

The Villains Series:
Book 2

Chaos Agent

LEE WINTER



Chapter 1

Office With a Name

THE FIRST TIME EDEN LAWLESS vanquished an archnemesis, she had just turned thirty-six and was not exactly expecting it. After all, no one had ever beaten Francine Wilson at *anything* before. But not only had Eden become an unlikely nemesis vanquisher, she'd somehow scored a new job out of it, in Washington DC, at a top-secret organization called The Fixers.

Eden had never been more surprised in her life—and that included the time she'd seen her mother naked on the TV news wearing only fake blood at an anti-fur protest. Never let it be said River Lawless didn't fully commit.

But of all the bizarre events that had filled Eden's professional activist life to date, working an office job for the first time was way up there.

It was in an *actual* office. With a glass desk, a swirly chair, a hot boss, and everything.

Whoa. Her brain screeched to a halt. Scratch the hot boss thing. That was wildly inappropriate.

Michelle Hastings, said boss, had hired Eden after appreciating her work on a small, ten-week subcontracted job in Eden's hometown of Wingapo, Maryland. That was the entire extent of their involvement. *Super* businessy.

Besides, even if Michelle *did* like women, an *if* based entirely on point five of a second's reaction on a Skype call weeks ago, the woman wasn't about to act on it. Because Michelle had always been, from minute one, a consummate professional.

But that didn't mean Eden couldn't appreciate the view. If she leaned back in her chair, she could see her, in profile, working at her desk. Well, by "see" it was more like her pale wrist, a bit of blue sleeve, and a slice of face that was entirely nose, mouth, and chin. Still, even that was a nice view.

Eden groaned. A bit of focus wouldn't kill her. Well, she'd focus when someone gave her some work. Her phone pinged with a text from her best friend.

Omg I can't believe you have an OFFICE job! YOU?!! Good luck for Day One. omg #endtimes

A new text landed: *Also next time ask my advice BEFORE accepting coz this is weird. You+Office=crazy*

Then: Our friends have a betting pool on how long you'll last in a corporate job. Most betting a few days. I'm down for a month coz I know about Hot Boss. Don't let me down. Winner gets beer.

Not for the first time, Eden wished she'd never mentioned Michelle's hotness to Aggie.

One last message landed with a picture of Aggie grinning idiotically in her new 'Kevin the guinea pig' pajamas.

Eden's recent birthday gift had been received as "the greatest creation in the entire course of fashion history, no kidding." While her "Find Kevin a Companion" list was apparently "genius." Aggie called it "Tinder for guinea pigs" and vowed to use it soon.

Aggie and Kevin looked adorable in the photo.

Something to print out & stick up on your desk to laugh at when you're drowning in the horrors of working inside 4 walls

Eden grinned and looked around for a printer.

* * *

“Tilly,” Michelle called, “of our unassigned cases, are any...good?”

“Good?” Otilie Zimmermann, Michelle’s sixty-four-year-old personal assistant, settled into the visitor’s chair and steepled her fingers. “Define *good*.”

“The opposite of evil. A case where you might think, ‘Well, that’s something good we’re doing.’”

Tilly stared at her as if she’d lost her mind. “No.”

“What about...*less bad*?”

“There’s the banker who wants his boss’s job and wants us to leak the man’s kinks to upper management to embarrass him into resigning. That impacts only one person.”

Michelle winced. “Kinks shouldn’t be used to shame people.”

“And yet we’ve been planning to do just that for weeks now.” Tilly eyed her.

“Yes.” Michelle knew this, of course. “Only one person being impacted doesn’t mean it falls into the category of *not* evil.”

“Okay, what about that businessman, Yin? He wants to get his daughter away from the syndicate before she gets drawn deeper in. Wants us to get them off grid so they can’t be hunted.”

“Definitely not evil, but it’s overseas. Think American assignments. Better yet, DC ones.”

“Okay...Hank Brewer?” Tilly’s expression twisted into disdain. “If you tell only half the story, it looks good.”

Michelle brightened. “Perfect.”

“May I ask why?”

“Ms. Lawless has joined our organization as of today.” Michelle schooled her features to neutral.

A sharpness entered Tilly’s eyes. “It’d be easier to just tell her the truth than try to manipulate our assignments to make us look good.”

Sometimes Michelle hated how astute her PA was. At least Tilly hadn’t asked why Michelle had hired the “panda” full-time for their emporium of sharks and snakes.

“She’s a potentially valuable resource,” she began justifying anyway, even though Tilly hadn’t spoken. “However, she’d run for the hills if she knew the truth about us. I want to tap into that resource for now. Brewer is the perfect job to occupy her while I find her something more useful.”

At Tilly’s dubious look, Michelle added, “Look on the bright side: when was the last time we took on an effective employee who didn’t make your skin crawl just a little?”

“Good point. And how disturbing.”

Michelle chose not to dwell on that any more than she would dwell on the fact she couldn’t wait to see Eden Lawless in the office, five days a week.

* * *

“Good morning, Ms. Lawless,” Tilly said as she stopped at Eden’s desk. “I trust everything is in order with your working space?”

Eden immediately sat up a little straighter in the face of the woman’s no-nonsense tone. Her accent sounded faintly German—which made sense with a surname like Zimmermann—even though her choice of words was all English and proper. Eden felt entirely sloppy by comparison. “Yep, all good. Great view.” She beamed.

“So glad you approve.” Tilly paused and eyed the photo stuck on the partition at Eden’s desk.

Eden followed her gaze and grinned. “Meet Aggie and Kevin.”

“There’s a ‘no personal items on desks’ policy at The Fixers,” Tilly said briskly. “The workspace must remain clean and professional at all times.”

No looking at Aggie and Kevin all day? Damn. Office life was harsh. “The Fixers’ loss,” Eden said with a small grin as she plucked the photo off the small divider.

Tilly slid a folder across her desk and then dropped a slip of paper on it. She gestured at Eden’s computer. The top-of-the-line iMac was so new that Eden could still smell the plastic wrapping it had been ripped from.

“Your login and password details.” Tilly tapped the paper.

Eden studied two random jumbles of letters and numbers and asked, “Which is which?”

With the tiniest of tuts—Eden wasn’t sure if it was directed at her or IT—Tilly wrote “password” and “login” next to the relevant codes.

“Additionally,” Tilly said, “speak to our cybersecurity department about getting a secure laptop for use outside the office.” She pointed to a list of phone extensions. “Ask for Snakepit.”

“Seriously?”

“Mmm.”

“Okay.” Probably some ex-hacker. Eden’s geek side was fully pumped. “Great! What’s next?”

Tilly flipped open the folder. “Your first job. Well, first in-office job.”

Eden glanced at the cover sheet inside. “Hank Brewer? The multimillionaire?”

“Billionaire,” Tilly corrected. “He had a good second half last year.”

“Isn’t he the guy who blew up native land for a gas-expansion project? And his demolition work caused a landslide that wiped out thousands of homes in Ecuador?”

“He has a checkered history, yes.”

“And isn’t he the guy who said college kids are ‘entitled jerks pissing away Daddy’s dough just to sound smart’? And educating girls outside of home economics is pointless?”

“He’s not the most...evolved...man.” The edges of Tilly’s mouth threatened a smile.

“So, are we helping him fix the awful stuff he’s done?” Eden offered a hopeful look.

“No.” Tilly hesitated. “Well, not yet. The problem is, because of his past deeds, no one wants to be associated with him, even when he genuinely wants to do good.”

“I don’t blame them.” Eden shuddered.

“He actually *does* want to be better. However, he doesn’t want his rivals to think he’s gone soft. So he’s asked The Fixers to find a way to donate to worthy organizations but without anyone finding out he’s behind it.”

“Then he should tell charities to treat his donation anonymously,” Eden said. “He doesn’t need us.”

“He does actually. He’s already tried donating all over the place, but he’s so toxic that they send his money back. They’re terrified of being skewered on social media if it ever came out they accepted his blood money. So, your job is to donate *this* sum in a way that doesn’t trace back to him.” Tilly tapped a number.

Eden stared at all those zeroes. “Hank must be feeling *really* guilty. And sure, I’d be happy to help.”

“Excellent.” Tilly turned to leave.

“Um, hey, so when does Michelle get a break?” Eden asked casually. It wouldn’t hurt to check in with her new boss, would it? For...reasons.

Hell. I am so lame.

“Did you wish to make an appointment to see Ms. Hastings? If so, go through me. She has a tight schedule.” Tilly waited, eyebrow poised. “Why do you need to see her?”

“Um...” Eden panicked. “I thought I could debrief about Wingapo.”

“No need. She approved your report as sufficient.” Tilly waited some more.

Eden thought wildly for another excuse. “Do you think she’d like a green tea?” she asked weakly.

“No. But if she suddenly decided to take it up, she’d ask *me* to get her one. As her PA.”

“Look, I just want to catch up with her,” Eden finally admitted.

“Ah.” Tilly considered that. “Well, she takes a coffee each day at nine and three. If you were to appear with one at five minutes to three, she’d be unlikely to refuse.” She scribbled on a piece of paper. “Her Starbucks order.”

