

Chapter One

“Come on, baby. Just a little more—”

Jet “Hex” Adler’s fingers flew across the keyboard.

She grinned. “I’ve got you. You know I’m too good.”

There was nothing quite like hacking into a bad guy’s security system. This time, though, she had to admit this guy’s system wasn’t bad.

That was irrelevant. She was better.

Biting her lip, Jet focused, staring at the code filling the screen. *Mm-hm*. Yep, this should do it.

Almost there.

Another tap, and the system opened for her like a clamshell.

“Yes!” She whirled her chair around. “I am the *queen*.” She touched her headset. “Killian, the system is down. You’re clear for infiltration.”

Next, Jet moved to the controls of the drone she had hovering over the warehouse in Brooklyn. Her boss, Killian “Steel” Hawke, and his team were going to retrieve a bunch of corporate technology stolen from a client.

Sentinel Security was *the* security firm in New York City. They did work for clients all around the US, and the world. Killian had built the company from the ground up. The former

CIA agent was a legend. She loved working for such a badass.

“Acknowledged, Hex.” Killian’s voice was deep and sexy, with the tiniest rasp. “Good work.”

The huge interactive screen on the wall of Hex’s office filled with aerial images from the drone. The massive, squat warehouse dominated the view. She tapped the keyboard and switched to infrared.

“Killian, I’ve got six heat signatures inside. Watch your back.”

A snort cut across the line. “Only six? And here I thought we might have a challenge.”

The female voice belonged to Killian’s new wife. Devyn “Hellfire” Hayden—or rather, Hawke now—was also former CIA. The redhead was not one to cross.

Killian was so in love. Jet sighed. She’d never dreamed she’d see the day when the dangerous, aloof man was so infatuated with one woman.

Actually, all of the Sentinel Security alpha team—a group of tough former military and ex-international law enforcement agents—had fallen in love over the last few months.

On-screen, she watched the heat signatures of her team as they closed in on the warehouse.

Along with Killian and Devyn were Nick “Wolf” Garrick, and Matteo “Hades” Mancini. She’d had a front-row seat as both of those tough guys had claimed their women. And they were great women. Jet loved Lainie and Gabbi. They’d all become good friends.

Then Hadley “Striker” Lockwood had gone and fallen for a sexy British billionaire. Hadley, a stylish, former MI6 agent, was Jet’s best friend. Hadley and Bennett were the perfect couple. They always looked like they’d stepped out of some glossy magazine.

The final member of their team was not on this mission. Bram “Excalibur” O’Donovan was upstairs in his apartment, with his pregnant fiancée. The team had only recently rescued her from an unhinged stalker who’d kidnapped her, and Bram wasn’t letting her out of his sight.

On the screen, the Sentinel Security team attacked, and Jet watched the action even as her mind wandered.

Yep, everyone was in love.

Except her.

She wrinkled her nose. Not that she didn't want love, she just didn't trust it. Her hand tightened on the keyboard. Or maybe she didn't trust any man could really love her.

God, it was all Brandon's fault. Her asshole ex hadn't broken her heart exactly, but he'd infected it with a virus that had left it stuttering and unsure.

She blinked at the viewscreen. Her team appeared to have the bad guys contained.

"Hex, we'll start loading up the tech," Killian said in her ear. "Can you call New York's finest and have them meet us? They can deal with our thieves."

"On it, boss man." She smiled. It was always good when a mission went off without a hitch.

When there was gunfire, or one of her peeps got hurt, it was the absolute worst to be stuck in the command center in the office, able to do nothing more than watch and wait.

Sometimes, she wished she was out there too—doing, fighting, taking action.

Jet snorted. She wasn't a field agent. Even when she'd been at the CIA, she'd been in the high-tech computer room, hacking terrorists and criminals.

She quickly put a call through to their contact at the NYPD. Then she stared at her phone. After a quick internal argument, she pulled up a number.

She'd saved it as Infuriating. She tapped out a message.

I just nabbed six bad guys. That's ten for me this week. I'm smoking you, James Bond.

Cain, no last name, a.k.a. codename Shade, often didn't reply for several hours, but this time, her phone dinged instantly.

You mean Steel nabbed ten. You just watched.

Jet snorted.

