

ON THE RUN.
OUT OF TIME.

DON'T
LOOK
NOW

MICHELLE GAGNON

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LOOK
NOW**

MICHELLE GAGNON

HARPER

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Dedication

For Kirk

Epigraph

*Be to her, Persephone,
All the things I might not be:
Take her head upon your knee.
She that was so proud and wild,
Flippant, arrogant and free,
She that had no need of me,
Is a little lonely child
Lost in Hell,—Persephone,
Take her head upon your knee:
Say to her, “My dear, my dear,
It is not so dreadful here.”*

—Edna St. Vincent Millay,
“Prayer to Persephone”

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PART ONE
RETALIATION

CHAPTER ONE

“I thought California was supposed to be warm,” Zeke grumbled, rubbing his arms.

Noa stayed focused on the tiny radio in her hand. It was new equipment they were trying out, top-of-the-line military-grade communicators. They hadn’t been cheap, but hopefully they’d be worth it—during their last raid the radios had died, with nearly disastrous consequences.

Noa pursed her lips. The rest of her team was supposed to call in five minutes ago, and they were rarely late. “It’s February,” she said without lifting her gaze. “Everywhere is cold in February.”

“For once, I wish they’d set up a lab in Hawaii,” Zeke mumbled. “We could be having fruity drinks, instead of—”

The radio suddenly crackled to life in Noa’s hands, and she waved for him to shut up. Drawing it to her lips, she said, “Report.”

“Lost him.” Janiqua’s voice crackled, distorted by static.

“What? How?”

“He went into one of the BART stations and got on a train.”

Noa chewed her lip, irritated. They’d been tracking one of Project Persephone’s mercenary squads for three days, watching and waiting to see what they were after. The two guys were cut from the same cloth, both obviously ex-military. Her team had been following them ever since they landed at SFO. But this morning the duo had unexpectedly split up, heading in opposite directions after leaving their hotel. She and Zeke were keeping an eye on one of the men, who was currently sitting in front of a café enjoying a cup of coffee. The news that the other team had lost track of their target was unsettling.

“What do you want us to do?” Janiqua asked.

Zeke was watching Noa expectantly. Sometimes serving as the de facto leader of a group of kids still threw her; they always assumed that she had all the answers. And right now, she felt as clueless as the rest of them. “Get on the next train and try to find him,” she finally said. “We’ll stay on his partner.”

“Got it.”

As the radio fell silent, Noa repressed a shiver. They’d been standing out in the cold for over an hour, hunkered against the side of a building. They couldn’t stay in this position much longer—the owner of the bodega across the street kept throwing suspicious glances their way.

As if on cue, Zeke said, “Looks like he’s going for the phone again. Time to put on another show.”

Noa sighed and rolled her eyes. “I swear this is your favorite part.”

“Definitely.” Zeke smiled as he backed her against the wall, then lowered his face down to hers. They held the pose, just inches apart. His breath tickled her eyelashes, and with every inhale her nostrils filled with his distinctive scent: soap and shaving cream mixed with a sweet underlying musk. Past his shoulder, Noa saw the bodega owner watching them. After a moment’s hesitation, he set the phone back down.

“We’re good,” she murmured.

“Maybe we should give it another minute, just to be sure,” Zeke responded, resting his forehead against hers.

This was supposed to be for show, but his lips hovered a fraction of an inch away. Noa could see the gold flecks that dotted his brown eyes, like spokes of pure sunlight. She felt a shudder down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold. Trying to regain her composure, she noted wryly, “Try not to get us arrested for public indecency.”

“I’m willing to risk it,” Zeke murmured, leaning in so that his whole body pressed against her.

Noa was suddenly finding it hard to breathe. He was just messing with her, right? They were friends, partners. So why was her whole body careening into overdrive? She gently nudged his shoulder, easing him away as she sternly said, “Focus. We’re supposed to be keeping an eye on our target, remember?”

“You really know how to suck all the fun out of a stakeout.” Zeke smirked, stepping away.