“Thank you!” Eden grinned, gave a double thumbs up, then felt ridiculous. She blushed.

“Mmm.” Tilly said thoughtfully as amusement glinted in her eye. “You know, I’d genuinely love to witness you two attempting a conversation. Marshmallow and acid, I’m thinking.”

“Nah, I’m not *that* acidic.” Eden’s grin widened.

And this time, Tilly laughed.

* * *

The receptionist—the art lover Eden had met during her job interview—was the one assigned to giving her an office tour about an hour later. Her name was Daphne, which she pronounced *Darf*-knee, as if she'd just stumbled off the set of *Downton Abbey*. Apparently, she was an office manager too, as well as phone answerer, snooty visitor ignorer, and occasional art critic.

"We're on the top floor," Daphne said, "which may not be apparent since the elevator doesn't have numbers."

"Yeah. That's weird."

"The letters make perfect sense if you know what they mean," Daphne said with a sniff.

She reminded Eden a lot of a contrary Siamese cat. She walked like one too, reeking of grace and attitude. Today she wore a crimson suit and matching lipstick that looked gorgeous against her dark skin. The outfit was probably designer. And those glossy, peep-toe heels had to cost more than Eden's whole van.

She and Daphne were nothing alike, but Eden would never let that stand in the way of making friends. You just had to get people talking. Find common ground.

"Have you worked here long?" Eden asked.

"Yes."

"Do you like it?"

Daphne rolled her eyes. "Who says *no* when you ask them that? What a question!"

Good point. She tried again. "How many people work at The Fixers?"

"That's not the right question either." Daphne shot her a long-suffering look. "I mean it's difficult to answer with any precision because we use a lot of freelancers." She waved at Eden. "By the way, it's exceedingly rare for one of them to get promoted to full-time staff." Daphne lifted her impeccable eyebrow as if to imply that was clearly an error she trusted would be corrected.

"Okay, how many full-time staff work in this building?" Eden persisted.

“We don’t really see ourselves as one building. Every floor is treated as an entirely self-contained ecosystem. We prefer it if staff over different floors don’t mix because sharing too much can lead to leaks, so it’s all contained by department.”

Overkill much? Were the nondisclosure agreements the staff all signed not sufficient?

“So, top floor is us.” Daphne waved at the open-plan floor. “We’re home to the admin department—the CEO and her staff—along with Political, Business, and Diplomacy, or POBUD. Apparently, you fall under that umbrella, although no one has yet assigned you a title. These are our networking divisions that get things done via negotiating or low-level maneuvering.” Daphne’s lips pursed. “These are clever, clever people, so watch your back.”

“Um, why would I have to watch my back from my own colleagues?” Eden asked. “That makes no sense.”

For the first time, Daphne’s mask dropped, her face transforming from aloof to outright surprise. “Oh my *God*.” She poked Eden’s arm lightly.

“Hey!”

“Just had to see if you’re real or I’m dreaming. An actual *idealist* in our building. If I had pearls, I’d be clutching them. Where *did* you spring from?”

“Wingapo?” Eden shrugged.

“Regional backwater? Of course.” Daphne shook her head as if erasing that thought like an Etch-a-Sketch. “Anyway, also on this floor we have Protection and Security, PROTSE for short.”

“Shouldn’t that be PROSE?”

“It should, but you can be the one to tell our scary head of security that he now works in PROSE.” Daphne looked amused by the idea. “I suspect O’Brian would dangle you off the rooftop.”

“He sounds nice.” Eden chuckled.

“He’s as nice as a colostomy bag, but he has some charm *if* he likes you. Him liking someone is about as commonplace as stylish Crocs. Anyway, O’Brian’s department is the physical kind of security, not computers. Cybersecurity is on the next floor down.”

“Let me guess, CYSEC for short?” She was getting the hang of this now.

“No. *Cybersecurity*.” A hint of devilment entered Daphne’s eyes. “They think their name sounds cutting edge. If true, that’s the only cool thing about their department. Trust me. I’ve met those boys.”

“I’ll have to visit.”

Daphne side-eyed her. “Good God, *why*? And did you miss the part about not mixing with other floors?”

“I love computers and comparing notes with geeks on tech. It’ll be fun. I assume it’s allowed that I go down there if I don’t share what I’m working on?”

“Cross-pollination of staff across floors is frowned upon as far as discussing cases goes, but if it’s just to talk about little nerdy things, I doubt it matters.”

“Great.”

“If you say so. Underneath Cybersecurity is Counterintelligence and Espionage. That’s two different departments, so no fancy acronyms, and they don’t play well with us or each other. Secretive little creatures, one and all.”

Eden stopped cold. “Say what?”

Daphne frowned and turned to look at her. “*Counterintelligence and Espionage*,” she repeated, drawing the words out as if speaking to a stupid child.

“Do The Fixers do *spy* work?” Eden lowered her voice, gaze darting around. “Like with actual *spies*?”

With a snort, Daphne said, “We do *whatever* is required. If that means finding out who’s stealing tech designs, then that’s what we do. We’ll set up someone on the inside to work out the culprit.”

Oh. *Defensive* espionage didn’t sound so bad. Or illegal. Eden reminded herself that the contract she’d signed for the Wingapo job had clearly stated she couldn’t do anything illegal. So, it wasn’t like The Fixers staff were running around breaking laws or toppling governments. They weren’t the CIA.

“Right,” Eden muttered, having nothing better to say.

“So, under the *spies* floor,” Daphne punched Eden’s word in amusement, “is Mass Communication, Message Branding, and Trend

Development. That's mainly publicity and managing social media for clients in a deviously clever way. MassMess for short. They think that nickname's funny. Of *course* they would; they live on Twitter." She rolled her eyes. "That's everything."

"But what about all the other floors? I mean, this building is *huge*. You've only mentioned four floors."

"I never said each department only has one floor. Cybersecurity, for instance, has six. Their servers take up most of that."

Six floors? Just for the IT department? Oh, wow, Eden had to get an eyeful of that. "So how many employees are there for all those departments? The full-time ones? In total?"

"Forty-eight."

"Is that all?" Eden gazed around the gleaming office in astonishment. "I thought you were much bigger."

"We are. We hire hundreds of staff worldwide in a limited-contract capacity. It's cleaner that way. No paper trails. Easier to cut loose later. So, as I say, it is exceptionally rare that one of the disposables..."

Eden blinked.

"Sorry, *freelancers*, is brought on board to the staff. It's...not only rare, it's quite shocking." Daphne's gaze raked her body, expression genuinely confused. "Okay, what is it *you* have that's so unique that you got promoted from disposable to staff?"

"No clue. My assignment in Wingapo was creatively done? I'm good at thinking on my feet when presented with problems?"

Daphne studied her, seeking a lie, then seemed to give up. "All right, this way. I'll show you where the kitchen is."

A moment later, they stepped into a large room with a fridge, sink, microwave, and a swanky Italian coffee machine.

"Hey, that's a nice one," Eden pointed at the shiny beast in mint condition. "Takes pods *and* has a bean grinder? Fancy!"

"Don't even *think* about it. That's reserved for CEO use only." Daphne all but pouted, a flash of envy in her eye.

"Does Michelle enforce that rule?" Eden asked in surprise.

"*Ms. Hastings*," Daphne stressed, "doesn't have to enforce anything. She's obeyed. Unquestioningly. That's it."

"You make her sound like an ogre." Eden laughed at the absurdity.

“She is our CEO and should be treated as such,” Daphne said firmly. “Now, then, the fridge is for all top-floor staff use, but label your food and hands off anyone else’s. As you can see, we take security of food seriously here.” Amusement laced her tone as she waved at the fridge.

On its face, stuck by magnets, was a handwritten notice.

If anyone eats my lunch, I will garrotte you.—O’Brian.

Garrotte was crossed out and, in different handwriting below it, was the word *dox*. That had also been crossed out and replaced with *blackmail*. Down the page it went, with different people leaving different, funnier threats.

“Your staff is pretty creative,” Eden suggested. “If a little violent.”

“They’re both,” Daphne deadpanned. She flicked her wrist over to study an elegant gold watch. “I have a meeting. You’re on your own. Email me or Tilly if you get stuck on the basics. Golden rule: Don’t touch anyone’s desk or anything on it, *ever*. And for the love of God, stop calling our CEO by her first name!” With that, Daphne spun around on her gorgeous heels and took off at a fast clip.

Eden called after her, “Honorifics are classist!”

Daphne’s derisive snort was loud and disbelieving.

Eden smiled.

* * *

At five to three, Michelle looked up to find Lawless hovering at her door, holding a coffee mug. “Are you lost?”

“No.” Lawless scampered over and placed the mug on her desk. “I made you a coffee. Thought you might want some.”

“You made it?” Michelle asked in surprise. “I usually get mine from Starbucks. Well, Tilly does.”

“Well, that seems un-environmentally friendly.” Lawless frowned. “There’s a perfectly good kitchen in this office that even has a top-of-the-line coffee machine. Apparently one that only you can use, and yet you don’t. Why is that?”

Michelle lifted her eyebrows at the temerity of the question. She was not required to explain herself to anyone. Still, unlike Eden, no one else had dared to ask. “The last CEO ordered it and insisted on it being just for him. He only ever drank this dreary light-roasted blend—the cupboards are still full of expired pods of the stuff. I hate it. Starbucks is easier.”