Without my insane skills, he would never have found them. Therefore, I get the credit. How many have you taken down this week?

One, but he was really bad, so he should count for three, pixie.

Either way, I'm in the lead. And pixie is a terrible nickname. I prefer goddess of all things tech.

I think goddesses are usually taller.

Jet shook her head. Shade was the CIA's best deep-cover agent. Most people had never heard of him, or only heard whispers surrounding the mysterious Shade. The kind that made criminals nervous. No doubt his bad guy was the worst of the worst.

She hoped he hadn't gotten hurt. Not that he'd ever tell her.

A funny pressure filled her chest. Shade confused the hell out of her. He was annoying, with an uppercase and underlined *A*. The man knew how to tap dance on her last nerve, and light the fuse of her short temper.

He was also hot as hell. She fiddled with her hair. He was tall, muscular, and had tawny hair that he often wore up in a sexy man bun, or short ponytail. Not to mention the wide, sexy smile. His eyes were brown—a rich, dark brown that hid so many secrets. He knew he was a walking fantasy. No doubt he used that to his advantage in his job.

Now, a sour feeling filled her stomach. It was too easy to imagine him charming international supermodels and beautiful foreign agents.

Jet was short and cute. She knew who she was. She had a big brain in a tiny body. She pushed her almost-shoulder-length hair back. It was black, with her usual pink tips on the end that she'd

just had recently re-colored. She was comfortable in her skin and her abilities.

She just wished she could find a man who felt the same.

They either felt threatened by her skills or intimidated by her work, or left her for more glamorous and beautiful women.

Shaking her head, she focused on her phone. Taller. The jackass.

Watch it, Bond, or I'll hack your phone and make it so your ring tone is annoying Minion noises.

That doesn't sound so bad, pixie. I like the Minions. And you are just pint-sized.

Jet's gaze narrowed. She hunched over the keyboard. "Let's see how you like this."

Her fingers flew. She loved her work. She did feel like a goddess, with so much power at her fingertips. The CIA had trained her well before Killian had lured her away.

"There." She hit a key and grinned.

A second later, her phone chirped.

Change it back. Now.

Nope.

Jet.

She could almost hear the deep timbre of his voice.

You were warned.

I'll get my revenge.

You're all talk. For all I know, you're in Timbuktu. I think you're full of hot air, Bond.

Bad girls get spanked.

Jet gasped and her hand shook. She felt a fierce pulse between her legs. She was sure Cain could make a spanking very pleasurable.

No. She squeezed her thighs together. Not thinking of Cain and spanking. His big palm on her ass...

Her panties dampened. *Shit, get a grip, Hex.*

Nothing to say now, pixie?

Oh, now she could almost picture the cocky look on his face and the smug tone to his voice.

I never have been, and never will be, spanked.

We'll see. I could make you beg for it.

God. She pressed a hand to her belly. They were crossing so many lines here.

In your dreams, Bond. Now go away; I'm working.

The phone went silent, but Jet felt all churned up. She tried to focus on the computer screen.

It would be very, very stupid to let her fantasies about Cain, aka Shade, get any worse.

He was *not* for her. The man had heartbreak written all over him.

He was married to his job, and serving his country. He *was* his job. Plus, he was gorgeous; pure sex on a stick. He could have any woman he wanted.

There was no way he'd ever give her what she needed. What she craved. She'd just be a minor detour in his road. Jet was sick of being a detour for men before they found someone better. She wanted to be someone's ultimate destination.

Cain "Shade" Cavanagh flicked off the blowtorch and rose. He kicked the circle of metal he'd just cut, opening up a neat hole. He ducked, stepping into the vault.

His headlamp shone on the gold bullion and artwork.

A nice little stash, but not his target. He knew exactly what he was after.

He moved to a row of filing cabinets at the back of the vault, and pulled open the third drawer

on the second unit. He flicked through the files. God, Corozzo was an asshole. A dirty one, who liked young girls.

Cain found the file he wanted and pulled it out. Then he slid it inside his black jacket.

Turning, he slipped back out of the vault. He paused to take a picture of the front. Then he found the number saved under *Pixie*.

Look what I just broke into.

He sent the picture.

She didn't disappoint.

A Cerberus vault? No way you cracked that. You cut your way in, didn't you?

