

PART 2 – GOVERNMENT AGENTS

Prologue

Candice's fingers flew across the keys with speed she had never reached before. The security on this portion of the SAICOD database was advanced far beyond anything she had ever thought was possible. Theoretically, she knew what she was doing, but this type of hacking and data mining was something she had only ever imagined academically. With each level of encryption she broke, hiding her tracks as she went and fending off cyber-security at every turn, she knew it was only a matter of time before someone suspected what was going on and eventually traced it to her desk. She had intended to be in and out before anyone else in the building took notice, but just getting into the SAICOD main database was taking much longer than she'd thought it would.

Fortunately, she had the keywords she knew would help her find the pertinent information and download it for later examination. It took a few minutes, but the words and names she was looking for began popping up with increasing frequency. Repeated references to 'Sector 15' and 'Project Overlord' flashed across the screen along with the rest of the garbled, bureaucratic document mess, and Candice felt more and more guilty the further she went. What she was doing – hacking into the central database of the most highly classified government agency in the world – could almost certainly be considered an act of treason, and absolutely was a massive national security risk. At the very least, if she was caught, her career as a SAICOD agent would certainly be over, not to mention the cost of the personal betrayal of Director Bloodgood, Agent Haller, and President Sterling himself.

But at the forefront of her mind, Candice heard Mary Anne's words and clung to them like a life-preserver pulling her through a torrential, overflowing river.

"Your family comes first. No matter what happens, we look out for each other and keep each other safe. Everything else is secondary."

Candice took a deep breath and plunged ahead. That list, the one with all those names on it associated with Project Overlord (including their own), was something that Candice and the rest of Team Dixon needed to know about. She needed to know what big secret SAICOD was keeping from them. She needed to know how much danger the family was in and bring the evidence to Atlas and Mary Anne, who could then take it to President Sterling and make sure that SAICOD didn't end up betraying them all. She didn't doubt that Bloodgood would do it, either. She'd seen the look in his eyes the last time this was brought up, and she very nearly feared for her life if he found out about her actions here.

Coming off that train of thought, Candice's gut was filled with butterflies when she realized that she was going right ahead with this all alone at the moment. With everyone else, including Mary Anne, dispatched to help save Jasmine and the others who had gone after the Leech, she was all by herself at the Sector 14 facility, which meant that there would be no one to cover for her or intervene if she was discovered.

The download was nearly complete. Candice was about to pull out and shut down when she saw a document flash across the screen. Anyone else's eyes might not have been fast enough on a computer to detect the names that she noticed in that split-second, but Candice knew it was a game-changer. Briefly, she paused and pulled it up to take a quick look, but her eyes grew wide as she began to examine it.

She was looking at a memo, originating from Bloodgood's office, that had been circulated among the SAICOD leadership, titled 'New Sector', and Candice quickly saw that it

concerned the formation of Sector 15, dated sometime back in mid-2001. Since it was a document that was never meant to be shown to anyone outside the SAICOD leadership, very little had been redacted. Several different phrases jumped out at Candice as she skimmed through it: it was meant to be a “high-security containment” facility, pursuing “new leaps in our scientific understanding”, as a means to “replicate these abilities” in search of a “permanent solution.” The memo also contained a list of names designating the potential first “subjects” of the Sector 15 facility, and Candice was relieved to see that none of her family members or friends were a part of that list. In addition, Candice noticed a significant use of the word ‘Partners’, always spelled with the capital ‘P’, and closely tied in the context of the memo to Project Overlord, said to be “instrumental to the success of the program.” Very few of the ‘Partners’ were mentioned by name, but there were some names dropped (and some redacted). Candice didn’t recognize these names, although a few sounded familiar. Douglas Schull, Amanda Sakihara, Alexander Feagans, Elizabeth Collins...

...and Dawson Kohl!

Candice’s mouth went dry and her eyes grew wide. Acting on a hunch, she cross-referenced the other names from the New Sector memo with the SAICOD villain database. Sure enough, all of them were listed in the villain category, most of them as high-level public menaces. These murderous, psychopathic supervillains – partners with SAICOD? And Dawson Kohl among them? Conspiring to imprison and experiment on others with special abilities! How deep did this conspiracy run?

Candice looked at all the names at the top again, and her stomach lurched with one more unwelcome surprise. Among the SAICOD leaders at the top, including Bloodgood as director, was another familiar name: ‘Nick S.’

“Nicolas Sterling...the President...” Candice gasped.

“He wasn’t the President back then, you know,” Candice heard behind her. She spun in her chair, her heart skipping a beat, and her blood running cold as she saw Fallon Bloodgood standing in the middle of the room, his hands clasped confidently behind him. Candice froze, staring at him as he smiled coolly back at her.

“You really should learn to take a hint, Miss Dunham,” he told her. “I tried to warn you where this path would lead, but you didn’t listen.”

Candice glanced back at her screen – the monitor showed no signs of her search or her download. Her preemptive programing had covered her tracks.

She cleared her throat and tried to compose herself, probably not as convincingly as she would have liked.

“I...I don’t know what you mean, Director...”