“Well, I did find a pod in the cupboard of a different blend that sounded interesting, which I hoped you might like.” She gestured at the cup. “Sorry, I didn’t notice how old it was.”

Michelle took a small sip. The flavor was actually good—surprisingly so given how long it had sat in the cupboard. “That is not terrible.”

“Well, if you decide you want more, I think we should discuss how pods go straight to landfills and don’t break down for seventy years.” Lawless’s big wide eyes were so earnest.

“You don’t say,” Michelle said, trying not to laugh. “How...awful.”

Lawless rolled her eyes. “I’m just saying you can get reusable pods for these machines. It’s not hard. Or, even more sustainable, use ground beans. Your fancy machine actually does both.” She bounced a little on her heels. “I could look into options for you, if you like.”

“Or, I could resume having a Starbucks and not worry about the former CEO’s god complex *or* his exclusive little coffee machine.”

“Well, if that’s what your plan is, why not let everyone use it?”

“Ah. Do *you* want to use it? Is that what this is?” Disappointment filled her. Not even a full day into her new job and Lawless was now trying to use their prior connection to wheedle favors out of her.

“That is *not* why I asked.” She actually looked offended. “But I know from talking to people that staff would love access to it. And if you don’t care, why can’t they use it? Wouldn’t it be more productive, too, to save them all having to leave the building to get a coffee?”

“Did Daphne Silver put you up to this?” Michelle regarded her. “I’m well aware she covets my machine even more than invites to Gucci launches.”

Lawless folded her arms. “Why must everything be some sneaky, underhanded scheme? A manipulation? Can’t a person just see a prob-

lem and want to fix it? Off their own initiative? Without any agenda? I was brought up to believe a happy group is a productive group.”

“You understand, don’t you, that *everything* we do here has an agenda?” Michelle said quietly, taking in the other woman’s radiating hurt. She sighed inwardly at Lawless’s sad face. “I didn’t intend to bismirch your noble reputation.”

“Apology accepted.” She instantly lost the defensiveness and grinned.

“I wasn’t aware I *had* apologized.”

“Close enough.” Lawless flapped a careless hand. “So yes or no on the office use of your coffee machine? And I have no dog in this fight. I don’t mind a good coffee, but I don’t need it the way some do. I just like clear answers.”

“Fine.” Michelle said, indifferently. “You may tell the office’s caffeine addicts the machine is now open for their use.”

“Awesome.” Lawless smiled widely, as if thrilled to prove her belief that Michelle wasn’t some petty overlord.

Seeing that smile felt good. No one around here ever seemed to smile without it meaning something sly had just occurred. Yet Lawless was utterly delighted that a bunch of strangers would get a treat that she wasn’t that invested in herself.

After another sip of coffee, Michelle asked, “So, anything else, or you just came to bend my ear about making my coffee machine un-classist?”

Lawless laughed. “I admit my egalitarian self was getting hives over it. But, yes, I have another question.”

“Uh huh,” Michelle said, tone wry. “Well?”

“You know I’m a tree-hugging greenie, right, so I say this with love.” Lawless stopped and a cute blush covered her cheeks. “I mean, I say it with great respect,” she corrected hastily. “But why are there no plants in your building?”

“Plants?” Michelle frowned. “Why do we need plants?”

“Michelle!” Lawless looked at her in genuine outrage. “You have the good taste to put an *original Degas* in your office and a nude—*entirely nude*, by the way—designer sculpture in your outer area, but you

don't understand the value of living, breathing greenery that makes the soul rejoice?"

Michelle hid her smile behind her coffee mug. "Soul rejoicing? That's not exactly on my to-do list for staff this month."

"It should be." Lawless's expression transformed into her 'mentally making a list' look.

"Ms. Lawless, I'm not going to justify to the board the expense of filling an entire building with vegetation. They'll think I've lost my mind."

"If it cost you nothing, you'd say yes?"

"How could it cost me nothing?" Michelle asked in confusion.

"You know my background. I have *so* many contacts. There's this one horticulturist I know who's amazing. He owes me big time. I first met him at a rainforest protest in Brazil."

"Of course you did," Michelle murmured.

"Besides, employees think more clearly with plants. It's all that oxygen. And it'll help Tyson most of all."

Michelle thought hard, skimming through all her departments, before conceding she had no idea who this Tyson individual was. "Who?"

"How can you not know Tyson? You see him every day in the foyer! The security guy?"

Oh. *Mr. Marshall.*

Lawless continued: "Do you understand how soul destroying it must be for Tyson to have nothing to look at but a wall of heavily tinted glass, one couch, and two elevators all day, every day? He needs plants as a matter of *urgency*. I just can't with the cruelty to the human spirit." Her eyes widened at the horror of it all.

"Cruelty? Because he doesn't have a stick with leaves to look at?" Michelle had to take a gulp of coffee to keep from laughing outright. "Poor man."

"I see you think it's hilarious, but I'm telling you, you'll change his world." Lawless brightened with enthusiasm. "Come on, let me do this. It won't cost you a cent. Productivity will soar. And the air in here won't taste like stale air-conditioner."

"It doesn't now."

“You’ve been here too long because I assure you it does.” Lawless lifted her eyebrows. “So? Plants for The Fixers?”

“Far be it for me to get in the way of employee soul rejuvenation,” Michelle drawled. “But if you bring in some exotic nonsense that makes us look in any way ridiculous, I’ll throw them all out the window, the way I did your cheap champagne.”

“You did not,” Lawless said with a chuckle, looking delighted nonetheless by Michelle’s agreement.

“Oh? How do you know?” she asked imperiously.

“The windows in your building don’t open.”

Ah. Lawless had her there. Michelle finished the coffee. “This was acceptable. Ask Tilly to bring me this daily instead of my usual Starbucks order in future.”

“No, I don’t think so.” Lawless bit her lip.

“Ex-cuse me?”

“Michelle,” she said reproachfully, “I made you that flavor because I found it in the cupboard already. But it’s not a fair-trade coffee. Not organic, either. I truly can’t endorse its ongoing consumption.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Michelle shot her a warning glare. Ordering coffee shouldn’t feel like a hostage negotiation!

“But we *can* work around that,” Lawless said hastily. “I’ll make a list of the good stuff you can choose from, okay? No need for you to drink earth-destroying evil coffee when you can just as easily have the alternative. Let me get back to you on that.”

Of all the cheek!

“Please?” She looked hopeful.

Damn her. “I’ll consider your list.” Michelle waved at the door. “Now, I have work to do. I’m sure you do too. I’m fairly certain that Hank Brewer can’t redeem his blackened soul if you’re busy debating ethically sourced coffee with your boss.”

“No problem.” Lawless leaped to her feet. “Although, I finished that assignment half an hour ago.”

“But he wanted to donate to a *dozen* charities.” Michelle eyed her. “You’ve solved this already?”

“Yes. I thought about who to donate to as much as how. I picked charities he’d never want to be linked to. Like college scholarships for

poor kids, rainforest protection groups, domestic violence shelters, STEM advancement foundations for women, that sort of thing. So the best part is, if it ever got leaked he was behind the money, no one would ever believe it. I've used a good friend who runs an NGO charity as a go-between. I gave him the money as a 'donation,' which *he'll* then spread around to all my chosen charities. Best part is, you can even use our 'donation' to his NGO as a tax write-off."

She beamed, looking so proud.

And... *Fuck.*

"Thank you. Now, I'm really very busy." Michelle pushed the empty coffee mug away. "Please return that to the kitchen when you go." She faced her monitor.

A puzzled expression crossed Lawless's face, but she collected the mug and turned to leave.

"Send Tilly in on your way out," Michelle added.

Moments later, Tilly appeared. "Ms. Hastings?"

"I believe our newest recruit has overshot the runway on her assignment. She's chosen charities which Hank Brewer would never, ever want to be associated with. And a third party was paid to ensure anonymity."

"Oh dear."

"It's impossible to leak it now. Even if we did, Brewer would deny it was him with vehemence." Michelle sighed. "We'll have to eat the cost on this one. Chalk it up to the perils of not properly briefing the employee."

Tilly's expression reeked of 'I told you so.' "From Ms. Lawless's point of view, she completed the assignment to the letter."

"Unfortunately." Michelle sighed. "Well, what's next?"

"We tell her the truth."

"You want me to explain that Hank Brewer really *did* want to be exposed as a secret good guy? That this was to rehabilitate his image?"

"Or feel free to explain to her that we do the devil's work," Tilly said, tone dry. "And that occasionally the stars align and the work performed is less bad, but generally it's about giving people with power or money more of what they covet."

Michelle pursed her lips. "Give her the Langley job next. Brief her better this time, so she can't make any more accidental errors. Factor in that she's too creative and clever for her own good...and ours." She turned back to her paperwork. "I trust you'll know precisely how much of Langley's secret to tell."

Tilly looked thoughtful. "It's curious, isn't it? How many secrets we know."

"Well, I *am* the secrets keeper, after all." Michelle offered a small smile.

