

Chapter 1

Jolie Benoit tapped a nervous fist against the steering wheel of her Nissan GT-R coupe as she squinted through the gloaming at the abandoned slaughterhouse. “They’ve been gone too long.” She turned to Travis, the other newbie on the field team, for confirmation. “Fifteen minutes is too long, isn’t it? They were supposed to be back in five.”

He looked up from the laptop, where he was using their wait time to work on his latest news article. “Don’t ask me—I’m the team bard.”

“Bard? You’ve been playing way too much D&D.”

Travis snorted as he calmly went back to his computer.

Jolie studied his profile. “Hauk brought you along to make sure I stayed in the car, didn’t he?” She couldn’t decide if she was asking him or simply announcing a fact. In a job that was supposed to be an in-and-out easy affair, Travis’s presence seemed superfluous, but she wouldn’t put it past the drill sergeant to sic a babysitter on her.

“Maybe it’s taking longer than anticipated to find the documents. It’s a big place,” was Travis’s only comment.

“Or maybe something went wrong.” Jolie tapped her head back against the seat. “I am not sit-in-the-car-and-wait girl. This job sucks.” She grabbed the door handle. “I’m going in.”

Travis put a restraining hand on her arm. Jolie could’ve easily broken his hold, but she paused anyway for him to say, “Hauk will have my head if I let you do something stupid. So keep my head attached to my body. Stay in the car.” Yup. Travis was her babysitter. *Great.*

“He’ll have to go through me to get to your head, I promise.” Jolie opened the door. “Besides, we’re anarchists. If he expects me to stick to the plan he dictated, he’s an idiot.”

Travis snorted a laugh and let her out of the car. “Tell him I put up a good fight. Hey, and Jolie?”

She looked back at him.

“Be careful.”

“I will.” She dropped her car fob in the front seat. “Keep the engine running, and drive away if you’re about to get caught.” She patted the roof. “I want my car in one piece.”

Jolie bumped the door shut with her hip and headed for the abattoir. It had been shut down just last year when the business moved further out of town.

Further out of town, harder for inspectors to reach. But The Underlight had gotten a tip that records were still kept in the offices—records that would prove the slaughterhouse had been falsifying injury reports to OSHA. It was no secret that slaughterhouses did it all the time, but catching them was the trick. And that was where The Underlight came in. The secret society’s work to expose corporate corruption wasn’t exactly legal, but in Jolie’s eyes, it was necessary. She’d been introduced to their ranks two months ago and had immediately signed up for field work. Hauk, also known as ex-Staff Sergeant Wesley Haukon, formerly of the Army Rangers, had given her basic training in defensive tactics, weapons and being generally sneaky. She wasn’t great in a fight yet, but she was strong and fast, and she’d gotten good at avoiding danger.

Quietly as she could, Jolie made her way up to the building. Though only abandoned for a year, the roads were already breaking up into grass and the exterior of the fortress-looking structure was redecorated in neon graffiti a good eight feet into the air. Hauk and Brayden, The Underlight’s computer expert, had intended to go to the foreman’s office on the second floor, where it overlooked what had been the killing floor.

Jolie stifled a shudder. Not just animals, but people had lost their lives here in a fast-

paced push to keep the conveyor belts moving. And this factory hadn't been shut down to build a place with safer machinery. No, the owners had wanted more space and faster equipment, which meant even more accidents. When the tip had come in that damning evidence could be found in the old foreman's office, Hauk had immediately agreed to take the job.

Jolie had volunteered to help. There'd been a fight, but The Overprotective One had finally agreed to let her drive. She had strict instructions to stay in the car, but they were ten minutes late exiting the building. Hauk and his overprotectiveness could go stuff it. She hadn't joined The Underlight to sit in a car.

She cautiously approached the side of the building. Just around the corner was a truck-sized hole in the brick that the company had cut out to remove equipment. Hauk and Brayden had entered through it.