Noa didn’t answer. This wasn’t the first time they’d pretended to be a teen couple making out; the last thing they needed was a beat cop nosing around, asking why they’d been standing on the same street corner for more than an hour. But this had felt different, like maybe it hadn’t all been for show. She surreptitiously studied Zeke, who was peering around the corner toward the café. After all these months together, his face was almost as familiar as her own—slim and angular, sharp cheekbones, tan despite the climate. The first time Noa met him, she’d been flustered by how attractive he was; but since then he’d become more like a brother. Although she was pretty sure that what she’d just felt wasn’t sisterly love.

Noa frowned—*now who is distracted?* She forced herself back to the task at hand, asking, “He’s still there, right?”

“Yup. Still just reading the paper.”

“Maybe we’re wrong about this,” Noa said. “Maybe they’re not here on a job at all.”

“Sure.” Zeke nodded. “I hear that San Francisco is where all the bad guys come on vacation. They just can’t get enough of the chowder bowls and trolley rides.”

Noa ignored him, leaning forward to catch a glimpse of the café. Their target was sitting at an outside table despite the cold, sipping from a large mug as he scanned a newspaper. He was a bulky guy with close-cropped hair, dressed in dark jeans, a peacoat, and combat boots. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was just a soldier on leave, enjoying some down time.

But she did know better.

“Be ready to move,” she warned Zeke, stretching her legs to get the kinks out.

He snorted. “I’m always ready.”

“Sure you are.” She grinned. “Like in San Diego, when you almost got left in the lab after the radios crashed.”

“Hey, that wasn’t my fault,” Zeke protested, lightly punching her shoulder. “I figured the kids might be in another part of the building.”

They both fell silent at the memory. The raid had gone smoothly—except that by the time they got inside, there wasn’t anyone left to save. Zeke cleared his throat, then said more soberly, “So you think these two are here to scout another lab?”

“I don’t know,” Noa admitted. “But something is going down.” The two commandos hadn’t gone anywhere near the warehouse district, though, which was unusual. She was having a hard time getting a handle on what they were after; they’d spent the entirety of the past two days walking through the Mission District.

“He’s on the move,” Zeke announced.

Noa’s head snapped up—the guy was halfway down the block, headed toward Valencia Street. “Remember to stay half a block behind me,” she said in a low voice. “If I have to pass him, you take over.”

“Got it,” Zeke said.

Noa pulled her watch cap lower, ducked her head, and trotted across the street in pursuit.

Teo Castillo was tired and hungry. He’d spent the day panhandling on BART, shuffling from one subway car to the next, begging spare change from commuters who studiously avoided eye contact.

He was halfway back to the encampment where he’d been living the past few months when he realized someone was following him. A lanky, rough-looking street kid. No one he recognized, though, and by now he knew all the homeless teens on this side of town. Teo had first noticed him studying the subway map near the turnstile at the Twenty-Fourth Street BART station. And now here he was again, walking down Mission Street fifty feet behind him.

Teo stopped abruptly and bent to retie his filthy Vans. Covertly, he glanced back. The kid was standing in front of a dollar store, examining their inventory with the same intense interest he’d given the subway map. He was tall and gangly, with knobby elbows jutting out of an oversized white T-shirt and jeans belted halfway down his thighs.

Teo tried to brush aside his paranoia. The kid was probably just headed in the same direction as him.

Five blocks later, he was seriously doubting it. The hair on the back of his neck prickled; he’d been jumped before, and wasn’t eager to go through it again. Last time he’d suffered three broken ribs and a concussion.

Plus, over the past year he’d heard plenty of horror stories; some kids even claimed that a group was snatching runaways off the streets to experiment on. Teo wasn’t sure he believed that; it sounded too far-fetched. But he knew bad things happened to kids like him if they were out here long enough.

And he had no intention of becoming a cautionary tale. He’d make a break for the underpass where he’d been crashing; hopefully some of the others would already be there. As he turned the corner onto Cesar Chavez Street, Teo broke into a trot. Within seconds, his lungs throbbed and he felt sick. He’d barely eaten all day, so even slight

physical exertion made him dizzy. Pathetic. Not so long ago, he'd been the star sprinter at his high school. Might even have had a shot at a college scholarship if everything hadn't gone sideways.