"No, you're the secrets trader. I've never seen you waste a good secret when you can trade it for something better."

"True." Michelle wondered why that settled so oddly in her stomach.

Tilly gave her a curious look. "You *are* good at this. That's enough, isn't it?"

"Yes, of course. Why wouldn't it be?" The lie slid so smoothly from her lips.

Tilly gave an indulgent smile. "Exactly. That's worth remembering."

* * *

Eden looked up to find Tilly at her desk, sliding another folder across to her.

"Your next assignment." Tilly flipped open the folder.

Inside was a picture of a tanned young man with bright, happy eyes and curly hair. The bio next to his photo said his name was Jason Langley, aged nineteen, from Washington DC.

"Jason Langley is a young man with big dreams," Tilly began. "He plans to do a charity walk from coast to coast across the US to raise money to get more braille books in public libraries. His little sister is blind, so he wants to help her 'experience more adventures,' as he calls it."

"How wonderful." Eden loved this assignment already.

"There's been some tension with his father, Robert Langley, a top political lawyer in DC. Jason believed his father wasn't supportive of his dreams. To show his support and mend their relationship, Robert

made a sizeable donation to his son's charity walk GoFundMe—enough to cover costs for a support team and much more.”

“Okay,” Eden said, curious as to where this was going.

“Things were fine until Robert sat down with Jason to learn about his plans for the walk in detail and discovered they're a mess. He's very concerned his son is going to kill himself through dehydration or sunstroke or some other means because he hasn't thought it through properly.”

“Ah.” Eden had met a few dreamers like this in her time.

“Robert has sent his son various intermediaries to talk some sense into him. Experts to help him budget his expenses, work out routes, and factor in weather and conditions. His son rebuffed all efforts, dismissing the intermediaries as ‘suits with negative energy.’ Jason believes he's being undermined, not helped. Tension has returned between father and son.”

“How can I help?”

“Jason needs a reality check but won't believe the source unless it's from someone he can relate to, not a stuffy suit. If he heard about the risks from someone who understands fighting for a cause, he'd be more inclined to listen.” Tilly looked pointedly to Eden. “I'm quite sure when you pull up in your...Gloria...he won't mistake you for a bean counter.”

Eden grinned, understanding dawning. “Nope. No chance of that.”

“Now, I cannot stress this enough: Jason's father, who is our client, wants you to ram home to his son every possible negative consequence. No sugar coating. The young man must understand the risks and everything that can go wrong. It's not your job to help Jason believe he can do it. He already believes. Show him what he *isn't* thinking about. Once he knows all the worst-case scenarios, only then will his father consider him ready.”

Eden nodded. “I'll start researching immediately—from blisters to full-blown disasters.”

“Good. The main issue is Jason's such a ‘head in the clouds’ type that he thinks he can wing it with shortcuts. Scare him if you have to. Remind him his little sister won't thank him if he's dead.”

Ouch. But true. “Consider it done.”

Tilly smiled. “Excellent. You’ll find his contact details in the file.” She left.

Eden flicked through the paperwork, noting the man’s proposed route—well, routes, as he’d listed ten possibilities—and then got to work.

Chapter 2

The Pandafication Begins

TEN DAYS LATER, MICHELLE EYED the enormous jungle engulfing the building's foyer when she arrived at work. She stepped around a towering potted palm and glanced up to find trailing ferns dangling from the ceiling. Pea-sized beaded greenery fell between them—String of Pearls, if she recalled correctly. The effect was magical and eerie against the glossy, forbidding black surfaces.

Her gaze fell to the security guard, a dark-skinned man with bulging muscles beneath his navy-blue uniform.

“Quite the change of scenery, Mr. Marshall.”

“Yes, Ms. Hastings.” He shot her a worried look.

“May I assume you're okay with being relocated to deepest, darkest Peru?” she asked lightly.

“Oh, yes, ma'am. Most surely.” His relief was palpable. “I love it, ma'am.” He flashed her a grin. “Ms. Lawless and her rainforest friend came by at seven this morning with a team. They unloaded a truckload of plants. Here and upstairs.”

“Did they, now?” Michelle wondered what awaited her on the top floor. And “rainforest friend”? Trust Lawless to have friends nicknamed according to various nature biomes. Michelle strode toward the elevators.

“Please thank Ms. Lawless for me,” Marshall called after her. “I... it's...”

She turned at his stuttering.

His eyes glowed with happiness. “*Incredible.*”

“Thank her yourself. It wasn’t my doing.” She stabbed the elevator button, assuming her usual hard-ass persona. “It cost me nothing, so I don’t care.”

“Yes, ma’am. By the way, I didn’t take you for a Paddington Bear fan.”

Ah. The deepest, darkest Peru reference. The question was not only unexpected but way out of character for the man who’d only ever been monosyllabic in her presence before. Apparently, vegetation had shaken his tongue loose.

“Nor I you.” She stepped inside the elevator. “Carry on.”

* * *

Michelle’s office contained a cascade of greenery. Peace lilies had won a coup—they were on every surface. String of Pearls dotted the windowsills, showing off their dangling green tails. But the plant that captivated her most was a mystery to her. She leaned in to smell its violet flowers and rich burgundy leaves.

“That’s my favorite too,” came a familiar voice. “Well, aside from the peace lilies, which do the goddess’s work.”

Michelle straightened, annoyed to have been caught admiring the plant. Then she felt annoyed she was annoyed because it was *her* office and she could do whatever she wanted in it. “The goddess’s work,” she said sarcastically, to hide her self-consciousness. “So...you’re religious?”

“More...spiritual.” Lawless spun around. “Doesn’t your office look amazing! So that one you were smelling is an oxalis. It’s so elegant, isn’t it? Bees love them.”

“We’re *inside*, Ms. Lawless.”

“True.” Lawless chuckled. “And peace lilies do the goddess’s work because they’re great at oxygenating rooms—so much so that astronauts took them into space. My friend Francisco got us a ton, so soon we’ll be sucking in sweet, sweet air instead of ick.”

Ick was hardly scientific. And Michelle still couldn’t smell the stale air Lawless claimed permeated the office.

“So,” Lawless asked hopefully. “Do you like it?”

Michelle folded her arms. “No.” How could she admit something so vulnerable as the fact the beautiful greenery captivated her? It made her office feel less sterile for the first time in the nine years she’d inhabited it.

Doubt flickered into Lawless’s eyes, but she rallied. “Maybe they’ll grow on you.”

“Was that a plant pun?” Michelle moved to settle behind her desk.

“Me? Pun you? Nah. You’d be merciless.” Lawless grinned.

“I’m not kidding.” Michelle’s tone and look sharpened. “I did not give you permission to overrun *my* office with plants. I allowed you to put some around the various floors, but in here...” she tapped her desk, “you’ve crossed a line. This is my *private* office. You don’t get to invade it on a whim.” Anger rose at the thought of how Lawless’s actions would be perceived outside this room. Would her staff call her weak?

“I’m sorry,” Lawless said, looking remorseful. “I didn’t understand.”

“I can see that. Now, clear it out. Immediately.”

Lawless nodded, embarrassment coloring her cheeks.

Within fifteen minutes she was done. Starkness greeted Michelle once more, and her heart fell at the sight of it.

Lawless plucked the oxalis off her desk—the last plant—and turned to go.

“Wait.” Michelle inhaled. “Not that one.”

Returning it to the desk, Lawless risked a hopeful grin.

“Tell no one,” Michelle warned her and shifted the plant to a side table, out of public view.

“Lips are sealed. Well, I gotta go. There’s a meeting for The Fix, and I’ve got to prepare.”

“The what?”

“Didn’t you get my email? I CCed all Fixers staff in the building.”

She had *what*? That was a major protocol breach. *Another one!* Only managers should be sending announcements to the whole staff.

Grimacing, Michelle made a mental note to get Tilly to go through office protocol with Lawless. Clearly the protester life hadn’t prepared her for the nuances of corporate employment.

“So,” Lawless began enthusiastically, “I’ve started a new club for coffee lovers at The Fixers, called The Fix—as in getting a caffeine fix?”

“You’ve started a *coffee club*?” Michelle stared.

“Sure. After I told people they had permission to use the coffee machine, do you know what happened next? They all flung open the cupboards and began plowing through those old crappy pods. They’re all expired, aren’t fair trade, and aren’t recyclable.”

“Oh dear,” Michelle deadpanned.

“Right? So The Fix is a friendly way to introduce them to better coffees. Every meeting, club members will learn about a new flavor or two and the villages helped by buying those beans.”

Michelle grimaced. “Did it even occur to you to ask my permission before instituting our building’s first club?”

“*First club*?” Lawless’s eyes widened. “I didn’t think I needed to. I’m not holding meetings during office hours.”

“You truly haven’t worked in an office before, have you?” Exasperation filled Michelle.

“I don’t understand why it’s so different. People are people, you know? A group of office workers, a group of protesters...it’s the same.”

“It’s also clear you have no understanding of office etiquette.”

“But why should—”

“No.” Michelle sighed. “It’s not just about protocol. How do you think it makes *me* look that you just run around doing whatever you want here? An employee who has been here only five minutes? It’ll look like *I’ve* lost control. That *you’re* in charge.”