Everything seemed quiet. The hole gaped open into a darkness where thousands (millions?) of creatures had died. Somewhere past that maw a six-foot-seven, highly trained military genius and his hacker buddy had run into trouble. And she was going to follow them. Maybe that was stupid.

She strained her ears for noise. Were those footsteps? She took a deep breath, hoping Hauk and Brayden were on their way out. Just in case, she kneeled down, lowering her profile like Hauk had taught her before peeking inside.

The floor was bare until the twisting chute—the cattle's last walk—took up an entrance to the left. An Escher-like mix of platforms and hanging walkways filled the two-story space at irregular intervals. Through it all meandered a conveyor belt full of silver hooks that gleamed above her in the dying sunlight.

Jolie stifled another shudder.

Maybe she'd eat a salad tonight.

The footsteps grew louder. She wrenched her attention from those creepy hooks to scan the floor. Strangers trampled down the stairwell from the foreman's office where Hauk and Brayden were supposed to be. But even from here she could see the office was dark inside.

Dammit. Where were they? Had those men caught them? Were they in hiding?

This was a non-entrance if she didn't want to be spotted, but just on the other side of the gap was a fire escape. She could get up to the roof and drop down one of the ceiling's many vent holes. Jolie's specialty at the burlesque was aerial dancing. Her favorite was a lyra, a hoop suspended from the ceiling, but she was adept dancing on a rope or a trapeze or silks. The idea of grabbing on to those hooks gave her the heebie-jeebies, but she wouldn't have any problem navigating from the track they dangled from. From there she could make it to the foreman's office unseen and start her search for what had gone wrong.

The plan had gone shitty wrong. Hauk slammed a fist into the door of the freezer unit, where he and Brayden had been stored. Luckily, like everything else in this gods-forsaken place, it was off. But that didn't change the fact that they were trapped.

Worse, if he knew Jolie Benoit, she was getting itchy feet about now and would be finding her way into the building soon...if she hadn't already. He knew he shouldn't have let her come. The girl had no fear, even when fear was well warranted.

It was supposed to have been an easy mission: break into an abandoned building, retrieve a couple of buried folders and get out. Maybe a guard or two at most. But it was like a fucking

convention of those damn Hands of Atropos out there, all armed with plenty of guns and zero brainpower to think for themselves.

Literally. Atropos were marked by a tattoo that magically destroyed their free will, making them the world's best pawns in a worldwide chess match. Now, The Austin Underlight's knight and bishop were stuck in a freezer, and the redheaded queen was probably dangling from the rafters.

Or at least, he damn well hoped Jolie was in the rafters, as he had absolutely no hope she'd stayed in the car like he'd wanted her to. But he'd repeatedly told her to get her ass in the air if she was ever in a bad situation. People don't tend to look up for trouble, and she was every bit as graceful in the sky as she was on the ground.

Graceful and stubborn and brave and gorgeous, with green eyes that made his heart beat like a machine gun. And if those Hands of Atropos hurt her, he'd rip their fucking heads off.

"Uh...Hauk?" Brayden's voice was strangely high. "We have a problem."

Hauk growled, "Ya think?"

But Brayden was pointing at something specific under a pile of scrap metal in the corner.

Hauk strode across the room to find wires attached to some electronic doohickey and... "C-4. Fuck." They'd been set up. This whole tip had been a scam. "Oh...fuck. Do you know how to..." He waved his hand at it.

"Uh, no. Hacking computers and disarming bombs is not the same thing. You?"

He shook his head. "No."

The door handle rattled. Hauk sprang for it, ready to break the legs of the first person in so they could get the hell out. The door opened a crack. "Hauk?"

Jolie. He didn't know whether to be more pissed or relieved. "We're here."

"The door is chained shut."

"Of course it is. There's a bomb in here. We've got four minutes. Can you find a hammer?"

"Hammer...wait, I saw a Coke can."

What the fuck? "What are you doing? Hit the lock with a hammer or a pipe. Then get the hell out of here." But she was already gone.