After seven blocks, he hazarded a glance back over his shoulder. The kid was not only still there, he'd been joined by two others—a black girl and guy. They weren't even pretending not to follow him anymore—they were flat out chasing him.

Crap, Teo thought. Three against one—he'd end up in the ER again for sure. He tried to run faster, but his legs were shaking too hard to maintain the pace.

To throw them off course, he abruptly darted left down Hampshire Street, then took a sharp right through the empty soccer field at the rec center. Dodging left again, he lurched onto a footpath that led through overgrown bushes. It was hard to spot unless you were right on top of it; with any luck, they hadn't seen him make the turn.

Seconds later he emerged in the camp, a bare patch of earth beneath a busy section of highway. It was hemmed in on all sides by soundproofing walls, a chain-link fence, and large bushy hedges. The clearing was cluttered with makeshift shelters: big boxes with tarps for roofs, a couple of muddy tents. The ground was dotted with soiled food wrappers, empty bottles, and syringes.

Teo's heart sank: There was no one else there. He was on his own.

Suddenly, a hand grabbed his arm. He winced reflexively, bracing for a blow. . . .

It never came. Teo opened his eyes and did a double take when he saw not the ragged trio of teens, but a good-looking guy in his thirties, well-dressed in jeans and a dark jacket. He was huge, easily six inches taller than Teo, and built like a tank.

"Teo Castillo, right?" the guy said with a smile.

Teo jerked his arm free and took a shaky step back. "Who are you?" His chest was still heaving, and his legs felt rubbery.

The guy held up both hands. "Hey, man, take it easy. Just wanted to make sure you were okay."

The guy looked normal, but something felt off. Teo eased back a few more inches. "How do you know my name?"

The guy squinted and cocked his head to the side. "You don't remember me?"

Teo shook his head slowly. The guy didn't look familiar, but the way he was acting . . . maybe one of his former social workers? Or a teacher? But what was he doing here?

"That's okay, it was a long time ago." The guy was still grinning, although the smile hadn't made it all the way to his eyes. "I'm here to help you, Teo."

"I don't need any help," Teo said quickly. "Thanks anyway, though."

"Oh, I think you do. What about those kids back there?" The guy jerked his head toward the bushes. "Looked like you were in trouble." He stepped forward. "And living in this dump? Not good."

"I'm fine," Teo snapped. He was sick of adults thinking they knew what was best for him. He turned and marched deliberately toward the other side of camp, where a narrow path led out to Potrero Avenue.

Before he reached it, though, another big guy emerged from the bushes, blocking his way. He was dressed in jeans and a fleece jacket, with a ball cap pulled down over his ears. Teo halted, confused.

"We're here to take you somewhere safe," the first guy said from behind him. "Trust

me.”

Teo’s mind raced. The two guys were blocking the exits: The only other option was the chain-link fence on his left. If he could get over it, there were cars a block away—plenty of witnesses.

He bolted toward the nearest section of fence. Panic sent adrenaline coursing through his veins, spurring him faster than he’d ever run before.

He was halfway over the fence when a hand clamped down on his leg. Teo yelped in pain as he was yanked back and slammed to the ground. Both guys loomed over him; one of them was holding a syringe.

“Hey, listen . . . I don’t do drugs,” Teo said, panicked. “Seriously, I’ll do whatever you want. Just don’t stick me with that thing.”

“Got a clean one here, Jimmy, you hear that?” the first guy said.

Ball Cap nodded. “That’s why they want him. Nice, clean subject.”

“A clean . . . what?” Those experiments he’d heard about, Teo realized suddenly. *They were real. . . .*

The guy with the needle leaned over and tugged at his jacket collar. Teo struggled, but the other guy pinned his arms and pulled his head to the side, exposing his neck.

Teo squeezed his eyes shut and prayed it would be over soon. He waited for the needle to pierce his skin.

And waited.

