

CHAPTER 1

20 YEARS AGO—JAMIE

Jamie's fingers danced across the keyboard as she coded her way past Wayboard's firewall. Once inside the company's mainframe, she dove deep below the directory structure into the kernel of the operating system. She saw all the standard traps and coding trip wires in place to catch hackers. Mediocre hackers. Jamie is not mediocre. Known in the dark internet simply as RK04, she is a ghost that flits from system to system—a shadow that no one sees. In a world where 99.9% of the players are male, she enjoys both the anonymity and pride of being a major player without the misogynistic bullshit.

She was exploring with no real purpose in mind. Sometimes it was just fun to get in—because she could. She leaned over to blow on the fresh pink polish drying on her toenails and gave them a wiggle.

After a bite of a half-eaten peppermint patty, she tapped a key, exited one module and was about to enter another when she paused. What was that? The statements in the opening subroutine of that last module were wrong. So wrong, they were *weird*.

Jamie hit the key sequence to return to the module she had exited, scrolled down a screen—and there it was. Someone had coded the wrong data type for the opening array. Really basic shit. *Who gets paid to do this?*

“That’s nasty,” she said aloud as she advanced to the end of the line that needed repair. The statement ended with *dynamic* when it should say *static*. She reached for another bite of the chocolate as she scanned the screen looking for some plausible reason for such a rudimentary mistake. “I’m such a girl scout,” she sighed as she reached out to tap the backspace key. But before she got there the word started to disappear on its own—and s-t-a-t-i-c appeared. Holy shit, someone was in there with her.

Jamie coded a little deeper to hide herself from view but kept a window open to monitor any further activity.

An apostrophe appeared at the start of the next line—someone was about to leave a comment. Probably to remind themselves of the change.

The characters (|) suddenly appeared. A hacker’s idea of a bare ass. She was being mooned! What the? She quickly keyed out of the module. Taking only a moment to come up with a plan, her fingers flew over the keyboard, taking her deep into the kernel of the operating system. She was going back into the module through a back door.

It was gone.

There was no way this was IT security tidying up some loose ends—this was another hacker.

>TYI appeared in front of her—an acronym for “Tag You’re It.”

Humph.

>byte me she tapped out in reply.

>FU was the response. And suddenly, she was out of the module. As in—*out* out. The coder’s equivalent of being kicked out on your ass. Really? *Asshole!*

If it was another hacker, he had just kicked her out—because he could. She wasn’t careful enough. Her fault. It ticked her off, big time. She coded back in to the module.

>Remember RK04 asshole

>Shakin. Where’s your humor dude?

99.9% of hackers are male so of course the invader figured it was another guy. “Dude” gave him away.

>Ask your mother was her response .

>Lame. What you doing in here? This guy wasn’t going away .

Jamie tapped out: >you first

>qing

Qing was short for *questing*; going in to a company’s system simply because it was there and a challenge.

The invader continued typing:

>Max later.

>Just looking at little bro

He was right—Max, short for Maxhouse, was a big brother system to Wayboard. He was doing recon—getting a feel for the coding structure, tips and anomalies that might lead to his demise inside the bigger system.

The module structures were similar but that’s where the similarities ended. You had to be at the top of your game doing a B&E in Maxhouse or the Feds would be knocking on your door—

with a battering ram. A lot of coders claimed to be sniffing around but that's likely all they were doing—for the moment. Someone would eventually figure it out and get in.

>I'm taking the flag the stranger typed.

So he planned on being first in. Good luck, pal.

>You and whose army? Jamie replied.

>Yours

>Say what???

>Gang bang. You're here so you're fam with the p handler.

Jamie hated that crude expression. But it made sense in the code world: going into a system with a partner. One watching out while the other explored; then switching off so the other could surf the code.

>When?

>Doing anything now?

Jamie hesitated...then smiled and keyed >Painting my toenails.

>YOU A <GIRL>???

>No man. But YOU sure scream like one, Jamie replied.

>FU

>What do you want with Max?

>paper.

>Newspaper?

>thesis. What say u?

A thesis? Geez, that meant this guy was a senior: 22. Maybe 23.

>Old fart. I'm a junior. Gramps.

That was the truth, Jamie was a junior in the Computer Science program at MIT. What she didn't reveal though, was that she was a prodigy; only 15 years old, fast-tracked to the technical school and already pulling the best marks in the class, as well as some senior courses. It was a lonely existence. No one her age around her and the other students were too snooty to befriend a "kid".

But here was someone who might be her equal, or better. Wanting to hang out. Albeit online—but that was ok. There'd be no way he'd be asking to hang out if he knew she was a 15-year-old girl.

>but you're hung like a senior

Jamie laughed—it was a code compliment. And it worked.

>I'm in

And so, their friendship began.

To keep things safe from law enforcement they stuck to the hacker creed: no names or locations. Nothing identifiable. They used algorithms to share information and only the first two letters of their first names when referring to each other. He knew her as Ja—but considering he thought she was a guy, Mitch probably thought she was Jason or Jack. Jamie assumed the Mi meant Mitch. Although it could be Michael or Mickey or Milo. He was 21 and a bit of a prodigy himself; one younger sister; he was expected to be the fourth generation to work in his father's law firm when he graduated. Trying to put off the inevitable, he kept signing up for more study.

They never disclosed anything beyond what could only be construed as circumstantial evidence, should one of their computers get confiscated in a bust. They didn't know each other's locations—although they both assumed the US based on their vernacular.

Over the following months, their online meetings grew in frequency. Jamie knew *why she* needed the company, but she couldn't figure out why Mitch did. He had a great sense of humor—a perfect dry wit and twist of perversion that Jamie found hilarious. He was easy to talk to, smart about subjects beyond computer science and he seemed to genuinely enjoy her company, even though she always remembered that he thought she was a he.