And returned two seconds later. "Do you still have a knife?"

He pulled one from his ankle holster and stuck it, handle-first, through the crack.

Before he could ask what she was doing, she asked, "You have weapons, and they still got you in there?"

The incredulity in her voice was flattering but didn't change that yes, despite packing enough weaponry to take on a platoon, he'd gotten his ass locked in a freezer. "Ambush. Six Atropos with rifles and distance. Can't fight a guy I can't reach."

"Pain-dar didn't go off?"

His laugh sounded more like a groan. He usually had an uncannily accurate sixth sense about impending violence. Someone had nicknamed it his "pain-dar" and the moniker had stuck.

Brayden answered, "We've discovered a flaw in the pain-dar. Their intention today was to herd us, not shoot us. We marched nicely into the freezer with no violence whatsoever and nary a tingle in Hauk's nethers."

"It's in my neck, not my nethers, and I wasn't nice. But yeah, no need to shoot us when they've got a strategically planted bomb. Which brings me to the vital question, and I do mean vital...what are you doing?"

"Popping the lock." Five seconds later, the chain rattled down and the door opened. Jolie

stood in the frame with a strip of metal the size of her little finger.

He sucked in a breath. Saving his ass, she looked even hotter than her normal excessively hot. Black clingy fabric covered her from feet to neck, showing off those rocking curves. Her red curls were swept back into a ponytail. Her smile glowed as she looked him and Brayden up and down, way too proud of herself.

He shook his head and strode out the door. He'd never hear the end of how she saved his ass on her first mission. "I'll ask later what you did with a soda can. And remind me to kill you for disobeying orders." He really meant another word that started with "ki" and ended with a double letter, but that wasn't going to happen. F.R.I.E.N.D.S. Go friends.

His friend winked. He stifled a groan.

They turned toward the stairs, and she waved a lighter-sized gadget as they ran. "I checked the foreman's office first and found—"

Somebody came around the corner. Hauk shoved Jolie down, and a bullet slammed into the wall right where her head had been.

"Hold that thought." Hauk launched at the attacker.

Nobody laid a finger on his friend.

It was fun to watch Hauk fight. He was a behemoth of a man with scars striping and pockmarking most of his body—he'd been in a fire in Afghanistan that had destroyed more than three-quarters of his skin—and had reclaimed his damaged exterior with tribal tattoos and metal piercings. Despite all the badass punk, he had the grace of a dancer when he tangoed with an opponent, all lethal choreography and a performer's flare.

Hauk slammed the gunner to the ground and somehow ended on his feet with a machine gun in his hands. More Hands of Atropos came dashing around the corner, only to be mowed down by Hauk's new toy.

"Go! Go!" he yelled in his booming Army voice. Jolie had seen it cow people—it had cowed her at first. But after two months of training with him, she'd come to a new conclusion.

Macho-Hauk was kinda cute.

But with a bomb and villains flitting about like hornets, she obeyed Hauk's command. The stairs were crowded, so she jumped for the nearest hook. Coming up had been a pain in the ass; her weight made the hook swing away from the one above it. But the same condition meant coming down was a simple matter of swinging from one to the next, like monkey bars on a child's playground or some Tarzan of Sinclair's *Jungle*. She glanced once over her shoulder to see Brayden shake his head vehemently.

Brooking no argument, Hauk picked up the comparatively little guy and strapped him on like a backpack. Brayden clung tight as Hauk jumped.

Back on the ground, Jolie raced for the hole in the wall and out. Hauk put Brayden down and the two of them were just steps behind. About a football field from the compound, Hauk yelled to hit the turf. Jolie dropped and rolled. Brayden dove into a drainage ditch.

She should've done the same. But a heavy weight landed on her, pinning her down. Jolie had a moment to register that Hauk had dived on top of her before the bomb went off.

The factory exploded, sending brick and shrapnel careening around them. Jolie reflexively buried her head beneath her arms.