Suddenly, there was a strange chattering noise close by. Teo opened his eyes: The guy with the needle was standing bolt upright, his whole body twitching uncontrollably. His mouth gaped open, exposing gleaming rows of white teeth.

Simultaneously, Ball Cap’s legs buckled. He landed on the ground looking perplexed, and oddly frozen.

Teo lurched to his feet, grasping the fence for balance. His first thought was, *What the hell just happened?* Followed immediately by, *Who cares—get out of here, now!*

As he turned to run, Teo nearly crashed into a girl who’d materialized right behind him. He’d never seen her before: She was stunning, with close-cropped dark hair and bright-green eyes. She was dressed all in black like the other guys, and held something that looked like an oversized TV remote.

“Relax,” the girl said without taking her eyes off the guys on the ground. “We got this.”

A group of teenagers swarmed out from behind her. They were all dressed differently: a few Goths, some skate rats, a couple of stoner types. All straggly and unkempt looking, like most street kids. But Teo had never seen any of them before.

He’d heard of them, though. This had to be the other thing everyone murmured about, late at night as they huddled in the dark. The group that was trying to protect street kids: Persefone’s Army. He hadn’t believed in them, either—a bunch of teenagers acting like some modern-day version of Robin Hood? He’d assumed it was just another urban myth.

But here they were. His eyes swept around the group—the three kids who’d been chasing him were standing guard over the guys on the ground. And the girl with them, who was clearly the leader . . .

“You’re Persefone,” Teo said, his voice filled with awe.

The girl gave him a funny look. “Actually, my name’s Noa. You all right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The kid who had been following him earlier came up and sneered, “You were lucky. Why the hell did you run?”

“I thought—”

“He thought you were chasing him, Turk,” Noa snapped. “You were supposed to stay on your target. What happened?”

Turk hunched his shoulders and mumbled, “Janiqua lost him.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s my fault.” The black girl rolled her eyes. “You were supposed to keep up with the target on the train. The hell’d you go, anyway?”

“I didn’t see him get off.” Turk kept his eyes glued to the ground. “Sides, I knew that dickwad was after the kid, he couldn’t stop staring at him. Even followed him through a few cars.”

“So you lost the guy, but not the kid?” Janiqua snorted. “That doesn’t make sense.”

“That’s what happened,” Turk snarled back, jutting his chin out as he stepped menacingly toward her. Janiqua didn’t give an inch, though—she closed the space between them while reaching into her pocket for something—

Noa quickly intervened, stepping between them. “Enough. We’ll sort it out later. Now get moving, these guys’ll be coming around soon.”

After another long, hard stare, the two of them separated, heading to opposite ends of the camp. Janiqua pulled a plastic cord out of her pocket as she bent over one of the guys, then used it to tie his wrists behind his back. Two other kids helped her.

Teo’s head was spinning—this was all too surreal. There were eight kids total, and they each moved with purpose. On the concrete buttress next to where he kept his sleeping bag, a scrawny black kid was spray painting a logo in red: the letters *P* and *A*, intertwined. The rest of the group hunkered down around the two guys who’d assaulted him, securing their ankles and wrists with impressive alacrity.

Teo suddenly saw the encampment through their eyes—small, cramped, dingy—and felt a twinge of embarrassment.

“Sure you’re all right?” Noa asked, examining him. “You look a little shaky.”

“I’m fine,” he said, fighting to keep the squeak from his voice.

“What’s your name, anyway?”

“T-Teo,” he stammered. “Teo Castillo.”

“Nice to meet you, Teo,” Noa said distractedly, her eyes scanning the clearing. She raised her voice and announced, “We’ll take the blonde.”

Teo realized she was talking about the guy who had first spoken to him. He watched a girl in a black pleather miniskirt and torn fishnet stockings matter-of-factly place a strip of duct tape over the blonde’s mouth. “What did you do to them, anyway?”

“Taser,” Noa explained, holding the remote up. “We don’t like guns.”

“Okay.” He wasn’t a big fan of guns, either. “So are these the guys who have been experimenting on kids?”

She scrutinized him. “You heard about that?”

Teo shrugged. “Yeah. Everyone has.”