They discovered that they were both math geeks—discussing her calculus assignments as some people would discuss the roster of their favorite baseball team. They both preferred rock music, often arguing over who they thought ruled the guitar world. Mitch thought it was Jeff Beck; Jamie voted for Stevie Ray Vaughan.

Eventually, they started meeting online a couple of times a day. Jamie found herself holding her breath as she logged in, hoping Mitch would be there. And when he was, she was grateful that

he couldn't see her bouncing up and down with excitement. She thought about him day and night.

She wished she could hang out with him in the flesh. But, she had to remind herself...they could never meet, let alone spend time together, even if they did come to the surface. Her age would have him running in the other direction. Fast.

When not talking number theories or solving the troubles of the world, one of their favorite pastimes was the digital form of trick or treat. If one of them got a hint of which server the other was interested in exploring, they would sneak in first and drop a harmless comment code. They used their favorite chocolate bars to recognize the other's stake. Jamie's was peppermint patties, so she'd leave a <PeP> somewhere in the code where she knew Mitch would find it. Mitch's favorite was Turkish Delight (something Jamie razzed him about endlessly...whose favorite chocolate bar is Turkish-friggin-Delight?) So, Mitch would leave <TDeI> somewhere in the code if he got in first. It was their equivalent of in-your-face for beating the other into the system: you snooze you lose, here...have a chocolate bar.

By the time Mitch's 22nd birthday rolled around, they were communicating day and night. First thing upon waking, Jamie would boot up her computer to say good morning to him. Often, he would already be there waiting. On the big day, Jamie snuck into the server at Disney World and hid balloons—comments with Happy Birthday strewn throughout their booking system. Not wanting to get caught, she had to keep a count to warn Mitch that he had to find all 22 of them.

Jamie was more excited than Mitch about his birthday. She had fallen in love with him. She knew it would do her no good. They could never be. He was a grown man and she was still a kid—at least she would be in his eyes—and the eyes of the law. But that didn't stop her heart from skipping a beat whenever he signed in.

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>Hippo birdies two ewes Jamie tapped out
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>Aw shucks, you remembered. Blink blink
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Jamie laughed to herself. Blink blink was the equivalent of batting your eyelashes. She was shaking with excitement to get on with the chase.

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>presents at the big w (short for Big Walt, as in Walt Disney)
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>after you
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>no, after you
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>why, thank you
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It was a Chip and Dale routine that they never tired of.

Once they were both in, Jamie hung back both to stand guard for intruders and to see that Mitch got all 22 balloons. After the first few, she noticed that he picked up speed and started snapping up the remaining balloons faster and faster.

>go man go! Jamie tapped out, laughing.

>gotta talk

Jamie froze. *Gotta talk?* It sounded ominous. Was he upset that she'd done this? Was he cutting them off? What does "gotta talk" between two guys mean? Was he gay? Jamie gave her head a shake. She had to concentrate to continue to keep an eye out for any traps. That would be the shittiest birthday present ever—getting busted.

Once out of the server, Jamie couldn't wait >what's up?

There was never any lag in their systems, so she knew that the pause right now was Mitch hesitating. She held her breath. Oh my god. What??

>In love with you

Jamie stared at the words, her mouth agape. She thought her heart would burst out of her chest. She'd never known such a feeling of complete and utter joy. Except—omg—Mitch thought she was a guy. Oh man, he's gay. She was going to break his heart as well as piss him off because she'd been masquerading all these months. Wow, what a birthday this was going to turn out to be. She had to get it over with.

>Nothing against—but I'm not gay.

Almost immediately came the reply:

>neither am I <dude>

He knew!

>how long have you known? Jamie hesitated before hitting [ENTER], still unsure if what she was seeing was true.

>a few months

>I understand why you hid it initially

>I'm great with it <wide grin>

Jamie couldn't believe her eyes. Her skin was tingling with excitement.

>When? she asked.

>started suspecting when you didn't know a circle jerk

>That was DISGUSTING!

>Ha! See? came his reply. Followed by:

>BEST B EVER

>or-it could be-

>I love you too Jamie didn't hesitate to press [ENTER] this time.

And Mitch's reply came right back:

>DEFINITELY BEST!!!!!!

Jamie hugged her arms around herself, her eyes glistening with emotion she could barely contain.

Until she saw his next message:

>we gotta face

Jamie froze. He wanted to meet. In person. He was 22 and she wasn't even 16. The fastest way to end this was to meet and have him see the truth.

>I can't

She held her breath waiting for a reply.

>why not????

>I have three heads. She tried to keep it light while racking her brain for a legitimate-sounding reason.

>Don't joke

>I'm not

>WHY NOT????????????????????????????????

Jamie gripped her head with both hands. The happiest day of her life was quickly turning into the worst.

>SO

The one-word message confused her. What? What? What the hell did that mean? She wasn't prepared for anger from him. Not after he'd just said he loved her!

>Look... Jamie pressed [ENTER] trying to buy some time to think.

[RELAY UNAVAILABLE] was the system message that came back.

Mitch was gone.

CHAPTER 2

20 YEARS AGO—MIKE

Mike stepped over the bags of dirty laundry sitting in the front hall. He rented an old four-bedroom Victorian house with three other students in his computer science program. They split the cost for a local woman to come in to clean once a week. That meant that one day a week the house was presentable; the other six it was a pig sty. Lottie was due tomorrow. Mike wondered why she didn't charge them more.

Wandering into the communal kitchen, Mike opened one of the two fridges. He was looking for the leftover care package of chicken wings from the night before. It was gone. That fucker Doug the most likely culprit. Shaking his head, Mike picked up the cordless phone on his way upstairs to his room. Hitting the speed dial for the local pizza shop, he ordered a large deluxe—charging it to Doug's credit card. Doug had been stupid enough to pass out with it in his hand at the end of one of their weekly tequila nights. Doug was a trust-fund baby. He shared the house with Barry, Jay and Mike, not out of necessity, as his roommates did, but to drive his investment banker parents crazy.

