for him. Hell, sex might be his way of coping whenever he’d escaped life-or-death situations. He was still charged with testosterone, and Nadia appeared conveniently for him to unload. She winced at the term. No need to make things awkward, but now knowing how John felt inside her, she wasn’t sure if she could look at him any other way without remembering.

“Yes.” Her chin jutted out.

His gaze narrowed. “Powell, what happened in Mexico could have happened to any comms officer. You need to get over it.”

She gritted her teeth. “See, John, I can’t just get over it because it wasn’t my job. You put me in a situation I wasn’t ready for. You blackmailed me into agreeing.”

He strode past her. “Don’t have time for this. Suck it up.”

“I don’t want to suck it up!” she yelled. “Can you even imagine how I would feel if all of you got captured, or even worse, killed?”

He stopped right at the door. His back to her. He didn’t even turn around, just cocked his head to his side. “Lock up.”

With those two words he left her behind. Nadia didn’t know how long she stared at the door that shut behind him. But when she came back into herself, she made a decision. She slipped out the agency-vetted phone that Garrison had given her. Extracting the chip and without thinking twice, she dropped it to the floor and crushed it with the heel of her boot.

Then she gathered all that was left of her dignity and left the house.

Chapter One

The sun was just hitting the horizon when Nadia pulled into the resident's entrance of the SkyeLark apartments. Before entering her code into the security panel, she glanced at her side mirror, watching a black Explorer roll to a stop at the curb behind her. She was used to Levi James shadowing her at work and looking in on her and her dad. She waved him off, letting him know she was secure.

Nadia knew he would wait until she was safely behind the apartment gates.

North Spaulding Street was quiet at this ungodly hour of the morning. She wished her favorite grocery store was open so she could save a trip, but such was the life of an LAPD crime analyst.

Crime didn't have a schedule, and neither did she or the people she worked with. She pulled her Subaru SUV through the entrance and rounded the complex, coasting into her parking spot. Cutting the engine, she dragged her weary form from the vehicle and made her way up to the third floor where the promise of sleep awaited. When her boots hit the second level, she remembered to tiptoe past the door of the apartment in front of the staircase. But when she ascended a few more steps, the sound of a knob being turned reached her ear.

She suppressed a groan. So much for making it past her nosy neighbor.

"Good morning to you, Missy," Clyde's cigarette-roughened voice greeted her.

Nadia ducked back so she could see her neighbor. Clyde was pushing eighty and the oldest resident in this cozy apartment complex. But the man had an alert mind and kept up his

daily walks and poker nights with his buddies who also lived in the building.

“Hey, Clyde.”

“Overnight call out?” he asked.

“What else is new?”

“Which mobster is it this time?”

Nadia bit back a smile. “Not every DB is a mobster.” DB meant dead body, but Clyde in his inherent nosiness, must have memorized a cop lingo book at one point in his life and understood every LEO term she threw at him.

He stared at her dubiously. “That’s not what I’m reading on the internet.”

“Not if you keep reading the *Hollywood Tattler*.”

“Touché,” Clyde gave a disgusted snort. “You’re right. The End of Days cult in the Valley has been warning of a Los Angeles Armageddon if people don’t repent for their sins. They said the Ebola scare two months ago was just a warning.”

Nadia yawned. It was a real yawn and not an effort to get rid of Clyde. “Well, you can sleep better at night. All perpetrators involved in the plot have been arrested.”

“Looks like you’re ready to crash,” Clyde observed. “Catch some z’s and catch you later.” Without waiting for her reply, he shut the door.

Clyde could be chatty. At times he could be abrupt like he was just now, but she was used to his quirks.

Nadia continued to trudge up the stairs. There were four apartments on the highest floor. She rented one and her dad had leased another. The remaining two units were occupied by Clyde’s buddies.

Grumpy old men surrounded her—no, not really. They usually made her laugh and were only sometimes grumpy. A smile touched her lips.

The sun cleared the horizon, and its rays reflected on her apartment’s windows. She glanced at her watch before she fished out the keys to open her door.

Six.

She didn’t have to be back in her lab until noon that day. Entering her digs, she booted the door closed and headed straight for the kitchen. She lowered her patch-laden backpack on the counter before opening the fridge. An unfamiliar foil-covered plate sat in the middle shelves. Unfamiliar because Nadia hadn’t put it there, yet familiar in a way she *knew who put it there*.