“No, it won’t, because everyone’s terrified of you.” Lawless frowned, clearly mystified. “I’m sorry, though. I didn’t mean to overstep.”

“Well, you have.” Michelle gave her a dissatisfied glare.

“Want me to cancel the club?” Lawless asked quietly. Her eyes were now everywhere except on Michelle.

Do I? “If I cancel it now, I become an ogre,” Michelle said. “Well, more of one. Which I admit *is* tempting.” She took in Lawless’s hang-dog expression. “No, don’t cancel. Besides, I doubt there’d be much interest anyway. Why would anyone join a club to sit around and talk about coffee?”

“Don’t be so sure.” Lawless suddenly grinned. “I have Fixers staff inquiring from all floors. I’m excited to meet people from the lower levels. Do you think the Espionagers might come?” She gave a tiny chuckle. “And if so, do you think they’ll turn up in trench coats?”

Michelle wondered if anyone would actually turn up at all. “They might be less interested once they see the prices of those exotic coffees you’ll be introducing them to.”

“Nah. I’m paying for all the coffees we try. And if people want to keep drinking them at work, I’ll pay for those too. I’m a big believer in putting my money where my mouth is.”

Michelle’s stomach knotted in dismay. Now her staff’s interest in Lawless’s little club became clear. They saw her as a sap to use for free coffee and then would mock her behind her back. Was she the office joke already? Someone should tell her before she threw away her money on manipulative colleagues who would abuse her guileless enthusiasm.

“Ms. Lawless, the employees here are...” *Sneaky, slippery bastards.* “...not the usual people you mix with at your social justice gatherings. They’re cynical. Half are ex-FBI, NSA, CIA, or worse. They’ll take advantage of your kindness.”

Lawless shrugged. “We’ll see. Mom always said the secret to making the world a better place is to fix one small thing and go from there. Maybe it’s a hopelessly optimistic plan, getting a bunch of cynical former agents interested in ethical coffee. But I’d like to try.”

Michelle didn’t want to imagine how it would be in a month’s time when Lawless heard the office mocking her. Anyone perceived as soft, naive, or kind was ripe for ridicule. Michelle knew that better than anyone. She opened her drawer and drew out a business card. “Here,” she said. “Take this.”

Lawless frowned at it. “You think I need a money manager?”

“I do. If you’re blowing all your Wingapo assignment’s payment on free coffees for staff, someone should talk to you about ways to at least retain some of it in an investment portfolio before it’s all gone.”

“Thanks for your concern, but money should be spent. On *people*.” She pushed the card back. “I’d much rather make my colleagues smile than shovel all my cash into investments.”

Michelle sighed and returned the card to her drawer.

“So,” Lawless said, hope returning to her eye, “is it okay for me to hold The Fix?”

“*Now* you’re asking?”

“Yes?”

“If anyone asks, tell them I threatened you with bodily harm if we have even a one percent drop in productivity,” Michelle said.

“What? Oh...you’re joking?”

Michelle wished she were. Rumors had started over less. If not about her allowing the club to go ahead or granting access to the coffee machine, then certainly for endorsing a plant invasion. She fixed Lawless with a long, cool stare. “That’s what you tell them. Understood?”

“Um...” Lawless blinked. “Okay.”

Finally. “Good.”

“Right, um, I brought you this.” Eden pushed a page across her desk. “As promised, these are all fair-trade organic blends for you to try.”

There were hundreds, including some ridiculous titles. Golden French Toast? Orange Indulgence White Tea?

“So, I’ll leave those with you,” Lawless said. “Email me your top ten and I’ll magic you up some whenever you’re in the mood.” She paused, cheeks reddening slightly. “For *coffee*. Because that came out weird.”

Michelle smirked.

“The first Fix meeting is after work tonight. You’re very welcome. Check my email for details.”

“I’ll pass.” Michelle grimaced.

Lawless’s expression faltered.

“No one wants their boss at these things,” Michelle explained.

Lawless grinned. “I do.”

More proof she didn’t have a clue who Michelle was, but the sentiment felt unexpectedly nice. “How goes the Langley case?”

“Finished. I’m just writing up a report. I’ve got Jason prepped within an inch of his life for his charity walk.”

“Prepped?” Michelle asked slowly. “You’ve explained to him everything that could go wrong?”

“Better than that.” Lawless beamed. “I reached out across my network and found someone who’d done the same trek. Dylan’s this old greenie dude who did the walk barefoot, with no support crew. He had tons of cred with Jason. Dylan took him through everything: how to prepare and how to not die, basically. So now Jason’s as close to bulletproof as any nineteen-year-old about to walk 2,339 miles can be. He’s already flown into Brunswick with his support team. That’s his starting point to take the shortest route.”

“He’s ready now?” Michelle whispered in horror.

“Definitely! He finishes in San Diego. He’s been training hard with Dylan.”

“When does he leave?” she asked weakly.

“Tomorrow.” Lawless pulled out her phone and tapped a few buttons. “I’m sending you a link to a story on him.” She put her phone away again. “Don’t worry. Dylan’ll make sure he’s safe. He’s walking part of the way with him, to ease him into it. That’s good, right?”

“Yes,” Michelle forced out.

“Great. I better get back to it. Things to do.” Lawless grinned and left the office, a woman on a mission.

* * *

“Tilly,” Michelle stabbed the intercom. “I need a minute.”

Her PA entered, and Michelle crooked a finger to get Tilly to come to her side of the desk. Michelle hit “Play” on the video she’d cued up from Lawless’s link to a Brunswick TV news report.

Jason Langley was telling a small pack of reporters how he couldn’t wait to raise money for braille books in libraries. “I want my sister to experience just as many adventures as I do!” His face glowed. “Maybe one day she’ll walk with me too, but for now, she’s only eight and loves to read about adventures. Wouldn’t it be cool if she and other blind kids had a thousand books to enjoy?”

Tilly’s eyes widened. “He’s *doing* it?”

“Apparently. Yet Robert Langley assured us that if his son genuinely understood the risks and hardship, he’d quit. He said his son was weak.” Michelle waved at the screen. “Does *that* look weak to you?”

Jason had just dropped to the ground to do a few push-ups, then sprung to his feet to do star jumps as he announced between puffs that he was in the prime of his life. Then he looked at the camera and said: “I couldn’t have done any of this without my expert guide, Dylan. He made my dream possible. I would have quit fifty times over if not for him.” He punched the air and added, “Who!”

“Oh dear,” Tilly said faintly.

“His father will be furious.” Michelle’s head started thudding. “The whole *point* of this assignment was to scare Jason, not embolden him. The boy was supposed to get intimidated and back out!”

“I know,” Tilly muttered. She inhaled. “Robert is to blame for underestimating his son’s willpower.”

“Or Lawless decided this was a worthy cause and went out of her way to make it happen.”

“If that’s the case, we should have told her the true objectives. That we had to sabotage Jason’s walk.”

“And why would Lawless want to support that?” Michelle asked. “Robert won’t want to pay us a cent, and I’m now going to have to argue that Robert didn’t know his own son and that that’s on him. I’m sure *that’ll* go down well.”

“He may refuse to pay,” Tilly said. “That will be twice now Lawless has cost us money.”

“No, twice she’s fulfilled her assignment to the letter of her briefing because she didn’t know its true purpose. And it’s happened twice because we underestimated her. We’re not harnessing *who* she is properly. Lawless thinks in a way we don’t, so we can’t predict what she’ll do next because it’s so far out of our usual realm. She could be a valuable resource because she has networks in areas different from ours. Instead of using that resource, we’re working against her, not with her.”

“The only way we can work *with her* is by telling her the whole truth,” Tilly argued.

“If we do that, we lose the resource entirely. Unacceptable.” Michelle rubbed her aching temples. “We’re smart women, Tilly. We

should not be defeated by a clever employee who happens to think a little differently. It's on *us* to predict her actions better, assume she'll always try to find the nicest, win-win solution, and oversee her accordingly. But first, it will be on *you* to brief her in such a way that gets us the results we need. Understood?"

Pursing her lips, Tilly said, "Yes, Ms. Hastings."

* * *

"You're certifiable," Daphne told Eden as they headed to the office kitchen for the first meeting of The Fix. It had just turned five. "Paying for everyone's coffees? They'll eat you alive." She made a Hannibal Lecter slurping noise. "Fresh pickings."

"Michelle said kinda the same, but nicer."

"Ms. Hastings does not do nice," Daphne said. "You're delusional as well as certifiable. But anyway, just prepare yourself to be mobbed by greedy monsters, your bones picked clean."

"Ye of little faith. And that was kind of gruesome."

In truth, Eden was nervous. Her first goal was having at least five people show up. Her next goal was that they didn't walk out in boredom when she started getting into the social conscience side of her chosen coffees. Beyond that, she just hoped there'd be enough interest for a second Fix meeting, or this would be humiliating.

"I happen to think it was realistic." Daphne sniffed. "And could you stop calling our supreme leader by her first name. It's weird."

"Why?"

"She's terrifying, so humanizing her is seriously unnerving."

"Why's she terrifying?"

"Because she's the boss villain in a building full of nasty, evil little henchmen and women."