Tossing his car keys on the dresser, Mike grabbed a cold beer out of the mini fridge buried under a pile of clothes and books in the corner of his attic bedroom.

Cracking open the can, Mike took a long swig of the icy lager as he reached over and tapped in his password. He then logged in to Onion. He and Barry had designed the hacking software that enabled users to have untraceable communications; essentially covering his tracks while he explored systems he wasn't supposed to be exploring. It was still in its infancy, but it seemed to be working and would hopefully give the hacker-infamous Tor browser a run for its money. Time would tell.

Mike was in his final year at MIT. He was gearing up to start his thesis, except he hadn't finalized his topic yet. He was bouncing back and forth between a few ideas, but he just couldn't get his heart—or more importantly, his head—into it.

"Mike!" yelled a voice from below, "phone!" Mike sighed, pushing himself up from the desk. That would be his grandmother, anyone else would have called his cell phone. But his *Oma* didn't trust "those things" as she called them. Having emigrated from Ecuador fifty years ago, she still shunned the ways of the modern world, opting for the older, simpler choices whenever possible. Mike usually appreciated that—no one ate better than he did thanks to her insistence on old-world cooking. She even made all her own clothes, even though she and Mike's grandfather, a retired judge, had more than enough money. But her refusal to use a cell phone always made him chuckle.

Mike grabbed the phone and made his way out to the front porch to take the call. He spoke with Oma every few days. She wanted to make sure he was eating the food in the care packages she regularly couriered to him (which his roommates had no qualms about unwrapping and scarfing down themselves—thus the pizza), getting enough sleep, and generally being happy.

“Cómo te va, Chiquita?” Mike smiled as he asked the Spanish equivalent to “hey baby, how’s it going?”

“My cheeky boy!” Mike was his grandmother’s favorite and he had to admit he enjoyed it. “You come for dinner on Sunday? You missed last week.”

Mike didn’t miss many of his grandmother’s dinners and he sure wasn’t going to miss two in a row. “I’ll be there, Gran.”

“How is your school? Your father tells me you are almost done.”

Everyone seemed so focused on Mike joining his father’s law firm when he graduated. That wasn’t his plan. He knew the shit was going to hit the fan when he announced his decision; one he had made long ago, but kept to himself to avoid years of arguments. That was one reason Mike had insisted on making his own way through school. He didn’t want his father using the cost of his education as a tool, to guilt him into coming to work for the family business. It hadn’t been easy, but thankfully Mike had excelled at programming all his life and with some hard work, had managed to get bursaries and scholarships to cover almost all of his college tuition. Plus, he had a decent income on the side doing penetration testing. He would hack into a company’s system then offer to show them how he did it and how to avoid future breaches. Since he wasn’t officially *asked* to do it, in the eyes of the law, he was hacking. But as an ethical hacker he didn’t do it for personal gain or mischief. He did it because it challenged his skill set and enabled him to make money at the same time. If a company got pissed or didn’t want to pay him, then he didn’t fix their issue and simply went on his way. No harm, no foul. They couldn’t report him to the police; well, they could try, but it wouldn’t do any good. Onion prevented them from finding him.

“I’ve got a tough few months left and then, I’m done.”

“You know Mikey, you don’t have to work for your father.” Her words caused Mike to almost drop the phone. He gripped it tighter, wary but hopeful that he might have someone, with clout, in his corner.

“What? What do you mean?” Mike perched himself on the top step of the wide stairs leading up to the front verandah.

“I think you don’t want to be a lawyer. So, you shouldn’t be. Your father can be stubborn but it’s your life. I know you’re going to pick well whatever you do.”

“Thanks. I’m glad *someone* is on my side. Oma, I’m not going to be joining Dad...I just wanted to put it off—telling him—as long as I could.”

“Mikey, you avoid your father because you don’t want to deal with this. Is that the way to handle it? No! You two are missing time together. You know how wrong that is. And you know what else? He already knows.”

“What? How could he? I haven’t said anything.” Mike racked his brains for any mention that he might have made of it but was certain he’d never discussed it with anyone.

“He told me. He just said you wouldn’t be joining him. He’s hurt, Mikey.”

“I knew he would be, but I...”

His grandmother interrupted him, “Not because you’re not going to work with him. He’s hurt because you haven’t told him and instead you avoid him rather than talk about it. Mikey, that’s not how we raised you. That’s not the right way, Chico.”

“Did he say that to you?” Putting off his announcement had made him feel marginally better but now that he realized his doing so, and not the actual decision, was hurting his father, he felt burdened by the guilt and regret. Mike and his dad were close. What was he thinking?

“I’ll talk to him on Sunday, Gran. You’re right.”

“That’s my boy. You do right, I know my Mikey.”

“I will Gran. Thanks for letting me know.”

“Guess you’re not such a big smarty that your old Gran can’t tell you a thing or two? Now, we’ll see you Sunday. Come early, I have some boxes that I need out of the attic. Your grandfather insists that he can do it, but he’s not a young man anymore, so I need you to get them before he remembers and tries to do it himself.”

“How about two?” Mike asked. “And if Grandpa tries to get those boxes before then, tell him I already said I’d do it.”

“Ok! That’s a plan, Stan.” Mike laughed. His grandmother was always throwing out these idioms; and between her age and her delivery, it was a hoot.

“Later ‘gator.” Mike tossed back.

“Ciao Bello.” Mike could hear his grandmother blowing him a kiss against the receiver.

Smiling, Mike stood up, just as Doug pulled his BMW up to the curb.

“Hey, Fuckhead.” Mike greeted Doug as he bounced up the walkway to the house.

“Love you too, asshole. Here.” Doug passed Mike some tickets.

Looking closely at them, Mike’s eyebrows shot up. “What’s this?”

“My old man got these from a supplier or somebody. He can’t use them and gave them to me. I’ve got a hot date with a sweet little lady.” Doug bragged, cupping his hands far out in front of him, fondling imaginary breasts. “You want them?”