A beep on the phone alerted her to a text message.

Even without looking, she knew it was from her dad.

“Goulash in the fridge.”

Going on a hunch, she headed to the pantry and opened it. A smile formed on her lips. Her father also stocked up her cupboard. They kept separate apartments and agreed to do their own groceries to maintain a semblance of independence as well as sanity. And yet, a dad would always be a dad. Always worrying if Nadia was taking care of herself given her long hours with the LAPD.

She exited the backdoor of her kitchen to go see her father.

The apartments on the third floor shared a rooftop garden. The majority of the plants were vegetable crops, and the rest were flowers. She made her way to Stephen’s unit and let herself in. He was sipping coffee and browsing the news on his mini tablet.

“Morning.” She walked over to him and kissed him on the brow before heading to his fridge to grab the carton of milk, which she knew he kept for her as well. Maybe this semblance of independence from each other was a myth in her mind. “Thanks for the groceries. You didn’t have to do that.”

He merely smiled.

“Didn’t expect you to be up already,” she continued. “You’ve been bingeing on *Hodgetown* until the early hours of the morning.” Stephen had a habit of sending her random texts of his activities for the day, which was how she found out he was cheating on her by streaming their favorite series and watching it without her. Nadia didn’t always respond, especially when she was on the job, but it had always been that way with her dad. It had been the two of them for the longest time until Clyde and his buddies butted into their lives.

“Have you started season four?” he asked.

“One episode.” Nadia poured herself a glass of milk and settled in front of him.

“Well, you have to catch up,” her dad said. “There’s—”

“Don’t tell me,” she cut him off with a warning glare. He also had a habit of spoiling a show. Like he couldn’t wait to tell someone about his theories. Nadia longed for their lazy weekends of all-day television. With the explosion of streaming, it was a wonder they did anything else when they spent time together. They loved the same science-fiction and horror shows. *Hodgetown* was the perfect combination of the two genres, and they had bonded over the

series.

“I wasn’t,” he defended. “But please tell Gabby to tell Theo his acting chops are getting better and better with each season.” Gabby Woodward was a detective on the LAPD task force that Nadia was attached to and, technically, her boss. Theo Cole was her son and the star of the hit series.

“Okay.”

“Maybe drop a hint that she should guest star on her son’s show.” Gabby also used to be a popular teen actress of a zombie apocalypse series that still had a cult following to this day.

Nadia laughed and sipped her milk. “You know, we give her a hard time about it at work, especially since everyone who’s above thirty remembers Gabby in *Dead Futures*.”

“Not only that.” Stephen lowered his tablet and rested his elbows on the table. He took off his spectacles, letting them hang from his fingers, and leaned forward as though he was about to tell her a great idea. “The studio would be crazy not to capitalize on the sensational headline from a year ago.”

“Daaaad,” Nadia gaped. “I can’t believe you’re all for exploiting that.”

He shrugged. “There’s a three-part mini-series on that baby swap scandal, right?” That story, so mind-boggling, it could only come out of Hollywood.

“That’s not a done deal yet. Gabby and Declan are not too keen on the invasion to their private life, but Theo is all over it.”

A yawn escaped her.

Her dad frowned. “That’s the second day this week you hit the late shift.”

“They needed someone to break into the deceased’s laptop.”

“Foul play?”

“It appears to be suicide, but Gabby isn’t calling it yet. The guy was on the news recently...” Nadia rubbed her eyes. Thomas Brandt was an executive with SillianNet, a software company that had been embroiled in a hacking scandal the year before.

“Go to bed, *sonyashnyk*, before you get called again. You can tell me what a whiz you are this weekend. We’re still on this Saturday, right?”

She loved his pet name for her. The Ukrainian word for sunflower. Looking at her father, no one could tell he was a former CIA asset who’d been a Ukrainian scientist forced to work in a Soviet-era bioweapons lab. Because of his defection, Russian death squads targeted them, and

the assassins had been successful in killing Nadia's mother. Stephen and Nadia escaped execution when the agency had given them new lives and identities in the United States. She'd been six-years-old at that time, and her memories were blurry. She didn't find out about their circumstances until years later.