“Well, it’s true. Don’t go anywhere alone from here on out. They might still be after you.”

A cold ball of fear formed in Teo’s gut. He glanced back over his shoulder, half expecting to see more huge guys huddled in the bushes. He wondered where everyone

else was—had the other kids known, somehow, that these guys were lurking around? And if so, why hadn't anyone warned him? Suddenly, he felt more alone than ever. "Where are you taking him?"

"Better if you don't know." More loudly, Noa added, "Don't forget the tarp."

Obediently, a few of them wrapped the first guy up like a burrito in a large blue plastic tarp. Once they had him inside, they lifted him off the ground, spreading his weight between them. Teo watched them march toward the bushes. They were like an army, he realized. Organized, following commands . . . despite their ragged appearance, he was impressed.

A minute later, he found himself alone with Turk, Noa, and the girl in fishnets. She was cute, despite her wild shock of blue hair. She caught him looking at her and raised an eyebrow. Teo flushed and shifted his gaze, examining the ground at his feet.

"The usual with the other one?" Turk asked.

Noa eyed the guy in the ball cap. "Yeah."

"You want to mess him up first?" Turk asked solicitously, directing the question to Teo.

"What? Uh, no. I'm good." Teo stared at the man on the ground; Jimmy, the other guy had called him. Jimmy was coming around, his eyes darting frantically from side to side.

"We'll leave him for your friends, then. I'll bet they'll have some fun with you, huh, jerk-off?"

The guy flinched as Turk dealt him a hard kick to the ribs.

"Turk," Noa warned sharply.

Turk threw her a sneer, then seemed to catch himself. He knelt down to tighten the zip ties another notch. The guy on the ground winced as the narrow bands dug into his wrists. "Just wait," Turk muttered in a cold, flat voice. "World of hurt coming for you, buddy."

Teo watched Turk haul Jimmy to his feet and frog-march him to the nearest pillar. Turk held him in place while Fishnets wound duct tape around him, pinning him to the concrete support beam like a trapped moth.

"All right, let's get out of here." Noa lifted a small radio to her mouth and said, "Back at the van in five."

"Copy that," a voice crackled in response.

And without another word, the three of them headed for the footpath.

Teo stared after them. In less than five minutes, it felt like his whole world had been turned upside down. And now what was he supposed to do? Go Dumpster diving for dinner, then grab a little shut-eye? "Wait!" he called out.

Noa stopped and turned to face him. "What?"

"Take me with you," he said, surprising himself.

She shook her head. "That's not how this works, Teo. Sorry."

"Please," Teo pleaded. "I can help. Seriously."

She looked him over skeptically. "You do drugs?"

"No." He shook his head ferociously. "Never. I don't drink, either."

Turk grumbled something, but Noa threw him a look and he shut up. She stared at Teo for a long moment, then nodded brusquely. "Fine. But any trouble and you're out."

“Yeah, sure,” Teo said, hurrying to catch up. As he followed Noa through the maze of brush that led to San Bruno Street, he felt something he hadn’t experienced in a long time: hope.

Peter Gregory pulled down the brim of his Red Sox cap as they passed yet another security camera. He stuck close to the office assistant escorting him; the staccato tap of her high heels punctuated the steady chatter she maintained. Fortunately, she didn’t seem to expect a response, aside from an occasional nod and sympathetic grunt. Terri was a moderately attractive woman in her midthirties with brightly hennaed hair, a form-fitting dress, and a gemstone manicure that flashed every time she waved her fingers to illustrate a point. Traces of a repressed Boston accent bubbled out during her diatribe against the gremlins bedeviling their mainframe. “It’s the third time this week the servers have gone down,” she said with another exasperated hand flourish. “Can you believe that? Do you know how embarrassing it is to explain to people that we can’t even send email?”

Peter nodded, trying to look shocked while surreptitiously examining his surroundings. Knowing about the atrocities Pike & Dolan perpetrated, he’d expected their corporate headquarters to look more evil lair-ish. But instead of a shark tank, the lobby sported glossy floor-to-ceiling posters of cheerful people enjoying the company’s many fine products, which ranged from vitamins and shampoo to pharmaceuticals.