Floor seats for the Washington Capitals game against the Montreal Canadiens—for the next night. Both Mike and his Dad were Washington fans. Mike had been raised, and his parents still lived, in Berkeley Springs, West Virginia, which was less than a two-hour drive to Washington. His grandmother’s words echoed in his head. “Sure, I’ll take them. Thanks.”

Mike dug into the front pocket of his jeans and pulled out a ten-dollar bill and tossed it to him.

“What’s this? They’re a gift and if they weren’t, they’re sure worth a shitload more than ten bucks.”

“No,” Mike replied as he headed into the house to call his father, “that’s for the pizza I charged to your card because you ate my wings last night. But now,” Mike held up the tickets, “we’re even.”

Picking up the phone, Mike called his Dad, who answered on the third ring. He was genuinely surprised and pleased by Mike’s offer. The two men arranged to meet two hours before the game at a nearby restaurant that Dad claimed had the “best prime rib in the world.” Hanging up, Mike was relieved, knowing he would clear things with his Dad, as well as apologize for not facing him as he should have.

Mike was elated by his new sense of freedom. He hadn’t realized how much the unwanted plans for his future had been weighing on him. Heading up to his room, he picked up the remainder of his beer and finished it off. Sitting down at his computer, he put on his headphones, turned on some tunes and let his elation direct him to today’s target: Wayboard.

Wayboard Inc. was a mid-size financial investment company that had just posted huge profits in its last quarter. Mike had been half-watching the news one night as he studied. Between gazing bleary-eyed at the math text in front of him and staring in a daze at the television, Wayboard’s postings had penetrated his consciousness as a possible hack venture. Finance companies tended to have better security—which made them both more of a challenge and a reward. He was aching to get in Maxhouse, a bigger, parent finance company with an attitude. Like an

athlete, a good hacker needed to warm up before going for the big sprint. And Maxhouse was big.

His Onion browser had logged him out while he'd been talking on the phone with his grandmother and his dad, so he logged back in.

Delving into his code, he always imagined he was at the helm of a ship that was exploring the outer limits of the universe. The data universe in this case. Although he didn't share this with others, he knew that 95% of all *code crackers* felt the same.

Rather than doing a quick penetration of the system, Mike took his time perusing outside the kernel, getting a feel for what might lie within. Wayboard was a big target—but it was exactly the kind of challenge he gravitated toward. He loved the rush of adrenaline at taking on the more complex systems. But he was never in a hurry; he took his time and every precaution possible to not get caught. It's what made him so good at this game!

The kernel was the most internal part of the system, bridging the hardware that ran a company's system and the software that did the data processing. Penetrating the kernel, Mike delved into the deepest module—deciding to look at the system from the inside out. As he ran the stairs (a term for quick-coding your way up and down the module structure), he saw a Directory list scroll. Directory lists didn't scroll by themselves. Someone else was in here. Friend or foe? While the list was scrolling, Mike knew he had only moments. He quickly changed the data type on a declared variable statement in the opening code of the module. It wasn't really a great trap for determining who the other penetrator was, because any company programmer worth their weight would catch it right away. But he played this game with himself whenever he found someone in the same code. He considered it a bonus round. God, he needed a life.

The scroll ended, and Mike saw a cursor moving towards the mistake in the DIM. At least whoever it was wasn't a moron. Smiling at the bit of excitement that had been added to his afternoon foray, Mike decided to have a little more fun. Tapping his keys, he fixed the bad code that he had changed in the first place. The other cursor stopped mid-line. Ha! If it was a company programmer, they were probably wetting themselves at this very moment. If it was a hacker, they were on high alert now and ready to run.

Mike hit the [ENTER] key to start a new line and typed an apostrophe to indicate a line of comment that the program itself would ignore. What to write? Think fast. Mike chortled at the unexpected treat; someone to play cat and mouse with.

Ah, he said aloud, "I'll moon them!"

> (|)

CHAPTER 3

TODAY—BIANCHI

Jamie grabbed a protein bar on her way out the front door. It was Tuesday morning and she had a 9 am appointment with the head of Bianchi Inc. She'd been too busy to search out any information about them ahead of time, but she figured she'd get up to speed when she met with Luke Bianchi at his office.

She hailed a taxi and settled into the back seat for the ten-minute ride, happy to have the time to return a client's call and scan today's schedule. After this appointment, the day was light, so she took advantage and booked a one-on-one with one of the trainers at her gym. Jamie was happy enough with her workout regime but found herself having an increasing number of out-of-town clients, and needed some pointers to stay in shape on the road.

As the taxi pulled up to the curb, Jamie peered out the side window of the car. To the left of the high-rise was a small parking area that held about twenty cars. She could see the VISITORS sign from the street. Behind that was a level of above-ground parking that suggested it was the entry point to below-ground parking. Getting out of the cab, Jamie paid the driver and headed into the building.

Entering through the glass revolving doors, Jamie saw a security desk to the left, directly in front of the elevator area. There were two men in the large L-shaped module; one sitting, beckoning to anyone who didn't openly display some sort of security pass; the other standing, scrutinizing a clipboard he held.

"Good morning," Jamie offered as she approached the man standing behind the counter. He lowered his clipboard and gave Jamie a prurient sweep from head to toe and back again. Hoisting the strap of her bag further onto her shoulder, she glared back at the man. "I have a meeting with Luke Bianchi. Thank you." She had thought that maybe the mention of the CEO might wipe the rude expression from his face. But instead he just smirked and started off towards the elevator, adding "This way," over his shoulder—clearly expecting her to follow.

"Do I not need to sign in?" she called out as she rushed to catch up with him.

"You Jamie Rutherford?" he asked.

"Yes..."

"Boss said you were coming. Said we'd know it was you by the voice, sexy and all." His smile was menacing.

Crossing her arms, she strode through the elevator door and turned to stand with her back against the wall, her jaw set.