Not that she needed to. A body far larger than her own covered her from head to foot.

Heat seared around her as a second boom resounded through the desolate field. And Hauk held her down, protecting her until silence filled the yard.

Hauk was still.

Was he okay? She struggled around until she faced him.

He was breathing. Shuddering, he pulled away from her, and those pretty blue eyes—the only pretty thing about him, but dang, they were something else—searched her frantically.

“Are you hurt?” he asked at the same time as she asked, “Are you okay?”

His agile fingers, which rarely reached for anyone, searched her body as she patted down his back for new injuries. The contact felt surprisingly nice, a relief, almost. The man had already gone through a firestorm in Afghanistan, and here, knowing exactly what horrible damage a fire could do, he’d put his body between her and an explosion.

Unnerved, she smacked his shoulder. “Dumbass! You watch out for yourself. You don’t need to get burned again.”

His features crunched up in exasperation. “You don’t need to get burned at all.” He looked up. “Brayden?”

“Yo!” he called. “Atropos have cleared out. I’m headed for the car.”

Hauk took a deep breath as his body weight relaxed onto her and the fingers poking at her became a thumb gently stroking her cheek.

A gloved thumb. The notion flitted through her mind that she might like him to take his gloves off and touch her skin with his own.

She shook her head. The physically wrecked drill sergeant? No way. They were friends. Or something. And danger always led to weird lusty thoughts. Or so she’d heard.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” he asked her again.

Ignoring her reactions to their closeness, she shifted beneath him, stretching her legs and throwing her shoulders back. Other than a rock poking into her side and the gravel stuck to her cheek, she was fine. Could’ve been a lot worse. “I’m good. You?”

“I’m fine.” But suddenly he didn’t look fine. He looked covetous as raw hunger, the likes of which she hadn’t seen since they’d first met, darkened his eyes.

Again came the gut flutter and the desire to remove those damn gloves. Oh yeah, and the memory of a kiss that had changed her definition of kissing.

Hauk had been so professional with her the last two months, so focused on training her to be an asset to The Underlight. Between her classes at The University of Texas, his day job as a metalworker and her nights at the burlesque, they’d barely had time to hang out anywhere but the training room.

But now, after near-daily contact of the most professional sort, the searing gaze he lavished on her brought a blush to her cheeks.

Danger led to weird lusty thoughts. For both of them. But it was a terrible idea to act on fleeting feelings of the moment.

Jolie had almost died. Multiple times. She could’ve been shot. She could’ve been blown up by a bomb. She could’ve been burned by fire or shredded by shrapnel. And there wasn’t a damn thing he could’ve done about any of it. In the Army he’d sent kids into battle, knowing each time that some of them weren’t coming back. It had hurt his soul every time. But not like this. Not this gut-deep sense that the world would be broken if he couldn’t bring her home safely.

These last two months, he’d trained Jolie as hard as any of his men because if she was determined to walk into danger, that was the best thing he could do to keep her alive. He’d expected to be nervous the first time he saw her in action. He hadn’t expected to be just this side of losing his mind.

But the danger was over. The Hands of Atropos had fled, the remains of the slaughterhouse smoldering in silence. Jolie was hot and soft underneath him, her freckled cheeks stained with a blush as her hands dug into his back, pulling him tight against her. And all that terror channeled itself into something else entirely.

He'd been so good. For two months he'd done his best to keep her comfortable, to train her like a professional and not like some randy kid using sparring matches as an excuse to get physical with the hot girl.

But right now he didn't have professional in him. He wanted to stroke every part of her smooth skin and make sure it was okay, to press so close to her that they were one creature, one life force, because then he'd know she was alive and he was alive and the world was a place where life went on despite danger.

"There's a ditch right there," she said. "You should have gone for the ditch."

He blinked, trying to focus on what she was saying. "What?"

