

CHAPTER 1

BACK TO REALITY

Standing, looking at myself in the mirror, I almost don't recognise myself. I am no longer a teenage girl, I am a woman. So much has happened over the last few months, I barely even remember the carefree life I had at school. I'd had no concerns, no real problems, just thinking up what my next target was going to be, who Foresight would hunt next. I didn't have to worry about work or boys, just John and myself. A simple existence; one that I miss, if I'm honest. I don't know if it's the job, the snatch and grab ordeal, or just life in general, that has made me jump from that carefree teenager to a stressed-out adult. I'm not sure my life is what my teenage self would've wanted.

It's been a few days since Shadow was arrested. I haven't been able to stop thinking about the image of him being escorted away in handcuffs. He saved my life, and together we took down some very bad people. That dark hole they've put him in isn't right. He shouldn't be there. I know he hasn't had a perfect, crime-free existence, but neither have I. We aren't much different. I could've gone down that same path if the General hadn't recruited me first. Shadow's circumstances played a big part in his journey and I don't blame him for how he reacted; I would have probably done the same thing.

He was too young to have lost his parents the way he did, to experience what he did. I can only imagine the mess of his father

shooting himself in the head. That is nothing a young boy needs to see, let alone again when his mother decides the pain of her loss is too unbearable. I don't blame Shadow for being angry at the man who caused it all.

He tried to get help, get justice for his parents the right way, at least initially, until he'd realised he would have to take matters into his own hands, claim his pound of flesh from the perpetrator. He should have stopped once he got what was owed to him, but he'd filled the hole from the loss of his parents, used that pain to continue some sort of vigilante cause. It doesn't feel unreasonable to me. I'd hunted bad guys for years, inflicting my own punishment on them just like Shadow. The only difference was I didn't take their money or if I did, I didn't keep any of it.

That's the difference between us: he kept some of the money to fund his mission, I didn't. I don't think that is a reason to keep him in some horrible secret federal prison I can't even find. I have no idea where he is or how long he'll be there. But there isn't much I can do about it.

I'm heading back into the office today after a couple of days leave. I'd needed to clear my head and just breathe. To centre myself, refocus of sorts. It didn't work. I don't feel focused or ready to get back to work. It's too early to give up and just let go, to forget Shadow and move on. At some point, I might have to, but not yet. I'm not ready for that.

I walk downstairs and have some breakfast. Nothing exciting, just some toast and a coffee. John has already left for work so it's just me and my thoughts this morning. Great, just what I need. I need to follow Shadow's example on this and find a distraction. Something to take my mind off of him. Though maybe not something as suicidal as taking on a terrorist-linked hacking group. I need to get back to work and just lose myself in the next job. I'll fight for Shadow if the

opportunity comes up but I need to get used to the fact that his fate is not in my hands, I can't influence that at the moment. So I will focus on what I can do, well, at least try to anyway.

I pack up my things, put the dishes in the sink, and head out the door. As I do, the sun's reflection flashes across my face from my replacement mustang; it's a dark horse, one of only a few in the country, a slight upgrade from the old one. It has armour plating and quite a bit of a power train upgrade. This thing is a little scary, if I'm honest. It feels like a screaming beast balancing on a knife's edge, teetering on losing control. I love it. At least I'll be able to have some fun on the way to the office. Nothing better than a bit of an adrenaline rush to get the brain clear. Get moving for the day, just what the doctor ordered.

The trip to work is quick. I hope I don't get any tickets. I cut it close on a few lights, moving through in a blur as the lights turned orange. I should learn to keep the pace down a little before I get the car impounded; I don't think the General would be too happy about that. I park the car at a parking facility a few streets away from work and call in a ride to shuttle me to the office. I can't take this thing anywhere near the office, it's definitely not inconspicuous, not something that would blend in at all.

The rest of the day goes by pretty fast. I'm a bit of a celebrity in the office, Shadow and I achieved pretty epic things in just a few weeks. Targets had been on the hit list for years and we'd just taken them out like it was nothing. I have to admit, what we managed to do is a big deal, but I don't think it is worth all the attention I'm getting. I just want to get on with my job and stop having to think about Shadow.

The next few days go by similarly. I go to work, do the bare minimum, then head back home to sleep. Rinse and repeat, that's all I can do. Keep moving forward and hope that I can get back to some kind of normal. It doesn't feel right at the moment. The whole world

seems off-balance. It's hard to explain but it just feels wrong. I need to give myself some time though. Time is what I need.

Oh, who the hell am I kidding? Time is not what I need. I need to get Shadow out of that place. I owe him that at least. If nothing else he should be able to go free. Even if he'll be watched for the rest of his life – or at least until he loses his tail again – but some sort of freedom. He's earned that.

CHAPTER 2

THE OFFER FROM ABOVE

I'm making my way down to the General's office, I think I may be about to get the talk. You know: *I feel your work has started to slip; you don't seem to be focusing. What's wrong? We need to get past this. You need to move on. Shadow is going to be in there a long time.* That conversation. It's been coming and I know it but I really don't want to sit there and listen to it. I just want to be left to my own devices, just let me deal with it in my way. I'll get it together; I don't need an intervention by the General.

The elevator stops and the doors open to the General's lobby. I step out, allowing the security systems to do their thing and authorise my access. I walk up to the entrance, take a deep breath and enter. As I walk through into his office, the General stands up, walking around his desk towards me.