Her escort pulled out a plastic card from his breast pocket and inserted it into an electronic card slot in the button panel. He followed by punching a 4-digit code into a numeric keypad beside the slot.

Jamie pulled out her phone and sent a quick text to her best friend.

9am appt at Bianchi Inc penthouse office on 14

She didn't have to say any more—John, would know what that meant. Any time Jamie felt uncomfortable with a client or situation, she'd text him a similar message, letting him know where she was. Just in case. No situation had ever warranted a rescue but they'd both agreed, better to be safe than sorry.

"This way," the man growled as he exited the elevator on the top floor.

He walked around a thick portal structure about a foot deep, motioning Jamie to stop.

"Walk through here." he said, pointing through the middle of the structure.

"What is this? A scan?"

"That's right. Come on." the man replied, jerking his thumb towards the machine in a show of impatience.

"Really? Wow. What does Bianchi do that requires this kind of security?" Jamie asked, genuinely curious, as she stepped through the scanner.

"It minds its own business." The man responded as she exited the other side.

Jamie raised her eyebrows at the caustic remark. Between the rude appraisal down in the lobby and his offensive demeanor, Jamie wondered how he could get a job at a company like Bianchi. She crossed her fingers that his attitude wasn't a harbinger of things to come in the meeting.

As she approached the reception desk, a young woman rose and extended her hand. "Jamie Rutherford?" she asked, offering a warm smile.

"That's me." Jamie smiled back, relieved to realize that it was probably only the guard that gave the place the creepy feeling she was trying to shake off. "I'm here to see Mr. Bianchi."

"And that would be me." Jamie turned upon hearing the raspy voice and saw an older man approaching from a hall beyond the desk, his hand extended. Although Luke Bianchi hadn't sounded young, he had certainly sounded younger than the man who appeared in front of her. At least twenty years younger.

The older man offered a warm smile. “Aha! I can see confusion in those beautiful eyes! You were expecting my son, Lucas. I’m his daddy...Antonio. I am much nicer than Lucas!” He chuckled mischievously as he reached out his other hand, giving a friendly, two-handed shake before releasing her.

Jamie smiled back, instantly comfortable with his warm attitude and easy smile. He was of average height, with wavy gray hair and olive skin. His dark eyes sparkled, and together with his wide smile, made him the consummate grandfather figure. “It’s a pleasure to meet you Antonio. I’m Jamie Rutherford. So, I imagine you are the student?”

“Yes I am. And please, call me Tony. Antonio is so formal. And I think we will be working together quite a bit—I’m not as quick as you kids, with these fancy computers.” His hand swept out to the side to suggest the receptionist was part of that younger group. Jamie smiled, knowing that by *kids* he likely included his son, whom Jamie figured had to be upwards of fifty years old to Antonio’s seventy-five.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you Tony. I’ll only call you Antonio if you’re in trouble. If you don’t do as you’re told—how’s that?” Jamie smiled back.

The big guard loudly cleared his throat as he took a step forward into the conversation circle—seemingly displeased with the casual remark Jamie had made towards the patriarch. Tony’s laughing voice stopped the guard from moving forward any further “Ok, Marco—I think I can handle Miss Jamie from here. Thank you.”

The guard gave her another once-over. Jamie was very glad to see him turn and amble back towards the elevator.

“Is he new?” Jamie asked quietly as the senior Bianchi lead her down the hall.

“No, he’s just very protective of me. But don’t worry, he only bites on command.” Tony chuckled, amused at his own joke.

At the end of the hall, he opened one side of a double door and stood back to let Jamie pass. The office she walked into—if you could call it an office—was huge. A full wall of floor-to-ceiling glass afforded a breathtaking panorama of the city and the wooded hills surrounding it. But it was the ostentatious furniture that really caught Jamie’s attention. It was as if Jamie had walked into another century.

“My goodness, how grand.” Jamie offered.

Tony laughed, “Ah, a woman who speaks her mind. What a breath of fresh air. Most people feel the need to say it’s beautiful or wonderful or whatever superlative they can quickly conjure up.

Please, make yourself comfortable.” Tony motioned Jamie towards an oversized taupe leather couch.

Tony clapped his hands together. “I think you were fated to come here to teach me, Jamie. Destined!” He slapped his leg as he shook his head and continued to chuckle. “Yes, destined.”

Tony came across as a sweet, gentle man. Used to teaching corporate types, Jamie hoped she and Tony could stick to teaching and not wander off-topic too often. She wondered if Tony might be more interested in having some company more than the subject of learning computer programs.

“I will have some coffee brought up and we can get acquainted while we wait for Lucas to join us. I know he thinks he’s got all the answers and knows exactly what he wants you and I to accomplish.”

“That sounds good,” replied Jamie, taking the seat closest to her.

“Do you want a bottle of water in the meantime?” he offered.

“No, I’m good. Thank you.”

“But,” Jamie added, “May I use your washroom?”

“Of course, of course.” Tony stood, sweeping his arm out to indicate the door to the left of his desk. “That door is to my private facilities. The other one is my changeroom. You only go in there if you need a pair of socks!” Tony laughed at his own joke. Jamie wasn’t sure if Tony was naturally jovial or just happy to have company. Either way, this certainly was turning into an interesting morning.

Jamie smiled. “Thank you.” She rose, crossed to the left of the desk, and slid open the pocket door. Stepping inside the room, she couldn’t help but be impressed with both the size and appointments. After availing herself of the facilities, Jamie used the delicately-scented soap to wash her hands and looked around for a towel. Not seeing anything, she quietly slid open drawer after drawer, not wanting to be heard and thought of as a snoop, but in need of something to dry her hands. She saw a door at the far end of the room, past the massive glass-enclosed shower. Turning the knob, she pulled it open and stepped back in surprise. It was an outer office hallway with a fire exit door to her left. A bit disoriented, Jamie stuck her head out the doorway and looked to her right. She heard the elevator ding and realized that Tony’s office ran along the side of the building, while the entry to his office was towards the front.