Recently, a faction of the Ukrainian Brotherhood targeted her father, intent to exploit his work. Technically, the threat was over, but just as a precaution, Levi had been assigned as her security escort. The LAPD also assigned regular patrols around the apartment complex.

"Yep," she said. "You're going to regret watching *Hodgetown* all by yourself."

"I'll watch it again with you."

"If you promise to hold your silence for the duration of each episode—"

"The Locke Demon appears to have—"

Nadia shot him a quelling look. The Locke Demon was her favorite character—as well as that of half of the *Hodgetown* fandom—from last season. A creature who used to be a man and cursed to be the guardian of the Ethervale, the thin curtain that separated *Hodgetown* from the dimension of monsters. In the finale of last season, the demon hesitated in killing Billy Mayhem, Theo's character, when he was trapped in the Ethervale.

In the opening episode of season four, the demon let Theo escape back into *Hodgetown*, so she was hopeful for the creature's character arc. She chugged down the rest of her milk and stood. "Well, I'm gone."

"Have the goulash for lunch."

"You didn't have to put it in my fridge, I would have come over."

Her dad looked at her dubiously. "Chances are you'd be running late, and I wouldn't see you for the next few days."

He knew her so well.

Potomac Reservoir, Maryland

John Garrison pulled his SUV into the parking lot of the Potomac Reservoir. Fishing was not his preferred hobby. In fact, he didn't know if he had one. John was always on the move with no free time to indulge in leisure activities, although he'd taken up a few for the purpose of supporting a cover identity. The person he was meeting definitely loved fishing, and John

couldn't fault this ideal spot for a clandestine meet. Two men standing side by side, shooting the shit for hours on end, waiting for a bite on the hook, certainly wasn't out of the ordinary for a place like this.

He was getting his fishing gear from the back of the silver Toyota Highlander when his phone rang.

"Garrison."

"Victim is Thomas Brandt," Levi's voice came over the line.

"Fuck. Nadia has his laptop?"

The SillianNet executive had been on the NSA watchlist ever since hackers breached their network monitoring tool via a software fix they provided to their clients. A routine task much like how one would apply a software update to a computer, it had infiltrated countless companies' networks, paralyzed their operations, and caused billions of dollars in lost revenue and productivity.

"Yup. Gabby made sure she was the one who processed all the computers and disks that were in his office."

"Good. We need to dig into his files."

"I'm sure Nadia can get something out of it now that she's in possession of the computer."

"Keep me posted."

Before Garrison could hang up, Levi asked, "Are you not going to ask me about Nadia?"

"You've been giving me reports," he said. "Is there something else you're leaving out?"

"Those were official business. Are you not interested in her personal life, like where she's hanging out after work, what time she got home this morning—"

"No—"

"Who she's dating?"

The line crackled with silence, and that question hung between them for a stretch of seconds.

"None of my business." John's grip on his phone was so tight, he was surprised it didn't shatter. "I need to know two things about Nadia Powell. That she and her father are safe, and what she can get out of Thomas Brandt's computers."

He ended the call without waiting for a response from Levi.

His phone buzzed with a text. “Sure, boss.” Sarcasm jumped at him from those two words.

John tucked the phone back into his windbreaker and slammed the back of the SUV closed while cursing Levi James. The man was pussy-whipped trying to win his wife back, he didn’t need to spread his misery around.

It had been eight weeks since he’d slept with Nadia, and three weeks since he’d seen her when he asked for Stephen’s help with the bioweapon antiviral. John was perfectly fine with the status quo, and that included keeping his ass away from the west coast.

Balancing his fish and tackle box in one hand and his fishing rod in the other, he headed to the rendezvous point, keeping his head on a swivel. One could never become complacent, especially when the person he was meeting was the acting Director of National Intelligence.

He spotted the DNI’s bodyguards, and they nodded to him in their own fishing spots equidistant from an older man standing rigid at the edge of the water. John would recognize that military stance anywhere, even if the DNI was wearing a mariner’s cap and a suede jacket. The Indian summer left Maryland weeks ago. Fall moved in quickly, bringing with it a chill to the air, and the cloudy sky blanketed the Potomac river in desolation.

John strode to his side and dropped his tackle box. “Admiral.”