The interior offices were even more of a letdown. Clearly Terri took her unofficial role as tour guide seriously; she was especially enthusiastic about a roof garden that offset carbon emissions, and the sustainably harvested bamboo floors. Listening to her prattle on, Peter was tempted to enlighten her about her employer’s off-site facilities, where kidnapped street kids were treated like lab rats. He was willing to bet that none of them featured low VOC paint and solar hot water panels.

“For what we’re paying them,” Terri complained again, “you’d think our in-house IT guys could fix this mess.” Holding a sparkling hand beside her mouth, she lowered her voice and said, “They’ll probably all be fired over this.”

Peter murmured something noncommittal. In spite of everything, he felt a twinge of sympathy for Pike & Dolan’s beleaguered IT department. It wasn’t their fault that the servers had crashed repeatedly after being bricked four months ago. Not only had Peter been the one to brick them, he’d made it his mission to continually develop bigger and better bugs to confound their firewalls.

Then last week, he came up with a way to take things a step further. His goal was to install a sort of Trojan horse known as a “packet sniffer” in Pike & Dolan’s data center; basically, a wire-tap device that eavesdropped on network traffic. But instead of listening in on people’s conversations, this “sniffing” program intercepted passwords and emails, and acquired all the data transmitted throughout the company.

With any luck, that data could finally give Noa and the rest of Persefone’s Army an advantage over the conglomerate.

To gain access to the servers, he was posing as Ted Latham: freelance tech genius for top computer security firm Rocket Science. Ted was also the fictional foster dad that Noa had created to escape the foster care system and earn enough money to support herself.

Peter had been nervous about assuming the identity, especially since he hadn't cleared it with Noa first. But he was hoping that if things panned out, she'd be happy he took the initiative. At least, that's what he kept telling himself.

Based on what little Noa had told him, Peter knew that no one at Rocket Science had ever met Ted Latham; all of their business was transacted virtually. The CEO hadn't even blinked at "Ted's" rambling email about spending the past several months offline while doing a walkabout. Moreover, when "Ted" offered to step in and handle their most troublesome client, Pike & Dolan, the CEO was beside himself with gratitude.

Peter felt a little badly about the subterfuge, but Rocket Science had enough high-profile clients to weather one failure. And if his plan succeeded, and he gained a window into the inner workings of Pike & Dolan, it would all be worth it.

Hopefully Noa would think so, too. He had the feeling that if she saw him right now, strolling down the corridors of Pike & Dolan in geek business casual, she'd have some choice words for him.

But she's not here, he reminded himself, feeling a flare of resentment. In fact, he hadn't seen her for months; their only contact now was limited to brief online chats.

"Here we are!" Terri announced, waving her key card in front of a wall-mounted panel. The light turned green, and she pushed the door open.

Any halfway decent company recognized the importance of this room: These server towers were the modern-day equivalent of a treasure vault. The air inside was noticeably cooler than the outer hallway; temperature, humidity, and particle filtration were all precisely controlled. Also true to form, it was located in the center of the building, far from exterior walls, elevator banks, and any other sources of potential electrical interference or water damage.

The servers themselves were housed in tight lines of tall gray metal cabinets that resembled the lockers in Peter's high school. In between the cabinets, metal shelves held rows of what looked like strung-together car batteries, which wasn't far from the truth; those modules kept the precious servers humming along as they delivered everything from emails to shipping manifests.

Peter's palms started to sweat. This was way too easy. He'd expected to encounter resistance; heck, he could hardly believe he'd made it past the lobby. And now that he was here, the enormity of the crime he was about to commit hit him hard.

"So?" He turned to find Terri staring at him expectantly. "How do you fix it?"

"Um, I just need to access the servers, to . . . check some things," he mumbled.

Terri released a world-weary sigh and said, "Obviously. But do you need *me* to do anything?"

"Not really," he said. "Unless you want to help with the secure socket layers."