Damn, he really liked this woman's sharp brain. He liked everything about Jet "Hex" Adler. She wasn't like anyone he'd ever met, and such a refreshing change. He liked her brain, her fine hacking skills, her sharp tongue, and her small, perfectly formed body.

Fuck. Get your head in the game, Cavanagh. Nothing ever distracted him from his work. Nothing.

Distractions got you killed.

Besides, he had no fucking right to mess with a woman like Jet. Sure, she understood his world and his work. Hell, she understood him, and that was rare. He was used to lying and manipulating to keep his country safe. He was used to never standing still, never caring about anything or anyone but his work. He was used to never being himself.

No, there was no way he would care for Jet.

He'd have to settle for poking at her from afar.

He slipped out of the building. Outside was a warm, balmy New Orleans evening. He heard laughter from a bar close by. He was on the edge of the trendy Arts/Warehouse District.

Cain hit the sidewalk, pulling on his backpack. He kept his stride loose and easy. Just a regular guy out for an evening of fun.

He turned a corner. A block down, there were more bars and restaurants. Gold neon caught his eye. There was a sign above a set of beaten-gold double doors. The nightclub was called Ember, and there was a long line of people waiting to get in. The pub beside it was doing brisk business, as well.

He knew the club, the pub, the restaurants, several warehouses and buildings, hell, the entire block, were owned by the Fury brothers.

Cain approached Ember, heading straight for the front of the line. Two big bouncers saw him and tensed.

Someone grabbed his arm. He glanced sideways.

A blonde woman in a glittery silver dress standing in the queue smiled at him. "Hey, can you get me in?"

"No, sorry sweetheart." He pulled his arm free.

Her gaze ran up and down his body. She fluttered her fake eyelashes. "I'll make it worth your while, hot stuff."

"Another time." He turned back to the bouncers. "I'm here to see Dante."

One spoke into a mic attached to his shoulder, then nodded. "Go in."

Cain entered the club. It was like descending into luxurious sin.

The decor was all black and gold. He passed through the lavish entry and into the main club space. A huge bar glowed gold, where an army of bartenders worked to keep the crowd watered. The ceiling also glowed gold, covered in a sea of gold flowers.

Servers darted across the space with trays of drinks, all of them decked out in shimmery, gold

halter tops and black trousers.

He approached the back of the club, skirting the busy dance floor. Huge, gold urns decorated the length of the wall.

Ahead, a door opened, and a man stepped out.

He suited the interior—black tailored pants, black shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and black ink visible on one forearm. His hair was jet-black, and way past needing a cut. A dark beard covered a strong jaw, and his eyes looked black as well.

Dante Fury spotted Cain and jerked his chin up. Then he waved at the doorway. Cain followed him through into the back area of the club.

There was less gloss back here. Here it was employees only, where the real work got done. Back here, the music was muffled, and offices and storerooms extended off a long hallway. This was the work center of the busy club. Cain passed a security room with a wall of screens, and several black-suited guards monitoring them. He was unsurprised that Fury ran a tight ship when it came to security.

Fury and his brothers were not always on the right side of the law, but they had a code. They were known for helping those who needed it. The five of them were more than capable of going toe-to-toe with the New Orleans underbelly.

Dante led him up a set of stairs and into a spacious office.

There was a large black desk with a laptop on it, and a black-leather couch against one wall. Three paintings hung on the wall behind the desk—they all looked like gold swirled through black ink.

But it was the large window that drew Cain's eye. It was clearly one-way glass, giving Dante a bird's-eye view into the packed club below.

“You got it?” Dante asked, dropping into his desk chair.

Cain withdrew the file and dropped it on the desk. “You’ll make sure he goes down?”

There was a glint in the other man’s eyes. “Fuck yeah. The bastard hurt the daughter of a friend. Lured her in, did sick shit to her, photographed it.”

“You got her out?”

Dante ran a hand through his hair. “Yes, but she committed suicide three weeks later. She was thirteen.”

Hell. Cain felt a blip of sympathy, but the truth was that he was desensitized to bad shit. He’d seen a lot of horrible things, all around the world. A lot of innocents chewed up and spat out. “Sorry to hear that. This will help you make sure he doesn’t hurt any other young girls.” And didn’t venture any further into human trafficking.