Bloodgood smiled again, this time a condescending smile that told Candice she didn’t have him fooled.

“Agent Haller,” he called over his shoulder. Candice’s heart lodged in her throat as Symon Haller walked in, accompanied by two SAICOD soldiers and an agency technician. Bloodgood watched as Symon approached Candice’s computer and inserted a small thumb-drive. Immediately, the screen began to play back a recorded visual of everything that it had shown only minutes before, including the database hack and the download.

“It’s all recorded, Director,” Haller announced grimly. “Every keystroke, every search, every decryption...all of it.”

Bloodgood strode over to Candice and put his thumb and forefinger on either side of her chin, tilting her head to look him right in his chiseled, stern face. His breath washed over her with a minty freshness that sickened her, and he smelled of expensive cologne like always.

“Did you really think you could outsmart *me*?”

Candice fought back tears. She was terrified, but also furious at the unapologetic corruption and the threat to her loved ones. For a second, she couldn't say anything, but she mustered all her courage and voiced the single most prominent thought in her head.

“...you...you won't get away with this...”

“My dear,” Bloodgood gloated. “I already have.”

“Sir,” Symon called. “We have a problem.”

“What is it,” Bloodgood growled.

“There are no other drives or devices connected to this computer,” Haller told him.

Candice saw Bloodgood's mind working quickly, and his expression went from contemplation to anger very fast.

“Then where did she--?”

“She must have used a wireless download to an alternate location or storage device,”

Haller said right away.

“Of course she did!” Bloodgood yelled. “Where did she send the data!?”

“We don't know, sir. It could be anywhere in the building, or it could be somewhere else. She could have sent it to a cloud site for all we know, or it could be hidden somewhere in the Deep Web.”

“How long will it take you to find it?”

The technician spoke up. “We can trace her work, Director, assuming she hasn't erased the trail completely, but she's an experienced hacker, so it could take anywhere from a few hours to a few weeks.”

Bloodgood whirled around toward Candice and grabbed her chin again, this time with his whole hand.

“Where is it?” he snarled through gritted teeth.

Candice, though scared out of her mind, bit her tongue to keep from speaking. She bit down so hard she thought she might sever it, which she knew was preferable to giving Bloodgood what he wanted.

“You know I'll find it eventually, so save us some time and give it to me now,” he demanded.

Still, Candice refused to speak. Bloodgood let out a primal yell and brought his hand across her face, slapping her out of her chair.

“If you won't talk to me now, then you'll talk after you've learned your lesson!” he shouted. After a moment, he composed himself, ran a hand over his smooth, hairless head, and straightened his suit, speaking at a normal volume.

“Take her away. If she wants to know about Sector 15 so badly, she can get a first-hand look at it. Haller, finish up here and get to work. I want our six best technicians to find that data within three days.”

“Sir, Sector 15 is reserved for only the worst—”

Bloodgood grabbed Symon by his tie and pulled him close enough to get some of the director's spittle on his nose. “*Agent* Symon Haller, you have your orders. Do I make myself clear?”

Symon paused, his voice coming out barely above a whisper.

“This...this doesn't seem right...”

Bloodgood scoffed at him. “Since when have you ever cared about that? Can you handle your orders or not?”

Symon stared back at his director's implacable face, not reacting in any way except to give a very slight nod. “Of course...Director...”

Bloodgood followed the soldiers and the technician out of the room, and Symon turned back to the screen where Candice had been sitting. The screen had reached the end of the recorded portion and froze there, showing the New Sector memo she had been looking at when they had caught her. Symon allowed his eyes to casually gaze at the document before reaching out to shut the machine down, and he had to do a double-take to make sure he hadn't imagined what he thought he saw. He scrolled down the list of prisoner names, putting his finger on the screen to be sure that he wasn't seeing things. He looked over his shoulder to make sure no one was watching, then sank into the chair in shock. He couldn't take his eyes off the screen, and it felt like someone had just abruptly deflated him.

“My God...” he breathed. “It...it can't be...I don't believe it...!”

Symon reached into his suit jacket and pulled out his phone. He pressed the encrypting button, sealing off his communication from all tracking and listening technology. Thanks to SAICOD, no one would hear the following conversation – not even SAICOD. The phone rang several times, so many rings that Symon wanted to leap out of his chair and punch something. Still, he restrained himself, and finally (finally!), his friend picked up his com.

“This is Ironclad,” came Atlas's voice.

“Atlas, it's Symon Haller,” he whispered. “I need to meet with you before you come back.”

“Um...Agent Haller, I thought we weren't supposed to use our real names over the com system...”

“No one can hear us,” Symon told him. “And I'm not calling you as an agent. I'm calling you as a friend. We need to help each other, and we need to do it very, very carefully. No one else can know about this except you and me.”

There was a long pause on the other end, and Symon heard Atlas breathing so he knew he was still there. “Symon...are you alright?”

Symon stared at the screen in front of him, feeling the beads of sweat form on his forehead. Everything he'd done – all the terrible things he'd done and convinced himself it was for the greater good – all of it was on his hands. And now he'd been involved in hurting the very people he joined SAICOD to protect.

“No...no, I'm not. This changes everything.”