"She's not a villain!" Eden scoffed. "That's nuts." And evil henchmen? *What the hell?*

"It's not nuts. Our CEO has a terrifying reputation. I hear she's done things no one else would dare. So, I give her a wide berth and full respect because she scares the scariest people I've ever met. You should too."

Before Eden could digest that, they arrived at the kitchen. *Oh wow*. There was a crowd of well over thirty people.

In the middle was the most enormous man, with a nose wrapped halfway across his pockmarked face, who looked like he could pull the limbs off a bear with ease.

“Oh, damn,” Daphne hissed, eyes on him. “It’s O’Brian. He’s the worst of them all. He’ll make your life hell. It’s not too late to call this off.”

“Never.” Eden grinned. “I love a challenge. And what everyone seems to forget is I’ve spent a lifetime working with idealists, anarchists, disruptors, and dreamers and getting them all on the same page. What’s a bunch of Fixers after that?”

Eden pushed her way into the middle of the gathering, meeting their curious gazes. “Hi everyone,” she began. “I’m Eden Lawless. Newest POBUD employee, founder of The Fix, and...”

“A complete rube!” O’Brian cut in. “Or a complete asshole, if there’s a catch. We’re all dyin’ t’know which it is.” His Irish accent competed with his American one, making Eden wonder which country he’d been in longer.

“Ahh, a cynic!” She laughed. “Okay, fair enough. But there is no catch.”

Suspicious gazes greeted her. Then came a round of “yeah sure,” “not likely,” “who gives away free coffee?” And on it went.

“Oh, for God’s sake!” Daphne growled. “Shut the hell up and let the woman speak! And I can assure you there’s no catch because she’s from... *Wingapo*.” Daphne said it as if Eden had just rolled in on an Amish buggy. And it was freaking hilarious.

Eden wheezed with laughter, not feeling the tiniest shred of embarrassment. Which started the room off laughing too.

“Fine, fine, so I have zero chill,” Eden admitted cheerfully. “I don’t care if I’m cool. I just want to talk about coffee. The good stuff. I’m sure most of you have traveled the world, dined in some pretty fancy restaurants, had some of the best beans there are, am I right?”

That got plenty of nods. “But you haven’t lived till you’ve tried *these* blends. I’m talking flavors that’ll blow your cosmopolitan minds. Blends from the far corners of the earth, little villages elevated from

poverty by their crops of coffee beans.” Eden reached into her bag and pulled out a packet of beans. “You’ll learn about the tiny collective of women coffee farmers who changed the fortunes of their villages in Dak Cheung in Laos. But that story’s for another meeting. Tonight, I have a real treat.”

The room had fallen silent. Eden grinned at everyone’s anticipation. Even O’Brian looked interested. The suspicion had gone from his cool eyes.

“First up, we’re all gonna be experiencing the glory of Laughing Man’s Ethiopia Sidama.” Eden ripped open the beans and poured them into the machine. “It has notes of bright citrus, bergamot, hints of lime. So, yes, it’s sweeter than normal for an Arabica coffee. But it’s also *intoxicating*. Line up your cups on the benches, everyone, and I’ll tell you all about the Sidama people while we brew some of it. Oh, and by the way, this one’s kosher, in case that’s important for you.”

Eden launched into her tale as the coffee brewed, then started filling up and passing out mugs like she was running a production line. “And that’s when my mom, absolutely *enraged* by this point, covered in mud, *still* chained to the tree, told the Ethiopian official, ‘And *that’s* why you’re single!’”

The room erupted into laughter. By now, they all had their coffees and were sipping on them. Story over, they began talking amongst themselves.

A hulking shape approached. “Lawless,” O’Brian rumbled. “I just found out you’re behind the vegetation that’s been plaguin’ our office.”

Eden looked up (and up) at him. “That’d be me. Once a tree-hugging hippie and all that.”

“Christ,” he snorted. “Just what the world needs more of. Hippies.”

“You don’t like your fiddle-leaf fig?” Eden asked. “I picked it out especially for Security. I figured you guys might need something with big leaves. Could come in handy as cover.”

She held her breath waiting to see whether he was about to fling her against a wall.

He threw back his head and laughed. “Fuck me! And I never said I didn’t like it. I only asked seein’ as the missus wants one for home.

I showed her a photo. She wants the name of it.” He looked at her intently. “So, fiddle-dee-dee what now?”

“Fiddle-leaf fig. Give me your cell number and I’ll text you its botanical name and where to get it from.”

He dug into his pocket. “Right. Here’s my card. Text me. By the way, your coffee wasn’t shite.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“But next time can you not do *notes* of *delicate* flavors? Especially anything *fruity*?” His face screwed into a grimace.

“What’s wrong with fruity?” Eden asked, lifting her eyebrows playfully. “I’m ninety-eight percent fruity myself.” She prayed he wasn’t homophobic as well as obnoxious. But for some reason, her gut told her he wasn’t entirely the bastard he so clearly liked playing. He seemed more for show. Eden really wanted to see if she was right.

“Of *course* you are,” he said, as if it were the final piece of the puzzle. “Addin’ it to the hippie, greenie, ethical-coffee-fangirl deal you got going. But no, seriously woman, can we get somethin’ *meaty* next time? Deeper? An angrier roast, like?”

Next time? That boded well, didn’t it? Her staunchest critic would be back?

He must have mistaken her silence for disapproval because the security head suddenly added politely, “If...you *wouldn’t mind?*”

Three neckless men within earshot all shot startled looks O’Brian’s way. Daphne’s eyes widened to dinner plates. A shy young man from IT, Snakepit, almost dropped his mug in surprise.

“Sure thing, O’Brian,” Eden said. “Can do. I have *just* the blend. So, same time next week?”

“Right you are,” he said. He clapped her so hard on the shoulder, a vibration ran through her. “Hell, Lawless, you might be some hippie-la-la, woke, PC rube who’s probably got rainbows on your pajamas, but you’re okay by me!”

“I’ll take that as high praise,” Eden replied with a grin.

He frowned at her. “Well, of course you oughtta. How else could you take it?”

She laughed hard. Everyone else started laughing too. Eden really hoped they were laughing *with* her.

“Right,” O’Brian announced. “Who wants to roll on outta here to the local for drinks? Lawless is buying!”

This was greeted with a roar of approval.

“Hey!” Eden protested. “I bought your coffees, now you want me to buy your booze too?”

“Yes!” The cries were good-natured, at least.

“Fine, fine. First round’s on me,” Eden said. “Then it’s on O’Brian.” She slapped him on the stomach. “Cause I’m sure he wouldn’t volunteer anyone to do anything he wouldn’t do himself.”

And this time when the room burst into laughter, there was no doubt they weren’t laughing at her.

* * *

Tilly brought in her paperwork and gave Michelle a weighted look, her signal that she expected to be told it was time for them to call it a day. Given the clock was nudging seven, it was a reasonable expectation.

“I think we’re done,” Michelle relented. “But before you go, I know you’ll be aware of what happened.”

“Happened?” Tilly’s eyebrows lifted.

“Lawless’s touchy-feely coffee group.”

Tilly smirked. “I wondered how long it’d take for you to ask.”

“Well?” Michelle made a *get-to-it* gesture.

“I stopped by to get the lay of the land.”

Of course she had. Tilly saw all. “And...”

“Mr. O’Brian was there.”

“Ah.” Michelle winced. “Tell me he behaved? Did he heckle her?”

“Funny you should say that. But first...attendance was a surprise.”

“How many?”

“Thirty-eight, not counting me.”

“Thirty-eight!” Michelle reeled in shock. “Our staff must be bored.”

“Or deprived of caffeine. I think most just wanted to try the CEO’s mythical coffee machine. Some wanted to meet the curious woman who’d talked you into making it available to all. And then there was Mr. O’Brian.”

“How many times did he mention his pet peeves of precious snowflakes, drama queens, and leftie hippies?” Michelle asked, bracing herself.

“More than once. Fewer than three times. For something different, though, it was almost affectionate.”

“Unlikely.”

“No, it was. He also wanted details from Ms. Lawless about the plant in his office.”

“Are we still talking about *the* Phelim O’Brian? Who can make grown men wet themselves with just a look?”

“The very same. Of course, he also couldn’t resist getting a jab in about her ‘woke PC brigade.’”

“How did she handle him?”

“She promised to text him the botanical name of the plant and...” Tilly waited a beat, “she teased him.”

Michelle was too startled to breathe. “Well. I assume the meeting broke up by way of him throwing the fridge?”

“Actually, the meeting broke up by way of everyone heading off to the Black Rabbit for drinks. Mr. O’Brian volunteered Ms. Lawless to buy the drinks, to much cheering.”

Michelle’s stomach tightened. *Of course. Vultures.* “They couldn’t resist taking advantage of her generosity.”

Tilly lifted a finger. “Not so fast. Ms. Lawless agreed to buy the first round, but then she volunteered Mr. O’Brian to pay for the second. She did it in a way he couldn’t say no.”

“How...is Eden Lawless even still breathing?”

“A mystery we’ll have to await another day to find out, because I returned here and they headed out.”

“So, all in all, the coffee club experiment was a success?”