Benjamin Porter turned slightly his way. “John. Been a while.”

“Three months isn’t that long between us.”

“True.” The admiral stared off into the lake. “I was hoping we wouldn’t meet under these circumstances again. Coming out of retirement after having only been in it for two years to clean up after my predecessor isn’t really fun.”

“Things went south when you retired.”

Porter sighed. “I’m not planning to stay un-retired. I’m just glad my wife is more understanding.”

Garrison finished setting up his line and whipped it into the water before glancing at Porter. John was aware of the admiral’s predicament. His wife Pru didn’t want to get married to a man who kept secrets from her after her first husband turned out to be the leader of an Asian crime syndicate. John had known Porter a long time. In fact, the admiral was the very person who told John to stop being idealistic and get a reality check. It was the admiral who told him that to be a successful spy, you needed to live and breathe the job. Porter didn’t straight out say

that having a family made you weak, but John could read between the lines.

The people you loved could be used against you.

The people you loved would hate the secrets you kept from them.

Ultimately, it was a losing situation, and it would only be a matter of time before resentment and bitterness eroded a relationship. That is, if the enemy didn't destroy it first.

"Is that why you haven't fully committed to the Director position?"

Porter shrugged. "I told the president that my agreement was temporary. He was desperate when my predecessor mucked things up by replacing you and your team."

"Yeah, the agency is not a big fan of publicity." John had to bite back a smile at how casual Porter mentioned the President of the United States.

"But it appears our problems didn't end with the Z-9 bioweapon threat." He glanced his way again. "Am I right?"

"Yeah. Thomas Brandt committed suicide."

Porter regarded him for a beat, and then, "Can't say we didn't see that coming."

"I'm assuming you mean that our Ukrainian friends got to him and made it look like suicide, because his profile points to an egomaniac who thought he could get away in compromising the nation's infrastructure. Taking his own life is unlikely."

Although with the bad press and the lawsuits, who knew what the man's mental state was. One malware could cause companies millions of dollars of downtime and headaches to repair their infrastructure—the U.S. government included. The breach was blamed on the Russian mafia-backed Argonayts—a segment of the Ukrainian underworld that specialized in cybercrime, extortion, and murder. Word on the street was this led all the way up to the Kremlin. John wouldn't be surprised. Brandt knew too much of their operations and with the feds breathing down his neck, the Argonayts considered him a loose end.

"Is that why we're meeting here?" Garrison asked. "You don't want the FBI to know the CIA is doing its own digging?"

Porter turned to him and smiled. "This is not even going to touch the agency. You're doing this personally for me."

"Fuck," Garrison said. "Don't fancy being banished to Antarctica."

"With your penchant for going rogue, I'm surprised you haven't been already."

John blew out a breath. "You want me back in LA?"

“Why do I sense hesitation?”

A tug on John’s fishing line allowed him time to form his answer. He reeled in a catfish. It was a tiny one, so he unhooked it and threw it back in. “I don’t like circulating in one place for long.”

“Is it because of the place or the people?”

“Place. I’ve worked with the same operators for a long time. You know that. Roarke, Bristow ...”

Garrison met Porter’s steady gaze. The admiral studied him. Garrison returned his regard with an unflinching stare. He could play this game all day, and Porter knew it.

“LA is huge, but people start to recognize you,” John added. “Especially since I use Roarke a lot. Damned Ranger had to marry into Hollywood royalty.”

“Yes, that’s a shame,” Porter stated baldly. “But Gabby Woodward and their son could be gold mine assets.”

“No,” John clipped. “I’m not using the kid.”

Porter returned his attention to his fishing line and was quiet for a while. “You’ve changed, John.”

“Surely you’re not insinuating that I’m turning soft.”

“Aren’t you?”

“Fuck no.”

“Good. Then I’ll need you to secure another asset before the Ukrainians get to him. Feds haven’t had any luck with him.” The admiral made a tsk sound. “The problem with these cyber-tech millionaires is they’re suspicious of the government.”

Garrison chuckled. “Could it be they’ve already hacked into our secret databases and know how twisted our institutions can be?”

“As acting DNI, the thought of that gives me nightmares,” Porter said.

“Who’s the asset?”

“Kenneth Huxley.”

“Shit. That man’s got an ego the size of Texas.”