Terri rolled her eyes. "Well, they said to keep an eye on you, but you look harmless enough." Her eyes trailed over him, apparently confirming her assessment because she chirped, "Anyhoo, I was going to grab a latte. How much time do you need?"

"Not long," Peter mumbled. "Probably ten minutes."

Terri smirked. "Fix this in ten minutes and my boss will probably propose to you."

Peter shrugged, keeping his eyes down.

"All righty then." Terri sighed, clearly disappointed that her little joke had been wasted on him. "Back in a bit."

He waited until the door clicked behind her, then went to work. He wasn't an expert on data centers, but any server should suit his purposes. And for what he intended to do, two minutes would have been more than enough time.

Peter dug into his messenger bag and pulled out a small device. Hurrying deeper into the room, he ducked down the first aisle and quickly counted off rows. He didn't want to install the device anywhere too obvious, or on a server that was checked routinely. If the IT department was really stressed about their jobs, there was a good chance they spent a lot of time in here trying to resolve the problem. Fortunately for him, the powers that be at Pike & Dolan had assigned Terri to supervise him, rather than one of them. They probably didn't want the techs to know that there was a bull's-eye centered on their backs.

Which worked to his advantage. Peter was still blown away by how easy it had been to simply stroll inside. Over the past four months, he'd devoted hundreds of hours to scaling the extensive firewalls that protected Pike & Dolan's data.

Turns out all he had to do was knock at the front door. Peter shook his head in wonder. Humans were so much less reliable than computers.

Choosing a server on the next-to-last bank, he opened the front panel and knelt down. He carefully installed the device into a port about six inches off the ground. It wasn't the sort of thing you'd notice unless you were looking for it. And if he was lucky, no one would find it until he'd gotten what he needed.

The sound of a door opening and closing set his heart hammering. Peter quickly straightened and closed the cabinet, trying to still his trembling hands. He scurried along the row, almost crashing into Terri as he emerged in the main aisle. She raised a sparkling hand to her chest in alarm and said, "Christ, you nearly gave me a coronary," her Boston accent twice as thick as it had been minutes earlier.

"Sorry," he mumbled.

"Whatcha doing back there?" she asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

Keeping his eyes down, he muttered a string of incoherent sentences peppered liberally with every techie term he could come up with on the fly. Terri impatiently waved for him to shut up. "Whatever," she said. "You fixed it?"

"Yeah, I think so," he muttered.

"Really? What was wrong?" She scanned the room behind him curiously, clearly trying to figure out where he'd just been. "My boss gave me hell, by the way. Said I wasn't supposed to let you out of my sight." She glared at him, as if it was his fault that she hadn't been able to sneak out for a latte.

"Sorry," he said again.

"You apologize too much, you know that?"

"Sorry."

Terri laughed sharply. "Okay, well. If you're sure it's fixed." She smoothed her dress and said, "I'll walk you out."

Peter was careful to keep his head down as she led him briskly back to the lobby.

Minutes later, Peter was trotting to the nearest T station. From there, he'd switch trains a few times before returning to his car. Paranoid, maybe, but he wanted to make sure no one had followed him.

The thought of what his little device might already be intercepting added a bounce to his step. If the plan succeeded, he and Noa might finally get enough information to

deal a fatal blow to Pike & Dolan, burying them. Peter practically felt like bursting into song.

CHAPTER TWO

The garage door opened and Zeke drove the van inside. Noa sat in the passenger seat, quiet and pensive.

“You all right?”

She turned to find Zeke looking at her with concern. “Yeah, I’m fine.” She paused. “That was a good one today, right?”

“Definitely.” He turned off the ignition. “If Peter hadn’t found out that P&D was sending a squad here, Teo would be lying on a table right now getting his chest sliced open.”

“Yeah, I know. Lucky he intercepted that email.” Noa rubbed her wrist. For nearly her entire life she’d worn a jade bracelet, one of the last gifts her parents had given her. She’d awoken on an operating table four months ago to find it gone, the final vestige of her past life stolen. She missed the bracelet more than everything else combined. Whenever she felt stressed, she’d still catch herself reflexively touching the skin it had once rested against.