“Indeed. Especially when she told us about where the coffee we were trying came from. How it was changing lives. It was a tale well told. It almost made me want to donate to someone.”

“You?” Michelle arched an eyebrow.

“Well, I said *almost.*” Tilly’s eyes danced. “She is entertaining, that one. Clever. She had the room eating out of her hand. I’m also pretty sure Snakepit has a crush.”

“Good luck, Snakepit.” He’d need it. If Lawless ever looked twice at that unworthy man-child, Michelle would eat her oxalis. She forced back the ridiculous slither of jealousy. “I suppose this club will be a regular thing?”

“Mm. I’m pretty sure it will.”

Would wonders never cease? “Lawless will be insufferable now. I warned her they wouldn’t have the best motives. Turns out The Fixers staff *can* play well at times. To think I was worried our panda would be mauled by the snakes and sharks. It turns out they should have been afraid of *her*.”

Tilly tilted her head. “Maybe we all should. Things worked efficiently before. Now...it’s a little more chaotic.” At that, she prodded an oxalis leaf on Michelle’s desk and added, “I’m going home.”

Chapter 3

Spies Like Us

THE WEEKS HAD FLOWN BY. Eden was getting the hang of her new job, and each day at five to three, she presented a new coffee to Michelle to try.

As Michelle sipped it, Eden would give her the story of where it had come from and a couple of notes about the flavors. After the first few days, Michelle had even stopped looking surprised to see her. It was just routine now. Tilly certainly seemed to appreciate not having to go fetch a Starbucks twice a day.

On the topic of Michelle's PA, there had been a curious conversation earlier today when Eden had asked her what her secret was.

"My secret?" Tilly's pale blond eyebrows gently lifted.

"How do you manage to get Michelle to call you by your first name? Why is it Mr. or Ms. for everyone else except you? Is it because of how long you've worked together?"

Tilly regarded her for the longest moment. "No."

"Then is it just because it's *you* that you get called by your preference in name? She likes you enough to do it for you?"

"I never said Tilly was my preference."

Wait, what? "I don't under—"

"My preference is my actual name—Ottilie, or Ms. Zimmermann."

Eden's mouth fell open. "Why don't you tell Michelle?"

"Ms. Hastings is the CEO and can call me Tilly if she wishes."

“But—”

“No. Let sleeping dogs lie.” She gave Eden a firm look. “And don’t you start calling me by my preferred name now, knowing Ms. Hastings will notice and ask why. Leave it be.”

Eden sagged, wishing she could help with this.

* * *

Six hours later—as was now The Fix’s habit after each meeting—most of the members had wound up back at the Black Rabbit for a meal and a few drinks.

Okay, it was more like a *lot* of drinks. Eden had planned ahead and reserved an upstairs room for their party of thirty so they could swap stories in privacy instead of talking in code as they had at previous Black Rabbit sessions.

Eden was feeling particularly merry two beers in. Or was it three? She found herself announcing to her new friends: “I love you all! I’m not just saying that because I’m a little bit drunk!”

O’Brian roared with laughter. “Lemme get you more booze then if you’re only a little drunk.” He lurched off, headed to the bar downstairs.

“Woman, you are not a little bit drunk,” Daphne declared. “You are a *lot* drunk.” Then, abruptly, she cheered. Which set off the rest of the group in equally merry cheers.

Eden smiled a bleary smile, and suddenly time sped up and O’Brian was back at her side, thrusting a beer in her hand. He grabbed her by the back of her jacket as she did a startled wobble. He plonked her onto a chair.

“Oops. Thanks. Didn’t even realize I was standing.”

“Honestly, woman, you can’t hold your drink. Typical woke, liberal-assed hippie,” O’Brian muttered. “Knew you’d be hard work.”

“Ha!” Eden clapped him on the chest. “You love me. Y’know, you remind me of this kick-ass anti-nukes protester from Budapest...”

For the next hour, Eden regaled the group with tall tales from her protester life, sparking ample laughter. She heard a few stories in return, snippets about what her new friends had seen and done. Many had lived remarkable lives all over the world.

A manicured man in a beautiful suit leaned in. Eden didn't know him. He barely spoke to the group, just sipped his wine and listened. Eden suspected he was "family."

"Tell us about Wingapo," he said, his long-lashed eyes warm and interested.

His colleague, a raven-haired, amply curved woman in an expensive skirt-suit, leaned in as well. "Yes, Eden, you *must*." Her voice was faintly Indian accented, rich and inviting, but she seemed far too practiced. Almost...too charming.

Ab! This had to be the pair from the Espionage floor.

Eden had outsourced the job of running The Fix membership and updates to Daphne after Tilly had sat her down and explained how she'd breached office email protocol in about fifteen different ways. Yesterday Daphne had told Eden in a breathless tone that two "Espionagers" had just joined The Fix. "And," the office manager concluded, sounding highly suspicious, "they never join *anything*."

"You want to know about my hometown?" Eden asked the man in confusion.

"No," the woman purred, "my colleague wants to know *how* you brought down its mayor."

"Who said I did?"

"People talk," she said, "even though the powers that be would have you believe there's no communication between floors. We know that was your assignment. And since Wingapo's mayor is now Ronald Boone, we know you were successful."

The table had fallen silent. All eyes fixed on Eden.

"Am I *allowed* to talk about it?" It was hard to keep a clear head right now.

"Not outside the office, no," the elegant man said. "We've all signed NDAs, though. No one here will tell a soul."

Eden glanced at O'Brian. As the most senior member of The Fixers in attendance, he'd know if she was allowed to share. He gave her a small grunt of affirmation, then added, "No client names."

Of course. She wouldn't have divulged that anyway.

Eden launched in. She made the story more exciting than it was as she outlined the scavenger hunt, clue by clue. Before long, everyone sat

engrossed as Eden spun her tale. She was at clue number six when the Espionage woman murmured, "It's a zodiac hunt, isn't it? That's your theme. How clever."

Eden gave her an impressed look. "Yes."

All the others groaned at not having worked it out.

Eden grinned and finished the story. That earned a smattering of delighted applause and cheers.

"Well, don't leave it there," O'Brian declared. "Who was behind the Bubba Bros PAC?"

That launched a chorus of debate.

"No one knows," Eden eventually said. "I asked a well-connected friend to find out, but he came up empty. Guess we'll never know."

"But it's obvious," the Espionage woman said. "Is it not?"

Eden blinked. "What do you mean?"

The woman glanced at everyone else who had gone silent. "You all see it, don't you?" She received blank stares. Then she looked at her colleague. "Liam?"

He nodded. "Yes. I see it." He reached for his phone. "I can probably confirm it with polling data. Meanwhile, why don't you tell them, Mia?"

Liam and Mia. Eden filed the spies' names away.

"I will." The woman looked at Eden. "In exchange for something I want to know." A small smile curled the edges of her lips. "I promise it's nothing difficult."

"Oh?" Eden wondered what on earth she knew that this clever woman didn't know already.

"Tell us: How did you get our illustrious leader to part with exclusive access to her coffee machine?" Mia asked. "Answer that and I'll reveal who's behind the PAC."

"You first," Eden grinned.

"All right. It occurred to me your arrival in town didn't go unnoticed," Mia began, her sensuous voice captivating. "Anyone who knew of your past, disrupting Wilson's ambitions, would have been aware you'd try again. Someone smart and devious would also be opportunistic. When that tacky ad came out, the mayor saw its potential immediately. She set up her own PAC to make it go viral and attack herself,

to ensure no matter what you came up with, she'd get a sympathy vote. She used Bubba Leighton's misogyny to capture the women's vote."

"No," Eden said, "that doesn't track. She sent my dad to find out if I was behind the PAC. He said she was furious."

"My dear," Mia said, "the mayor is ruthless, as evidenced by how she tried to use your own father against you. He was a distraction. She sent him in to make it seem as if she were not responsible for the PAC. The worst outcome possible would be you working it out and making it known she was calling *herself* a cunt."

Silence fell. *Well, shit.* That *did* sound like Francine. The former mayor's boldness and ambition were next-level.

"It was an insurance policy; ultimately ineffective, but it was a good try," Mia finished. "I'd have thought of that myself if I were her." She glanced at Liam. "Well?"

"Poll numbers, before and after the PAC ads, confirm Wilson got an additional swing from women voters of twenty-two percent. It would have been enough except data shows that after the final scorpion clue went up, she was sunk."

Mia smiled. "It was a clever preemptive strike. Wilson clearly hoped whatever you had planned wouldn't be as good as it was." She tilted her glass Eden's way. "And, my dear, it was indeed good."

"It was," Liam agreed. "If you ever want to leave the kiddie table that's POBUD and dive into the dark side, you know where to find us."

A couple of defamed POBUD staff howled at him over that dig.

Eden chuckled. "I don't really think that cloak and dagger stuff is for me, but thanks."

"Yet it's *already* you." Mia smiled beguilingly. "Anyway, pay up. How *did* you get Ms. Hastings to share her coffee machine with the hoi polloi?"

"Well," Eden began. "You won't like it."

"Oh?" Mia's eyes took on an interested gleam, as did everyone else's. Eden lowered her voice to a confidential whisper. "I *asked* her."