"You told me I should go for a ditch. You didn't go for the ditch. What kind of bad example are you?" She said it with a smile, like she was joking, trying to make light of everything.

He frowned. "I didn't go for the ditch because you were out here in the open for every hook in the factory to spear as they came hurtling out."

She tried to shrug, which was hard for her to do with him weighing down on her. "Well, that would serve me right, wouldn't it? I mean, I was the one who didn't go for the ditch. You shouldn't have to get speared and roasted for it."

Was she kidding? She seemed serious. What he should've done was not let her come on this stupid mission in the first place.

"There you go again, looking at me like I've lost my mind. But I'm right. You shouldn't have to protect me when I do something idiotic." She pushed his shoulders, signaling that she wanted to get up.

He should let her go, but her new line of idiocy just made him want to hold her tighter, potentially while shaking sense into her. He settled for keeping her pinned until she made some simple agreements on the rules of sane behavior. "Look, you always get behind me, understand? If there's danger somewhere, you put me between it and you. And if you can't do that, I'll do it for you."

She frowned, her smooth skin creasing in displeasure. "Why?"

"Because that's my job," he ground out.

She actually rolled her eyes at him. "Whatever. Your job is to protect the interests of The Underlight. Not me. I'm responsible for myself."

Terror-turned-lust was now evolving into anger. He knew what was happening but couldn't seem to stop his voice from rising nearly to a shout. "You are not responsible for yourself if you can't find a stupid fucking ditch three feet away from where you landed." He stabbed a finger to their right. "Or a man-sized pile of rubble right there. Or a group of trees right fucking there."

She shrugged obstinately. "Newbie mistake."

"Cherries get their heads blown off for newbie mistakes." And the world would not be the same if her head were not happily attached to her body.

"Well," she huffed, "I thank you for your help, but I promise to find the *fucking* ditch or the *fucking* rubble or the *fucking* trees next time, so your self-sacrificial assistance won't be *fucking* necessary." Her voice rose with each word until she was yelling right back at him. Her

eyes sparked with emotion, her breaths came in heaving puffs and her hands, which had been shoving, had somehow switched to tugging at his jacket.

That was it. He was shutting her mouth up with his own. He plowed his fingers into her hair, the way he'd wanted to every damn day for two months, and wrapped his hand around the back of her head. Her fists on his lapels pulled tighter in response, as if urging him on. It was the only signal he needed to lean in and—

“Ahem, Hauk? Jolie?” Brayden's normally pleasant but currently nails-on-chalkboard-awful voice grated. “I hate to interrupt, but it's colder than a snowman's ass out here, and Travis and I would like to get home. You two can fight in the car, provided neither of you are driving.”

Hauk shot him a death look, but Brayden the timid blew a white puff of unconcerned breath into air that didn't feel the least bit cold. Jolie wriggled, trying to get free, and reluctantly he rolled off of her, landing his ass on chains that had blasted right next to them.

Dead fucking next to them. Two feet to the right, and one of them would've died.

“I'm driving my car,” she said, completely oblivious as she hopped to her feet. “I'm *the driver*. That's my job.” She shot Hauk a narrow-lidded glare as if he'd tried to stomp on her puppy then jogged off toward the car.

Hauk scrubbed a hand across his face—his scarred face—and growled, “Brayden...”

Brayden had the nerve to laugh. “You were about to kiss her in front of a burned-out abattoir with me and Travis watching. You'll thank me later when you've calmed down. You'll get a better chance, I promise.” He turned and followed Jolie.

Hauk lay on his back and breathed, trying to get his raging emotions back under control. Brayden was wrong. He wouldn't get a better opportunity. He was fucking ugly, and Jolie was glorious. The fact that she let him touch her at all—in the training room as they practiced fighting, which was about as impersonal as touching got—was a miracle in and of itself. Getting her to contemplate a kiss under other-than-momentous circumstances was *not* a long shot. It was an impossibility. Which meant he was probably a rat bastard for taking advantage of momentous circumstances.