Turning back into the room, she was wondering if she was going to have to wipe her hands dry on her skirt when she spotted a gold-plated pair of cupped hands, as if begging, mounted on the side of the vanity. She reached towards the ornament and jumped as warm jets of air

suddenly shot upwards from the tips of the fingers. Laughing to herself, Jamie finished drying her hands in the air stream and returned to the office.

“I’m sorry I took so long, but I couldn’t find a towel to dry my hands.”

“But you found the dryer, yes?” Tony held his hands cupped together in front of him.

“I did. Pretty fancy.” Jamie smiled.

Jamie crossed back to the chair she had taken earlier. She saw that, in her absence, a tray of coffee had been delivered.

Tony gestured towards the tray. “Please. Serve yourself.”

As Jamie poured the coffee and added cream, Tony started “Lucas is...”

“A genius!” Came a booming voice from the doorway.

“Very modest.” Tony finished with a shrug of his shoulders. “Jamie—this is Lucas, my son.”

“Luke. I’m only Lucas to my parents. Too old world for me.” Luke stepped forward, offering his hand. “And I’d know you were Jamie a mile away. You look like you sound.” Luke had no way of knowing that Jamie had already learned what he meant by that from his thug downstairs. Ignoring the comment and its implications, she was surprised by his flaccid grip but replied, “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’ve been having a pleasant conversation with your father.”

Luke was about Jamie’s height with a slight build. His dark hair had streaks of gray in it and was combed back into a short ponytail captured low on the back of his head. He wore an expensive grey suit and vest, his grey tie and shirt finishing his monochromatic look. Some women, Jamie was sure, would find him attractive.

“I’ve only got a few minutes. Some crap downstairs needs my attention.” Between these opening remarks, the lacklustre grip and his comment about recognizing her (which she could imagine him sharing with the guard more crassly than the guard had shared with her), Jamie was glad, should she agree to their request, she’d be working with the father and not the son.

It was obvious from the moment Luke walked into the room that he was not only of a different generation than his father but of a different ilk. “My Dad has to use the computer. No choice. If he wants to keep his hands in the business, he needs to know how to use a computer. He doesn’t have to be a genius, but he needs to know a bit more than just how to turn it on and play solitaire. No disrespect, Papa.”

Tony shrugged. “None taken, Lucas. I know what I don’t know. And I know what I know.” The latter comment seemed to be a silent message for his son. Jamie thought it might be a bit of a “watch-your-step-with-me” type remark.

“We have,” Luke shrugged and continued, “some...security concerns. We need to make sure my father can do what he needs to do without compromising any of our information.”

“And I want to skip with my granddaughter. She’s going to school in Milan.”

“Skype Papa. Skype!”

“What does Bianchi Inc. do?” Jamie asked, hoping to get better insight into exactly what they were looking for, from her.

With a shrug, Luke replied. “We’re in security, of sorts. Lots of numbers, names, etcetera. Encryption up the ying-yang thanks to Eddie, our resident nerd. Dad needs to know some basics; how to find files he’s looking for and how to use email.”

“And Skype Theresa.” Tony added.

Jamie smiled at Tony. But then she folded her hands in her lap and directed herself to Luke. “You know, Luke. I really specialize in corporate training...”

“This is a corporation.”

“Yes.” Jamie hesitated but continued, “What I mean is that I charge by the day, at a minimum charge. I can’t imagine you want a whole day of training, each time I visit?” she directed this last comment to Tony. Addressing Luke, once again, she added, “My rate is normally only conducive to groups of people—not a single person. I think you could find someone who could help Tony, who would be more economical and willing to charge you for a few hours at a time rather than a full day at a time.” Turning back to Tony. “Not that I don’t want to help you, Tony. And, frankly, I’m booked up enough that...”

“Look,” Luke interrupted her. “I get it. We’ve done our research. I know you’re good. And you don’t have to take little shit jobs. Got it. You spend a few hours, once a week, with my dad—you get your day-rate. I’m not trying to Jew you down.” Jamie winced at the reference. If it had been Luke she had to spend the time with she would have refused on the spot and been on her way. She smiled at Tony with a shrug. “It’s up to you. I can’t start for a few weeks because, unless my schedule changes, I’m already booked until next month. After that, I can offer you any days but Mondays or Wednesdays.”

“Why not Mondays or Wednesdays?” Luke asked, leaning back against the front of Tony’s desk.

“I have a long-standing client who has retained me for every Monday and Wednesday for the rest of the year,” Jamie replied.

“Who’s that?” There was something about the way Luke asked the question that made Jamie think he didn’t believe her.

“I teach full-day programming courses at the FBI Academy at their headquarters. They are a long-standing client of mine.”

“Programming?”

“Yes, to the administrative staff who perform the bulk of the computer work.”

“And they let you just walk in there twice a week?”

“Yes. I do not go into any areas that are designated as restricted. I can’t even get into those buildings—or at least, I assume I can’t. I’ve never tried or needed to. But I did go through a thorough security and background check to be allowed on FBI property.” Not understanding Luke’s reasons behind the questions, she added, “I have been fully vetted—but that’s beside the point. Really, I would be very happy to help you find someone better suited to one-on-one for a more reasonable price.”

“You the best?” Luke raised his chin with his challenging words.

“I believe I am, yes.”

“I’m sure, I’m sure.” Luke brushed off the question as he rose from the desk. “Thanks for coming in. I’ll let you know if we’re going to go ahead with this.”

Jamie was surprised that the meeting was ending so abruptly, but rose and turned to shake Tony’s hand. “It was a pleasure meeting you. I’m going to find you someone. I promise—they’ll take good care of you, Tony.”