“Not many people can boast of hacking into Homeland Security’s database and not end up in jail,” Porter said dryly.

Garrison snorted. “Smith should be the one in jail. You never dare a legendary pen test

genius to break into your security.” In business, penetration testing was done to test the security of a company’s IT infrastructure.

Smith was the United States Secretary of Homeland Security. At one of the cyber security conferences, the Secretary dared Kenneth Huxley to break into the department’s database. Scotch at a bar may have been involved.

Needless to say, the hacker was successful, and DHS ended up with a huge embarrassment. In Huxley’s defense, he claimed what he did fell under ethical hacking.

“You need to convince him to put his Crown-Key technology under DHS protection. I cannot stress how dangerous this would be if it ends up in the wrong hands.”

“You’ve heard chatter about it?”

“I’ve been in this game for a long time,” Porter said. “Cyber-warfare has taken center stage in the last decade. Companies developing technology for our military and intelligence community are also vulnerable.”

The NSA’s cryptologic centers around the country had been defending against cyberattacks from rogue states like Russia, Iran, North Korea, and China. It had been a constant battle.

“With Brandt’s supposed suicide and the SillianNet hack last year, getting a bead on where Huxley is going with his Crown-Key technology with its ability to infiltrate secure networks is a matter of national security.”

John was annoyed at the anticipation he was feeling at the thought of returning to LA and struggled to keep an expression that gave away nothing. Like him, Porter knew how to exploit personal weaknesses in the name of the greater good. “I actually know just the person who has access to him.”

The admiral angled his eyes at him and smiled.

Chapter Two

“What the hell does he want?” Nadia checked her phone as she got out of her Subaru in front of the apartment complex.

An unknown number flashed on her phone. It was a text message, ordering her to pick up, and she had no doubt that it was Garrison who’d been blowing up her phone for the past few hours. She shook her head and slipped the phone into her backpack and walked to the staircase. Well, he could wait until hell froze over. She was done jumping to do his bidding. And couldn’t the man leave a voice message?

Wednesday night was poker night for her dad and his buddies. And, if Nadia remembered correctly, it was Clyde’s turn to host. As she passed her neighbor’s apartment on the way to the third floor, she could hear their arguments and grumblings. She smiled. Maybe she’d join them later. The night was still young. Kelso would have invited her out for a beer if he wasn’t on his “shredding phase” as he called it. She shook her head. If there was a health nut on their squad, that would be him. Gabby seemed to get sucked into his healthy regimens, much to the horror of her husband, because that would mean kale shake was on the menu. They were a fun bunch. She loved her team.

Reaching the third floor, she froze upon seeing the lights on in her apartment. Levi had stopped walking her to her door two weeks ago. It was unnecessary, but Nadia wondered if Murphy’s Law was at work.

Or maybe it was a case of Garrison breaking in again.

It wasn't the first time.

Was he in LA? Was that why he tried to reach her?

Her heart pounded.

She wasn't sure if it was from anticipation.

Perhaps her blood pressure just spiked at his audacity.

She stopped and unslung her backpack from her shoulder to get her stun gun.

A figure detached from the shadows behind the stair wall.

She jumped, yelping.

"I sure hope you're not thinking of using that on me," a voice said.

"Asshole!" Nadia whisper-yelled, her hand on the weapon which was still in her bag.

How did he know she wasn't just reaching for her keys? "Would you stop sneaking up on people?"

John revealed his face under the hallway lights. "I thought I gave you enough warning." He jerked his head toward the lit apartment.

"And stop breaking into my place."

"Maybe if you'd install the necessary security I've been telling you to—"

If smoke could come out of her ears. "Is this your way of proving a point?"

"Take it however you please." His eyes glittered and he nudged her forward. "Can we take this inside?"

"What's the matter?" she retorted, stalking away from him. "Hallway conversations too uncomfortable for your spooky ass?"

"Not at all," he returned mildly. "Especially since your nosy neighbors are playing poker."

Nadia clamped her mouth shut. Of course he knew what was going on in this apartment complex before he graced it with his presence. He probably knew what time each resident walked their dog and took out their trash. When they came upon her door, she didn't even bother with keys and twisted the handle knowing it was unlocked. Entering the apartment, she flung her backpack on the armchair before spinning on the heels of her scuffed boots to glare at her unwanted visitor.