Mia frowned. "And?"

"What do you mean *and*?"

"What did you promise in return? Did you bribe her with something?" Her eyebrow twitched up in amusement. "Or...blackmail her?"

That caused roars of laughter.

“Bribery? Blackmail?” Eden snorted. “You people act like these machines cost a fortune. I simply *asked*. I caught her in a good mood. But if she’d said no, I’d have bought one for you all anyway. I’ve learned from my protester days that while an army runs on its stomach, creative types run on coffee.”

Mia frowned. “But *how* did you ask? Was there pleading?”

“Why is it so difficult to believe that I asked and she said ‘okay’?”

“Because it’s our scary overlord,” Daphne cut in. “I told you two months ago that she’s terrifying. No one just goes up to Ms. Hastings and asks for things. That’s just stupid.”

“Why, thank you,” Eden drawled. “My stupidity got you all coffee machine access, need I remind you?”

“And I, for one, worship at your stupid, unfashionable, vegan-leather-wearing feet,” Daphne said. “Between our boss and *these* evil little reprobates, I declare you The Asshole Whisperer!” She lifted her glass and smirked at her colleagues amidst good-natured cheers and boos.

That seemed as good a time as any to call it a night. “Right, this Asshole Whisperer is heading home.” Eden then turned to the Espionage pair. “Mia and Liam, it was great to meet you both.”

“Likewise,” Mia purred. “It was most *educational*. And I don’t just mean for the Guatemalan coffee blends.” The duo rose to go.

Daphne also stood, snatching up her Gucci purse. “I meant ‘assholes’ as a compliment,” she told Eden too loudly. “Honestly. People are so touchy.” She rolled her eyes.

“Daphne,” Eden informed her cheerfully, “you’re hilarious.”

The group was now breaking up, heading for the door. Eden spun around, looking for the biggest person in the room.

“O’Brian...” She headed over to him. “Please tell your wife that it’s a yes to dinner next week. In answer to her question, I’m a vegetarian—not a vegan, although Mom’s still trying to lure me to it—and I’ll bring her a fiddle-leaf fig in grateful thanks for a home-cooked dinner. It’s so lovely she offered.”

“Shall do.” He beamed. “She’s fierce excited to meet someone from work.”

“Surely she’s met others before me.”

“No, of course not. D’ya think I want her knowin’ about the kinds of folks I work with?” He chuckled. “At least with you, she’ll think I work with sweetness and light.”

“Thanks. I think?” Her brows knitted. “Am I being used for propaganda purposes by any chance?”

“Too right you are.”

“You know, on this topic, there’s something I have to know. And I’m asking you because you seem to be the only straight shooter around here.” Eden paused. “Well, aside from Daphne, but she’s more insulting than honest—actually, maybe dramatic’s a better word. I never know if she’s being factual or just amusing herself.”

“Is there a point buried somewhere in there, Lawless?”

“Right. Sure.” Eden laughed. “Why does everyone act like The Fixers is evil and filled with awful people? I’ve only seen it do good. And everyone I’ve met so far is lovely. Yet, there’s this in-joke you all do. Like the note on the fridge, promising all these dire punishments for food theft. What gives? Why’s it a running joke that everyone is violent and shitty?”

“Ah.” O’Brian tugged his ear and glanced away. “You asked the boss that?”

“No. She never gives me straight answers either. That’s why I’m asking you.”

He shifted from foot to foot. “It’s true it’s a runnin’ joke. And it’s true we carry on like we do the most evil shite.” O’Brian folded his arms. “But I’ll tell you one thing for a fact: my job is security chief, and the boss has a standin’ order for me to avoid paperwork at all costs.”

“What does that mean?”

“It’s her code for, ‘Don’t make me have to bail your ass out of jail cos you did somethin’ illegal.’”

“Really?”

“Yes. She doesn’t mind me walkin’ up to the line, bein’ all menacin’ and so on. Which I know how to do pretty well, bein’ a former boxer and all. I’m not goin’ to lie to you, Lawless, I’ve done some time on the inside too. Stupid stuff. But Ms. Hastings rescued me from a bad spot once and has my loyalty. So, if she wants me makin’ people shit-

scared but not layin' a finger on 'em, then sure. I'll not be givin' her any paperwork."

"So you're saying everyone's all bark, no bite?" Eden exhaled in relief. "Good to know. I was starting to question my sanity for a moment. My assignments are all so benign, yet everyone's acting like we're doing the worst. It didn't make sense."

"I imagine it wouldn't," O'Brian murmured. "Look, I better get home. I've already asked my missus to pick me up. Can't keep her waiting." He fumbled around his pocket and pulled out a bunch of keys. Attached to the ring was a beautiful wood-carved snow leopard.

"Oh," Eden exclaimed. "I *love* snow leopards. And that's so gorgeous."

"Thank you. Worked pretty hard on it."

"Wait, *you* did this? You're a carver? That's so beautiful."

And then the most astonishing thing happened. Phelim O'Brian blushed. It was impossible to miss against his pasty-white skin. He scratched the back of his neck and muttered, "It's nothin', still learnin'..." but Eden knew she'd found the man's secret passion.

"You're very talented, Phelim," she told him sincerely. "Don't ever quit your carving."

He smiled then, and it seemed so odd on his asymmetrical face, with all its imperfections. But in his love for his hobby and appreciation of the compliment, Eden thought she'd never seen anyone look more handsome.

A thump against her shoulder jarred her into him. "Whoa, sorry," she gasped, straightening.

They both turned to see who'd hit her. It was a tall, impeccably dressed man in an Italian suit, with attractive features, a strong jaw, and a jagged scar bisecting his cheek.

O'Brian's eyes narrowed in recognition.

The stranger offered an insincere smile and lifted his hands. "Oh, my mistake." The words belied his radiating menace.

Eden, immediately anxious, leaned a little away from him.

O'Brian glowered at the interloper. "Got some fuckin' nerve showin' your face in here. You know this is The Club's bar. You're as welcome as a fart in a submarine."

“As eloquent as ever, Chewbacca,” the man said. “Say *grrr* for me.” He made a clawing motion.

“Who *are* you?” Eden asked.

His penetrating gaze swept over her with interest but not the sexual kind. It was as though he were pulling her apart, molecule by molecule, assessing. His gaze turned dismissive.

“Me? Oh, I’m...leaving.” He smiled, his expression shuttered, and stalked to the exit.

The moment he was gone, Eden asked, “Who was that?”

“Trouble,” O’Brian grumbled. “Used to work in my department. He knows better than to be here. It was no accident. He didn’t just *happen* to be here.”

“What’s his name?”

“Baldoni.” O’Brian glared as he said it.

Baldoni. The name pinged around her brain before it finally registered. Alberto Baldoni. Michelle’s ex-husband.

Michelle’s grandmother had told her about him and how dangerous he was. Hannah’s dislike of him had been obvious. Eden understood why now. There was just something about his smug, cold face that made her want to punch it repeatedly.

O’Brian shook himself. “Best be gettin’ home. I’d say home and *to bed*, but that Death Wish coffee you poured into me is really kickin’ in. Sleep’s goin’ t’be a fantasy tonight. How’d you talk me into *three* cups of the stuff?” His eyes twinkled.

“By saying, ‘No, O’Brian, that’s insane, don’t do it, you fool.’”

“Yep, sounds about right.” He chuckled and headed to the door.

She followed.

They passed through the main bar and reached the exit with no sign of Baldoni.

“Hey, Lawless.” O’Brian turned as he opened the door. “Want a lift home? My missus could drop you off somewhere if it’s in the same direction.”

“No need.” As they stepped outside, Eden pointed at her van parked down the street. “I’m already home. One of the perks of Gloria. I live where I drive.”

O'Brian took one look at the vehicle and laughed his ass off. "WhaddidIsay? Fuckin' crazy hippie. Goddamnit!" He clapped her cheerfully on the back, almost knocking her off her feet. "Shite! You're a fuckin' classic. Ya drive a *wokemobile*."

"Yeah, yeah. No insulting my ride. Go home, Riverdance, you're drunk."

"No, don't you call me that." He glowered playfully. "If that catches on, I'll have to kill ya, and that'd piss me off because you'd miss dinner, and my wife's lookin' forward to meetin' ya."

Chuckling, Eden said, "Fine. I promise, no Irish dancing nicknames for you. Night, Phelim."

"An excellent, life-enhancing decision." He grinned as she headed off.

A gust of cold air bit through her. Eden shoved her hands into her pockets. The action made the usual crinkle noise from all the receipts she kept in there, because sorting receipts was a *some-other-day* project.

Then she felt it: a small plastic object. She pulled it out. A USB thumb drive.

From Baldoni? He *had* bumped into her. Okay, what on earth had the former Fixers employee and ex-husband of the CEO given her? Dread mixed with burning curiosity swirled inside her.

It was followed by a bigger question: *Why me?*

TO CONTINUE READING,
PLEASE PURCHASE

CHAOS AGENT

BY LEE WINTER

This excerpt is offered by Ylva Publishing.
Its primary function is the orientation of interested readers.
Ylva Publishing | www.ylva-publishing.com