Tony looked at his son but spoke to Jamie. “We’ll see you next month, Miss Jamie.” Jamie could sense something going on between the two men and quickly turned towards Luke to say good-bye. After another limp handshake, she walked to the door and let herself out into the hall. She nodded at the receptionist and wished her a good morning, pushed the elevator button, and was surprised when it opened, and the giant was standing in the elevator. She stepped back to get out of his way, but he just stood there staring at her. Caught off guard, Jamie asked “Um...are you going down?” The one side of his mouth lifted in a lewd half-smile. Standing straighter, Jamie repeated, “Is this elevator going down to the ground floor?”

“Yep.” was the monolith’s response.

“Marco! Be nice!” The receptionist admonished, after hearing the exchange.

Marco grunted and moved back a step to allow Jamie onto the elevator. She pressed the button for the ground floor, not trusting that Marco would do it for her.

The elevator stopped a few floors down and two people got on, pressing the basement parking level button. Jamie was grateful for the buffer between herself and Marco.

When the elevator reached the ground floor, Jamie exited and made her way towards the front of the building. As she got closer to the door, she turned to see Marco reaching the security counter. “Marco!” she called, half turning so he could see that it was her. He looked up. “Have a great day!” she exclaimed. Worked every time. Except this one. Marco lowered his head to study something on the desk, ignoring her. There is no way I’m coming back here, she thought as she smiled to herself and exited into the sunshine.

Jamie pulled her cell phone from the outer pocket of her purse, texting John’s familiar number as she walked. All clear she tapped out, then hit the SEND button.

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“I want her.” Tony leaned over to pour himself some ice water. One coffee was his limit.

“What’s not to want? That’s one nice little package. Well, not so little—that girl has some juicy looking meat on those tall bones.” Luke’s hands mimicked a curvy shape in the air.

“That’s not what I mean, and you know it. She seems smart. And direct. I can learn from her. We don’t have to look for anyone else.”

“I don’t know, Pop. She might not be worth the trouble...”

“You aren’t telling me it’s the money, I know better. It’s her connections.”

“Yeah, of course it is. I just don’t want any surprise guests coming to any parties.”

“She said she’s vetted but is low-level. You think she’s hiding something?”

“No,” Luke shrugged. “Pretty sure she isn’t. You know I only ask questions I already know the answer to—that way I know if they’re not being up front. It just seems a little weird...why ask for trouble?”

“Who’s asking for trouble? We approached her. She offered to find someone else for us.”

“Yeah, yeah. Let me think about it, Pop.”

“Lucas.” Tony raised his voice just enough to get Luke’s full attention. “She said she can start next month.”

Luke stared at his father for a moment. “She said she wasn’t interested.”

“No—she said she thought it wasn’t the best budget choice. Double her money—that’ll show her that we don’t care about the money. And tell her I want *two* hours every Thursday morning.”

Luke sighed, understanding his father’s thinking. Money almost always greased the wheels. He smiled to himself, thinking, and Marco greases those the money doesn’t work on.

“Ok. But nowhere but *your* office. Nothing but what we talked about. And you never leave her alone. Right?”

Tony gave his son a pat on the cheek. “Right. Run along. Deal with your *crap*.”

CHAPTER 4

TODAY—MEETING MIKE

The following Monday, Jamie presented her pass at the front gate of FBI Headquarters and drove to the visitors' parking lot near the front door.

She opened the trunk of her car and retrieved her laptop. But when she reached back for her curriculum satchel—it wasn't there.

"Damn," she muttered to herself. She grabbed her cell phone and texted John:

I forgot my training bag inside my front door. Can you drop them at HQ front desk? Pretty please. Hot agents in suits 😊

It wasn't the first time she'd needed John to drop stuff off to her. They both knew he wouldn't get past the guard house to enjoy the *smorgasbord* as he called it. But they helped each other out without question. It was nice knowing that there was someone who always had your back.

At the front desk, Jamie gave a wave to a familiar guard as she made her way to the security gate.

Passing through the scan, Jamie headed to the atrium and its bank of elevators. The atrium was a large four-storey alcove of glass, one side taken up by the entrance and elevators, with the remaining three forming an exoskeleton, showing hallway activity on each floor of the building.

The doors slid open and Jamie made her way onto the elevator with the others who had been waiting. Exiting onto the fourth-floor, Jamie turned towards the Academy classroom at the far end of the hallway. The room was already unlocked for her and the lights were on. After dropping her bag, purse, and sweater on the desk beside the podium, she went around the room turning on the computers. That finished, she made a quick trip to the first-floor cafeteria for a take-out coffee.

As she re-entered the classroom, the guard she had waved to downstairs appeared. "Special delivery for you, Jamie." He held Jamie's curriculum bag out to her.

"Thanks, Ben. I forgot it this morning."

"At your service, young lady." The older man replied as he threw her a salute on his way out the door.

Smiling, she took a quick sip of her coffee, then opened her bag and got her materials ready for the day. Within minutes the class started filling up. Many familiar faces appeared, along with a spattering of first-timers.

As people claimed their seats, Jamie walked around the lab, greeting people, and answering questions. A regular, Joanne Call, caught her attention.

"I've got a report that I can't get to run, no matter what I do! It's driving me crazy." Jamie smiled. Joanne had some inventive ways of doing things.

"We're about to start. But at our morning break or lunchtime, I can look at it..."

"Excuse me," a deep voice interrupted from directly behind Jamie. She turned and was momentarily caught off-guard by the handsome man who had approached. He wasn't just handsome...a perfectly-formed chiselled face, with arresting gray eyes, rested atop broad shoulders clad in a well-cut dark navy suit. And then he smiled. Jamie couldn't help but smile back, sure her face would crack if her grin got any wider. "Are you Jamie Rutherford?" he asked.

"I am," responded Jamie, coming out of her stupor, and holding out her hand.

"Agent Mike Abano." His grip was warm and firm, his large hand enveloping hers.

"Well, you know I'm Jamie Rutherford." *My god, why can't I stop smiling?* "What can I do for you, Agent Abano? Are you in today's class?"

"No, ma'am," he chuckled, his smile tilting up one side. "The Director requests a word with you."