"Why are you here?" she gritted.

He closed the door behind him and leaned against it, casually crossing his arms. "You'd

know if you'd answered your phone."

God grant her the patience not to throw the vase on the console table at his head. That would be a waste of vase and flowers. "I don't answer calls from numbers I don't know. You should have left a message."

"I don't leave voice messages on phones I haven't vetted."

Nadia raised a brow. "Unfortunately, I don't answer to terse texts like 'answer your fuckin' phone'."

A telltale muscle ticked beneath his right eye.

"I need your help," he replied without inflection.

How could he so blatantly stand there and ask for her help? "So cut to the chase. Tell me what you need, and I might consider helping you."

Or not.

"Kenneth Huxley."

Her eyes narrowed. "Ken? Don't tell me he's on the government watch list. If that asshole from Homeland Security hadn't goaded him to break into their database, he wouldn't have tried."

Garrison straightened from his lean against the door. "Ego has a way of making the smartest men do the stupidest things."

Nadia couldn't argue with that. She'd known Ken before he'd gained notoriety in the DHS hack. They'd moved in the same IT circles since she'd been a gamer. As her work in the LAPD took her into the branch of forensics science, she'd lost touch with him. Until two years ago when she'd been called as a character witness by the feds in their investigation into Ken. She stood up for him even if she thought he was an idiot for hacking into Homeland Security.

"If you're asking me to spy on him ..."

"Have you heard of his Crown-Key technology?"

"Yes. It's an improvement from what he used when he targeted DHS."

"We want to offer him protection."

"He's not going to go for it, especially after the government tried to crucify him."

Garrison left his position at the door and prowled toward her.

Nadia stood her ground. She wasn't tiny, but even at five-seven, John towered above her. She put his height at six-three, give or take. His dark hair was thick and needed a cut, but those

gray wisps that winged his temples and threaded a trim beard made him a walking, talking, sexy male specimen of rakish charm and mature confidence.

It was a wonder women didn't throw their panties at him whenever he ambled by. Maybe it was a blessing he stayed in the shadows. Nadia doubted she was the only female who felt the mating call whenever John was around. Sensuality oozed from this man's pores.

Bad. Bad. Powell.

A cocky gleam entered his indigo eyes as he studied her face. *Shit*, did he know where her mind just went?

"It's a matter of national security," he said, the smirk teasing the corners of his mouth.

"Ken wouldn't do anything to hurt the country."

"Rogue states would love to get a hold of his technology."

She stilled. "Where did you hear this?"

Garrison turned away and walked to the couch where Nadia noticed his duffle sitting beside it on the floor. "I haven't heard anything yet."

"Bullshit," she stepped toward him. "You wouldn't be here if that were the case."

He spun toward her and pinned her with a stare. "My job is not to react, Powell. My job is to anticipate possible threats to this country. I don't have to tell you that wars among nations are not staged with guns and troop movements. It's gone cyber. The clusterfuck of the SillianNet malware is only the beginning, and now Thomas Brandt is dead, and we know it's not suicide."

Nadia remained silent. Kelso hadn't mentioned that the Counter Terrorism Task Force (CTTF) was working with Garrison again, so she wasn't commenting on the investigation or her findings.

His eyes squinted at her. "You're not talking."

"I don't comment on ongoing investigations."

The tic under his eye returned. She'd gotten used to his tells. Currently, he was trying not to say something that would piss her off and derail his chances of gaining her cooperation.

He backed up a step as though to give her space.

Another sign he was trying to make her feel more relaxed.

However, that had the opposite effect and made her more wary. "I told you. I'm done helping you. You're the CIA. You have resources at your disposal, especially since you report directly to the DNI."

“Right now, you’re my best resource.”

“Get out,” Nadia fumed. “Take your things with you.” She turned away from him and grabbed her backpack off the armchair. “See yourself out and lock the fucking door.”

“I have an upgrade to your Wasp 10k.”

She paused and then slowly turned around. “What?” she asked weakly. Her geeky heart pounded with the rhythm of a thousand drums.

John approached her stealthily much like a jungle cat would prowl toward its prey.

As for Nadia, she was feeling like a fly being lured into a pot full of honey.