Tonight was a fail all around.

With that cheery thought, he pushed his ass back up to standing and contemplated an hour-long car ride back to Austin with Jolie driving. The night just got better and better. He jogged to the car and slid into the front seat. From the backseat, Brayden and Travis watched them with undisguised fascination. *Great*.

Jolie stared ahead as he slammed the door, but her hands trembled on the steering wheel. She was royally pissed. Was he supposed to apologize? What for? If he knew, he'd probably do it. Girl drove him fucking crazy that way.

She turned to him, eyes fiery, jaw held carefully still, and said, “Thank you for protecting me. I appreciate it.”

His mouth was already open for a retort. He closed it. Opened it again and said, “Thank you for breaking us out of the freezer. I appreciate it.” Seeing as he and Brayden would be dead right now if she hadn't.

Her eyes widened in surprise and her jaw relaxed. “No problem. I like driving, but I'm not wait-in-the-car girl.” At her command, the little car zipped forward. His heart gave an answering leap.

Of course she wasn't wait-in-the-car girl; it was one of the things he admired about her. He was going to have to get used to seeing her in danger, even though the thought dried his mouth and filled his stomach with anvils. He forced himself to nod then forced his voice to say,

“Okay.”

With another look of surprise, she resettled into her seat more comfortably. “Cool.”

He was sure glad somebody was happy with this turn of events, because this was going to drive him nuts. “Training room tomorrow.” It wasn’t a question. There was still so much she needed to know.

“Looking forward to it.”

He tried to relax into the seat of the fanciest car he’d ever been in. Jolie always had the best and most beautiful of everything. One more example of how he didn’t fit into her life.

She grinned and a little blush blotted her freckles. “Maybe we can practice finding a ditch so you don’t have to land on top of me next time.”

Just what he needed, no reason to touch her at all. He grunted a response and shut his eyes, but he could still feel her like an electric generator sparking next to him. He wasn’t ready for her hand to land on his knee. Eyes suddenly wide, he jumped, and the seatbelt snapped him back into place.

She didn’t seem to notice, her fingers lingering on his knee. “Lemme know if I can do anything for Katrina’s event tomorrow. I know you’ll be there in case of trouble. I’m performing just after the halfway mark, but the rest of the time I’m yours if you need me.” She grinned, patted his leg twice and removed her hand back to the gear shift. “Use me as you will.”

He wished. He opened his mouth to crack a joke, like he sometimes did the rare times they saw each other out of training, but she blushed yet again (Jolie never blushed...what was up with that?) and added, “In defense of The Underlight, I mean.”

As if she had to state the obvious.

“Aww,” he said, putting enough humor in his tone that she wouldn’t take him as dead seriously as he meant it. “And here you got my hopes, among other things, up.”

She laughed in surprise then shot him a smirk that did nothing to ease the cramped quarters inside his trousers. “Usually I’m the one to cause an explosion, not stop a poor man from going off. But if you ask nicely, next time I’ll let you blow.”

Any shot at a smart comeback or rational thought was lost to the picture of a fire-cracking detonation with Jolie underneath him. The image made his head spin and body ache. They harassed each other, sure, but she didn’t normally taunt him so baldly with what he couldn’t have. “Hell, woman,” he grumbled.

“There was a first time?” Brayden piped up from the back.

Her eyes shot to the review mirror like she’d forgotten they were back there. She bit her lip, chagrined. “Sorry. My mouth got away from me.”

Hauk dragged his eyes off of her to stare out the window at dead plants and a snowless, muck-brown winter. The cold air would do him some good. “She’s referring to the bomb, numb nut.” The words were a lie. She was referring to the first time they’d met with a thin barrier of fabric between them. He’d never told Brayden, or anyone else, that particularly fond memory.

Almost under her breath Jolie added, “You have a terrible tendency to bring out the naughty girl in me, Wesley dearest.”

He had once. If only he still could now that she’d seen his face.