'Sam, good, thank you for coming down. I want to talk to you about something, a bit of a problem I have and maybe a solution that you might be able to help me with.' He gestures for me to sit on one of the couches in his office, big, leather monstrosities, the type you would think of in an old-school easy bar or gentlemen's club. They are quite comfortable and that concerns me.

I haven't been sleeping too well and I don't think it will go down well if I take a nap while we are meant to be talking. I need to focus,

ensure I don't relax too much. He walks over to the bar. 'Can I get you a beer?' He grabs two out of the fridge before I really get a chance to answer, handing me one as he sits on the other end of the couch.

'Thanks.'

He opens his beer and I do the same. We both take a mouthful before he continues. 'Now, I've noticed that my star hacker is struggling a little and I think this is partly my fault.'

Okay, so it is going to be a pep talk, an attempt to cheer me up and get me back on the horse, so to speak. Well, I guess it was only a matter of time. I know that I haven't been very focused and I know my work is very subpar compared to my usual standards but that is still pretty good work. 'I know you don't agree with how I handled things with Shadow. He saved your life and helped bring down two very bad groups.' He pauses to take a mouthful of his beer.

I lift my bottle, doing the same, and feel the cold liquid run down my throat. It's perfect beer temperature. 'I couldn't very well let a criminal just walk free, you know that.' I go to say something, but he lifts his hand to stop me. 'There is also the issue of how well you two did. I have praise pouring down from above. They feel you should get a further promotion. They'll be expecting big things moving forward, more of these types of takedowns, more big busts, but how are we going to be able to achieve that when my best hacker is barely functioning at a quarter of her ability? You've been moping around like you haven't slept in weeks...' He fixes me with a steely look. 'What do I do about all of this, Sam?'

I shift in my seat a little. It's about to get real uncomfortable. I hate talking about myself, especially about my feelings. Is he going to ask me about how I feel about Shadow? If there is something more there, beyond just two hackers doing their jobs?

'Don't worry, I am not here to talk about your feelings or anything like that. We have shrinks if that is something you want. Is that

something you want?’ the General asks. I shake my head and he continues. ‘I want to offer you a promotion.’ He sits calmly, watching me as he lightly drums his fingers against the armrest of his chair. I don’t say anything, I just hold his gaze. After a few moments he continues. ‘I think it might be a solution for what we all need. A way to achieve the goals for the powers that be and allow you the ability to do it without restriction,’ he says.

Okay, now I’m listening. ‘What is this promotion exactly?’

He smiles and takes another mouthful of his beer. ‘I’ve been thinking about this for a couple of days. The money that Shadow and yourself collected from Arachnid is quite a large sum and could easily fund a program for many years. This program could run completely off books. No red tape, no bureaucracy, no interference. You and your team could do what is needed, whenever it is needed. You could do it in the shadows, in complete secrecy. There would be no links to the Australian government or any of its allies. A perfect weapon against the thugs of this world and we could have complete ability to deny any involvement.’

A black ops hacker squad, in essence, that’s what he is talking about. ‘So, you want me to run this hacker squad of sorts? To run off-book jobs as we did with Arachnid, essentially hunt down the worst of the worst and then find a way to take them down? Take their money, take their assets and do it with complete autonomy? Have I got that right?’

He just nods slowly and gives me a single syllable response. ‘Yes’.

That could be a worthwhile job. I could make a difference, a real difference, every day.

‘What’s the catch?’ I ask. There’s always a catch.

He nods slowly. ‘Yes, there is a catch. The fact is that because this is a black ops team, you will not have the protection of the ASD. You’ll be on your own. If you get caught, we will not be able to help you, at least in the short term. You’ll have to rely on yourself

and your team. You would be out in the cold, needing to fend for yourself.’

That was what I would expect, and the condition doesn’t cause real concern, if I’m honest. The autonomy and self-reliance would allow me to be more effective at my job and relieve the need to worry about staying within legal constraints. That wouldn’t be a problem anymore. I would have to still rein it in, I couldn’t just go around making a mess, this isn’t the wild west. But autonomy to do what is needed, to make my own judgement calls would be nice.

‘So this team you keep speaking of, who are they? Have you already selected them or can I build my own team?’

The General smiles a little, pausing for a moment. ‘The team will be yours to select, you can decide who will be the right fit. You have full autonomy to make those decisions.’

Full autonomy, the ability to choose my team. The possibilities thrill me, but there’s one candidate that immediately springs to mind.

‘How many can I recruit? And can Shadow be brought in to join the team?’

His smile widens a little, as if he was expecting this, as if it was part of his plan. ‘Yes, if you feel Shadow would be suitable for your team I will ensure that he’s offered an opportunity, get out of jail free card of sorts, in exchange for working on your team. I think just the knowledge that it’s your team will be enough to convince him. Wouldn’t you say?’

That was a not-so-subtle dig, but I ignore it. ‘Do I need to make the decision immediately or can I think on it?’ We both take another swig of beer.

‘No, take some time, get out of the office and take that car of yours for a drive. Clear your mind and come back to me by the end of the week with your answer. If this is not for you, that’s okay, you can continue to work in my team as you are.’

We both sit drinking our beer for a few more minutes, just chatting about some of the other projects I have been working on. I enjoyed it, just letting go of my worries a little. The General is a pretty good guy. This opportunity is as much for my benefit as it is his. I need to remember that. Do right by him no matter the decision I make.