His mouth twitched. “Weren’t you complaining about the camera?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve got higher resolution and faster frame refresh rate. The new Wasp is installed with a visual intelligence app.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Tell me more.”

John grinned. Damn him. He knew he had her hook, line, and sinker.

After enumerating the Wasp’s new features, he asked, “Do you want to see it?”

“Yes, but what do you want in return?”

“It’s all yours if you go with me to this event tonight.”

“Event?” she frowned. “Tonight?”

“I’ve secured us an invitation to Huxley’s shindig at his penthouse.”

She pulled back her shoulders. “It’s sneaky of you to take advantage of my gadget-loving heart.” Or gadget-whore heart, but she didn’t say that aloud. “But you need to give me more than a future cyber threat if you want my help. I’m not following you blindly, John. I need to know it’s worth it before I piss off the best pen tester on the planet and have his wrath rain down on me.”

“Didn’t figure you for a chicken.”

Nadia’s eyes narrowed. “Chicken. No? But pissing off Ken Huxley is suicidal and that I’m not. And you know that to be true, otherwise the DHS would’ve used more convincing methods to get him onboard.”

John’s mouth tightened as they squared off. “We’re concerned with the Ukrainian

hacking group.”

“Argonayts?”

“Yes. Since you’re not keen on sharing, I’ll tell you this. I believe Brandt’s death is not suicide, but an effort by the Argonayts to silence anyone who can expose them.”

“You have proof of that?”

“I have an asset in Ukraine who has the evidence, and I believe there are more targets.”

“Huxley’s Crown-Key.”

“Yes. If Huxley comes under Homeland Security protection, he will have the backing of the U.S. government to go after any rogue state or cyber actor that tries to exploit his technology. He will not end up dead like Brandt with our hands tied to go after his murderer.”

Damn, he made a strong point, and if the Argonayts were in any way connected to Brandt’s murder then ...

She rubbed her brow before peering at John. “You’re going to do the talking. All I have to do is get him to a place where you can make your case.”

“Fair enough.”

“And you’re going to hand-over that Wasp right now.”

John headed to the black duffel laying on the floor and lifted a black case from its depths and held it out to her. “Done.”

She suppressed the urge to snatch it from his hands, calmly taking the black container from him and flipping the lid open. There, nestled in foam that had been laser cut to accommodate the shape, sat three shiny Wasp drones looking more badass than her last ones.

Her geeky heart did a happy jig.

Nadia stared at herself in the mirror, feeling a tiny bit of guilt in agreeing to Garrison’s plan to draw Ken into the protection of the spy agency. Of course, it wouldn’t be the CIA on record. They would still be Homeland Security. Ken had always had a crush on her. Before he hit his first million and aside from the gaming community, they were both into cosplay. One year she dyed her hair black and dressed in full-goth after getting the dragon tattoo on her right arm.

Right then and there, she became Ken’s dream girl, and he called her Lisbeth—as in Lisbeth Salander, the hacker genius in the book “The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo.”

She wasn’t about to dye her hair black again. Honestly, she’d been thinking of going

back to her strawberry blond roots. However, Nadia had been digging the platinum blonde hair lately and more than debated in bleaching it almost to white until her trusty hairstylist advised against it, saying it would make her look ghostly.

Decisions. Decisions.

Good thing shoes were an easier choice.

Just buy more of them. Nadia was a lover of funky shoes. She peered at the pair currently hugging her legs. Suede over-the-knee boots paired with a black, slinky cami-dress that hit above mid-thigh. The style certainly displayed the dragon tattoo on her arm. Dark kohl lined her eyes, and her lipstick was darkish red, almost maroon.

Garrison said to dress sexy. He intended to use her for a distraction in their plan to lure Ken to an area where he could talk to the tech millionaire. Flirting with Ken with John's encouragement somehow soured her stomach.

Her eyes flared as she saw herself in the mirror.

Dress sexy.

She would show him sexy.

She exited the bedroom just as Garrison was buttoning up a black dress shirt that he left open at the collar. Gold chains hung around his neck, and he had a gaudy gold ring on his finger. He had sleeked back his hair and she was suspicious that he'd done something to his nose. It looked a bit wider at the base and he appeared to have slathered on an orange tanner. He had the seventies Italian mobster vibe down pat.