The handshake finished, Jamie released his grip. "Me? Really?" That was a first.

"Well," she gathered her thoughts, "the class is just about to start. We have our morning break or lunch at noon. I can come see him at either of those times."

Agent Abano stared back, his look unreadable.

Jamie continued, "or...at 4 when class is over for the day. Whichever is best for him."

Still no response other than that intent gaze.

"You let me know." Not sure what else to do, she slowly turned back to resume her conversation, thrown by the interruption. His effect on her was lingering and it took her a moment to remember what Joanne had been asking her.

A voice called out from the front of the room. "Excuse me, people. Listen up."

Jamie's head came up. Agent Abano stood at the podium. *Her* podium.

"Today's class is cancelled. This room will be locked down in five minutes. Thank you." Agent Abano nodded at the room, then looked towards Jamie.

Jamie quickly made her way over to the podium. “I beg your pardon? What do you think you’re doing?”

Agent Abano replied, “The Director wants to see you.”

Jamie was trying to contain her anger and at the same time salvage her class. “Who do you think you are? You have no right to cancel my class!”

The agent leaned down until his face was only inches from Jamie’s. His brows pinched, he repeated, “The Director wants to see you.”

As he straightened, Jamie stood to her full height, placing her hands on her hips. “I not only heard you, but I understood you. All. Three. Times.” Jamie pointed towards the door. “But I have a course to teach!”

“No. You. Don’t.” Agent Abano leaned back in towards her, mimicking her abruptness and glancing around the now-emptying room. “The Director,” he continued, “wants to see you.”

“I am not an employee here. I’m a consultant. I’m sure anything the Director wants to talk to me about would be training-related and hardly *urgent*. And it certainly would not warrant you cancelling my class and me being out a day’s fee over it.” Jamie would not back down, she was furious. She didn’t care how breathtaking this guy was—he was a dick.

“YOU cancelled your class,” the agent shot back over his shoulder as he moved towards the door. “If you had been more judicious and had listened to me and come when I asked, you might have been back here in an hour and teaching your class.”

Infuriated, Jamie brushed past the agent, stomping out into the hallway. She sensed, rather than heard, the agent following behind her, trusting that she knew the way to the executive offices on the top floor. And she was sure he’d be happy to let her know if she made a wrong turn along the way. “Arrogant ass.” Jamie muttered under her breath.

Reaching the main bank of elevators, Jamie stabbed at the UP button repeatedly.

Hands back on her hips, she faced the agent. “I am charging my full daily rate today—cancelled or not.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You know what you can do with your *ma’am*.” Jamie snapped, her fingers curling in imaginary quotation marks.

Standing at ease, hands clasped behind his back, the agent’s eyebrows raised ever so slightly.

Arms crossed, Jamie brooded as she continued to wait for the elevator. Suddenly turning back towards the hallway, she didn't meet the agent's gaze. "I forgot my purse in the classroom."

Mike Abano put out his hand, lightly grazing her arm. "The room has been secured, m..." he stopped himself from saying "ma'am. "It will be brought to you."

The elevator arrived with a ping. When the door opened, the agent motioned for Jamie to precede him. Inside the car, Jamie stood off to the side looking mad, but internally starting to be concerned about the reason for this summons. Cancelling her class seemed excessive if it was just to talk about training. She was confident that there was no way they would know about her after-hours foraging. She was good, hidden behind numerous protocols and fake IPs. As far as people were concerned, she was a corporate trainer. But she'd kept her hacking skills honed and still used them from time to time. That couldn't be what the Director wanted to see her about. Could it? No. If it was about her data mining and coding forages, they would have come at her with handcuffs instead of Mr. GQ-in-a-suit.

She surreptitiously glanced at the tall detective. What a shame such a big handsome package was wasted on this arrogant SOB. Her gaze moved up to his eyes and then she quickly glanced away when she saw him watching her in the reflection of the elevator's mirrored walls.

Her anxiety about the meeting was starting to mount. "Was it really necessary to cancel a full-day class? What is so important that the Director has to see me now?"

Mike answered her question with nothing but a slight shrug. Why was this so awkward? He was still having trouble forming words when he looked at her. He had been speechless, back in the classroom, standing there tongue-tied by the effect she had on him from the moment she had turned to him and smiled.

"It wasn't my intent to be so uncooperative." Jamie continued, "I know you were just doing your job. But you caught me off guard. And I am not comfortable charging a long-term client for a day and not doing anything for that money. At the same time—not being paid for showing up to do a job..."

"Hello?" Jamie stared back at the agent, not sure why he was giving her the silent treatment. She had apologized. Why still the attitude?

The elevator doors slid open. The agent nodded to the left of the elevator door, gesturing for Jamie to exit before him. She muttered "Thank you."

Walking behind her, Mike couldn't help but appreciate the view: tall, tan pencil skirt with a crisp white blouse, nude pumps. Her skirt clung enough that he could see—or more importantly not see—panty lines. A thong. He couldn't help but envision her in a thong and one of his

unbuttoned shirts. Maybe under less hostile circumstances. He was sure she'd rather be caught dead than half-naked in one of his shirts. Too bad. She was breathtaking.

As they made their way down the long hallway, Jamie half a dozen steps in front, a buxom blonde in her mid-thirties approached from the opposite direction.

Jamie was far enough ahead of the agent that it was obvious that the blonde didn't realize that they were walking together. Not that the woman would have noticed anyway—her stare was locked on Agent Abano.

Once the woman passed her, Jamie heard her breathy purr, "Hi Mike". She turned and saw the woman sweep her hand across the detective's upper arm as she walked by him.

Mike didn't respond, but he met Jamie's gaze. She saw what she thought was discomfort flash across his face as his jaw clenched. She wasn't sure if it was because the woman took such intimate liberty with him or because Jamie had witnessed the encounter.

As the inner security desk came into sight, Jamie once again started to fret about why the Director would want to see her at all—and why so urgently?