Dante nodded. “He’s going down.”

“Uncle Sam thanks you for your help.”

“Thanks, Shade. You need help from me, you only have to call me.”

Cain nodded, then headed back down the stairs. As he crossed through the club, he ignored the welcoming, interested look from a stacked brunette in a tiny, red dress.

Outside, he headed down the street, taking several turns until he found where he’d parked his rental car. It was a short drive to his hotel in the French Quarter.

He liked staying at the Bourbon Orleans Hotel. He liked its old-world charm, which made for a nice change from the sterile hotel rooms he was used to. He strode through the grand lobby with its pillars and grand furniture.

When he reached his suite, he checked the small, near-invisible strip he’d set to ensure that his room was still undisturbed. Once inside, he pulled his shirt off and headed for the shower.

The room had more French styling and a view into the hotel's lush courtyard. Not that he ever had time to stop and enjoy it.

He'd wash off the day with burning hot water, but he already knew that he'd never quite feel clean. He was dedicated to protecting his country. He knew his work was important, and that it saved lives, and kept many innocent people safe.

But sometimes it sucked. It was hard and horrible and shitty.

He walked in the darkness and did the hard things so other people didn't have to. So they could stay safe and naïve, so they could voice their uneducated opinions on social media, and get up every morning and have breakfast with their kids, then go to the job they bitched about.

Shit. He shook his head. He was in a mood today.

After indulging in a long shower, he dried off. With a towel wrapped around his hips, he went to the computer on his desk and let the facial recognition read his face.

An image of the Sentinel Security office appeared. Not the stylish upper levels of the warehouse that housed the corporate security and cybersecurity divisions. No, this was the lower levels, where Killian's top team worked. The command center where a hacker called Hex ruled.

She sat on a chair, one leg tucked under her, moving it slightly side to side as she studied the screen. Her brow was creased in concentration.

He smiled. He liked watching her work. Of course, if she knew that he'd planted a tiny, secret camera the last time he was there, she'd lose her mind.

Suddenly, the elevator to the side of the image opened, and a woman in a neat skirt suit strode out holding a vase of flowers.

Cain frowned.

Jet stood up, her mouth open.

He saw her smile and reached over to touch a flower. Then she grabbed the card nestled in the blooms and read it.

He flicked on the sound.

“Who are they from?” the receptionist asked. “A secret admirer?”

“No, a guy I worked with on a recent job. Cybersecurity.”

“Was he cute?”

Jet cocked her head. “I guess. Yeah, he was.”

Cain scowled. Some dickhead had sent her a mixed bouquet. Could the guy not figure out what flowers suited her best? Jeez, there were even chrysanthemums in there. They were too ordinary for Jet.

She set the vase down on her desk, then sat, still smiling.

He picked up his phone and tapped.

Chrysanthemums? So lame.

He saw her read the message. Her brows snapped together.

How did you know I got flowers?

I'm a spy, remember? And those are not flowers. They're a bunch of lame.

She scanned the area, a fierce scowl on her face.

You'd better not have a camera in here, Bond! And what, I'm not worth sending flowers to?

That's not it. You're just worth more than lame, boring flowers.

Shit, he knew he was skirting a line. He shouldn't be flirting with her.

On the screen, she looked frozen. Then her fingers moved.

That's kind of...nice.

I can be nice. I know what a smart, beautiful woman deserves.

Actually, he was pretty sure no one would ever accuse him of being nice. He saw Jet bite her lip and he swallowed a groan. He felt that small move in his cock. Then his eyes were on those lips, and he was imagining them wrapped around his cock.

What does she deserve?

He stared at her message for a beat, then tapped on the phone.

The best. Beautiful pink lilies with colorful dahlias.

Those are my favorite flowers.

Oh, he knew.

You deserve breakfast in bed, and someone to worship that small, sexy body.

On the screen, he saw her jaw move, her lips murmuring his name.

Fuck, what the hell are you doing, Cavanagh? He shouldn't be doing this.

He watched Jet tap.

He also needs to be here doing all of that.

Cain sighed, staring at her message. He wished he could, but there were so many reasons why he couldn't. Most of all, he wasn't capable of that. Of a relationship.

He didn't respond and shoved his phone away.

No more flirty texts. He needed to stay away from temptation.