Nadia smiled inwardly when John's eyes darkened, and his jaw clenched into a hard line.

"I said to dress sexy, not give Ken Huxley a heart attack."

She shrugged her shoulders while she strutted further into the living room. The three-inch heels on her boots certainly gave her more elevation so she could stare more closely at John's face.

Eyes narrowing at his nose, she asked, "Is that a prosthetic appliance?"

He frowned and touched it briefly. "Is it obvious?"

"Only because I know what your real nose looks like."

"I can see the outline of your nipples. Maybe you should change into something else."

"Why? I'm proud of my boobs," she retorted. "Do you know how many chest exercises I had to do so these girls stay up without support? Besides, I don't get to dress like this often."

She backed away and made a full turn, knowing that John had probably spied her bare ass cheeks because she was wearing a thong. Nadia thought she heard him give a strangled groan, but when she turned back to face him, his face was impassive.

“Are you ready?” he asked brusquely.

“I’ll just grab my wrap.”

“Good idea,” he muttered when she disappeared into her bedroom.

When she returned to the living room, Nadia was surprised to see her father scowling at John. Surprising, because her dad used to like Garrison. But this time, displeasure emanated from her father’s body language.

“Are you dragging my daughter into another one of your secret missions?” Stephen asked.

John said nothing.

“Dad, stop it.” She inserted herself between them. “Garrison needs a little help, that’s all.”

Her father’s scowl deepened. “Then why are you dressed that way?” His gaze lifted past her shoulders. “You disappear for weeks and, when you return, you’re taking my daughter to a club. What’s this, a date?”

Nadia’s face flamed. “No! John needs help—”

“With one of her contacts,” Garrison inserted smoothly. “I swear, Stephen, this has nothing to do with you or the Ukrainians who were after you. Everyone involved has been arrested. This is something else entirely.”

“Can you leave us for a minute, John?” Her father looked at her. “I’d like to speak to my daughter.”

“We were getting ready to leave, anyway. I’ll wait for you outside.” Without saying another word, John left her alone with her dad.

He didn’t say anything for a while, just stared at her. Not able to hold his gaze, she looked away. “Why are you here? It’s too early for poker night to be over.”

“We ran out of whiskey. I was heading to my apartment but I saw your lights on and thought to say hi. I was not expecting to see John here.” Stephen sighed. “I don’t think it’s a good idea for him to keep dragging you into things. You have enough on your plate with the LAPD.”

Nadia would agree if Garrison's case wasn't so related to hers.

"And I don't like that you're disappearing into yourself."

Not sure where her father was going with this, she caught his gaze. "What do you mean?"

"I can't keep track of who you are," he said. He gestured to her outfit. "This is not you."

"Dad, this is sort of a disguise."

"A disguise? Or is it because you don't know who you want to be?"

"You never said this when I cosplayed."

"You were in your teens." He stared at his feet. "And it was my fault."

"Dad, we've talked about this."

He raised his eyes, and her heart cried at the torment in them.

"I should have been honest with you about our situation here in America from the start."

She gave a sad smile. "You were trying to protect me."

"You went from being a precocious and confident child to a teenager trying to hide from the world."

Stephen was talking about that day they were suddenly uprooted from their suburban home in Virginia after an agency leak exposed them to Russian assassins once more. She was twelve when she discovered the truth of their immigration to the United States. Her father had been a defector and not simply a pharmacist. Eight months of safe houses ensued, and, with it, the need for disguise. In Nadia's young mind, that was coloring her hair, or changing her hair cut, wearing different styles of clothes, or noticing how wearing glasses changed her look drastically. It wasn't until Halloween during their sixth month of hiding that she discovered the power of costumes, and how she could transform into someone else.

She reached out and gave her dad's arm a squeeze. "I turned out okay, didn't I? And I enjoyed cosplay. Being a geek is my calling."

"I was happy when you found a job with the LAPD."

"See?"

"But somehow I feel like you've reverted into not knowing who you are again," he sighed. "I think John is a bad influence."

"I'm not arguing there," Nadia laughed. "But not in the way you mean."

"Do you really think that man knows who he is?"

Stephen stared at her for a few seconds longer, and then he gave one shake of his head

and disappeared out her back door.

* * *

Her Covert Protector

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