“Something’s still bothering you,” Zeke noted.

“I just feel like we’re not doing enough,” she admitted. “We saved one kid today, but they might have gotten a dozen more, and we’ll never even know for sure.”

“That’s why we took one of their guys, right? Maybe he’ll tell us.”

“Maybe,” Noa said, although she privately doubted he’d say anything. Much as she hated Pike & Dolan, she had to admit they knew their stuff when it came to hiring shadowy mercenary types.

“So what do we do with him after?” Zeke asked.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Noa admitted, lowering her voice so that the group in the back of the van couldn’t hear. She’d discovered that a big part of leadership involved acting like you always knew what you were doing. Zeke was the only person she shared her doubts with. “I guess we just drop him somewhere when we’re pulling out.”

“We’ll figure it out,” he said comfortingly. “We always do.”

Noa didn’t answer. The van door slid open behind them, kids chattering as they piled out. She sometimes felt like she was trapped in a play, in a role she was ill suited for. These teens expected her to have answers for everything, down to what they’d be eating for dinner. It was a lot more exhausting than she’d ever have imagined, especially since six months ago she basically had been a hermit living alone in a studio apartment.

But it wasn’t like she had a choice in the matter. No one else was doing anything to

save these kids.

“C’mon,” Zeke said, nudging her arm. “Let’s get inside. I’m starving.”

“Hey, Noa. What do you want us to do with this guy?”

Noa turned to find Janiqua standing at her window. She swiveled in her seat and looked into the rear of the van. The guy was still rolled up in the tarp, bound and gagged, with a black pillowcase over his head.

“Leave him for now,” she said, forcing some authority into her voice. “We’ll deal with him after dinner.”

Janiqua nodded briskly and went inside the house. Noa took a second to gather herself—the kids were probably already going over every minute detail about the raid. After that there would be questions: What would they do with the prisoner, where were they going next . . . She felt a wave of fatigue coming on, and tried to fight it back. Ever since Pike & Dolan had experimented on her, Noa suffered from weird physical side effects: She slept less, but exhaustion would overcome her unexpectedly. She only needed to eat every few days, but when she did, she’d consume mass amounts of food in a single sitting. And she healed much faster than normal; sometimes a deep cut vanished after just a day.

She’d learned to manage; deep-breathing exercises usually helped with the fatigue, and she was careful not to gorge when the others were around. They seemed to sense that there was something different about her, though. That was probably part of the reason they followed her.

Unconsciously, Noa’s hand drifted to her chest. A little over four months ago, P&D had transplanted an extra thymus in her chest, which partly explained why she’d undergone all these strange changes. But she was no closer to finding out exactly what that meant. All she knew for certain was that their experiments were continuing. And that the same people who had used her as a guinea pig were still determined to find her.

There was a muffled noise from the backseat. Noa watched in the rearview mirror as the guy struggled, trying to shift up to sitting. Her eyes narrowed; better make sure he was still tightly secured—the last thing she needed was for him to escape. She slipped into the back and checked the zip ties on his wrists and ankles. Out of curiosity, she lifted a corner of the pillowcase to get a look at him.

She immediately shied back in horror. Noa knew this guy; he’d chased her through Brookline high school last fall. Nearly caught her, too.

His eyes also widened in recognition, then narrowed to slits. He tried to say something, but the duct tape on his mouth muffled it.

She collected herself, trying to repress the sudden flash of panic. *He’s tied up*, she reminded herself. He couldn’t hurt her now. “Nice to see you again, too,” Noa said. “You’re not getting out of here, so you might as well chill.”

The guy glared at her. Noa dropped the pillowcase and said, “Behave yourself, and we might even feed you. Chili tonight. Should be pretty good.”

She climbed out of the van. In front of her, a plain wooden door led into the kitchen. They were hunkered down in a foreclosed house in Oakland. It was in a seriously sketchy neighborhood, on a street where half the residents had been forced out when they couldn’t pay their mortgages. So far, no one appeared to have noticed the group of scraggly kids squatting there. But it had been a few days, and staying in the same