

Chapter One

Ben Segar swore in frustration as he tugged at the eighteen inches of silk wrapped tightly around his neck. He was a former army ranger and trained Secret Service agent with advanced degrees from MIT and Stanford, for crying out loud. His fingers could dismantle an IED, fire a kill-shot accurately from fifty meters, and bring a woman to ecstasy in two minutes flat. Yet tonight, they couldn't seem to wrestle a damned bow tie into place.

"Hey, Boy Genius, allow me." Secret Service Agent Christine Groesch tapped him on the shoulder indicating he should turn from the mirror and face her.

The Secret Service lounge, located directly below the Oval Office on the ground floor of the White House, was a frenzy of activity. Agents filled the room changing into either tuxedos or their battle dress uniforms—or BDUs—depending on their assignment for the evening's state dinner. The event was the finale to the World Economic Summit. With heads of state from twenty different countries attending—not all of whom were on solid diplomatic terms with the US—tensions were running high among the men and women charged with protecting the president of the United States and his family.

"It's like tying your shoes," Christine explained.

Of course, the pesky fabric slid easily through her fingers forming a perfect bow on her first attempt.

"How did you get to be such an expert at bow ties?" Ben asked.

A wistful look settled into Christine's eyes before disappearing behind the professional mask she wore. "My sister has three kids under the age of ten. Which also means her patience isn't what it used to be." She smiled as she straightened Ben's tie. "It fell to me to teach them all how to tie their shoes."

Time spent with loved ones was fleeting for most agents within the president's protective detail. Many families didn't survive the strain. Ben had long ago resolved that a wife and kids were not conducive to a life in law enforcement. He knew firsthand what that type of career could do to a family and he never regretted giving up one for the other. Good friends, a steady diet of willing women to share his bed, and his role as the Mariner, the Secret Service's top cyber asset, gave him all the satisfaction in life he needed.

It appeared Christine might be having regrets of her own, however. *Not another one.* There seemed to be an outbreak of conscious coupling among his friends lately. He shook his head in bewilderment.

"You've been in your 'la-bore-atory' too long, Segar," Lou Caracas called from across the room where he was strapping his service revolver to the leg holster on his BDU. The agent was subbing as a member of the Secret Service's Counter Assault Tactical (CAT) team tonight. "Since when do they invite the geek squad to a state dinner, anyway?"

"Since the Secretary of Homeland Security issued orders for Segar to be here," a voice boomed behind them.

Agent Adam Lockett, commander of the CAT team stood in the doorway looking like the badass sharpshooter he was. A hush fell over the room with Adam's announcement. Ben would have rather his buddy keep that little bit of intel to himself. The fewer people who knew of his clandestine work for the Secretary of Homeland, the better.

“Just remember to keep your pretty clothes and your tech toys out of the way so the real muscle can do its job tonight, Inspector Gadget,” Caracas said with a snicker before picking up his helmet and heading out the door.

“That guy is a hothead,” Christine murmured as she pinned the insignia designating her as a member of the Secret Service into the lapel of her sequined pantsuit. The pin was meant to distinguish her from the actual dinner guests—assuming the sensible shoes she wore wouldn’t give her away first. “I’m glad Adam will have him dodging raindrops up on the roof all night. I hope it pours.”

“Bite your tongue,” Adam admonished their friend when he joined them. “It’s bad enough my team and I have to spend the evening as human lightning rods. This BDU is heavy as shit when it’s wet.”

Christine laughed. “I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to stay dry. Besides, given how much time you spend canoodling with a certain member of the First Family, I’m sure you already know the best places to hide out in this building.” She patted Adam on the shoulder. “See you upstairs, Ben.”

“Christine has a point,” Ben added. “But instead of hiding out, maybe you should get your fiancée to intervene on your behalf.” His buddy had done the unthinkable and fallen in love. In fact, he was set to marry the First Lady’s younger sister in a few weeks. “You could escort Josslyn to the dinner and let that smart-ass get drenched up to his balls instead.”

“No can do.” Adam shook his head. “Joss hates these kinds of events. She’s holed up in her office at the zoo working on an op-ed opposing big trophy hunting. The piece will probably have the president’s chief of staff spewing his morning coffee tomorrow.” A proud grin tugged at the corners of Adam’s mouth.

Clearly, he no longer considered his fiancée to be the She-Devil incarnate. A staunch defender of animal rights and hater of all things gun related, Dr. Josslyn Benoit should be an unlikely match for the stoic sniper. Except she wasn’t. As much as Ben hated to admit it, the passionate zoologist was, in fact, the perfect match for his friend.

And another one bites the dust. Their third roommate, Griffin Keller, had married the First Lady’s goddaughter a few months back. Once upon a time, the three men had sworn a solemn oath to never succumb to the white picket fence in the ’burbs with a wife and two point five kids. Somehow, Ben had become the last man standing.

“They’re waiting for you in the Woodshed,” Adam said, interrupting Ben’s thoughts.

Grabbing the laptop case at his feet, he followed Adam out the door. They strolled down the long hallway to the White House Situation Room, known among senior staff as the Woodshed.

“I’m guessing that whatever got you out of your T-shirt and into the James Bond getup tonight is above my pay grade,” Adam remarked quietly.

“More like above your bandwidth,” he teased. “This is going to come as a shock, but they want me for my mind.” He hefted the laptop case in his hand. “And the beautiful things it creates.”

“Try not to bore them with numbers, dude,” Adam teased.

His friendship with Adam—and Griffin—dated back to their first summer as plebes at West Point over a dozen years ago. They’d all three found their way to the Secret Service after their tours of duty in the army and even shared a townhouse on Capitol Hill. But as close as the three men were, there was an entire segment of Ben’s life that he couldn’t share with anyone else. While he assumed his friends suspected there was more to Ben’s job than managing the Secret Service’s crime lab, it was better for everyone involved that his alter ego be kept exactly where Ben did much of his work, in the dark.

At the end of the hallway, two Marine guards stood at attention on either side of the entry door to the inner sanctum of the White House security. Secret Service Director Worcester was wearing out a hole in the carpet waiting for them. He waved them into the reception area.

“Glad you had evening clothes at the ready, Agent Segar,” the director said. “Tonight is crazy enough without having to find you a monkey suit. Nothing seems to be going as it should. Including the damn weather.”

Ben shared a look with Adam, hoping the director didn’t notice how he’d taped up the cuffs of Adam’s tuxedo to accommodate his shorter arms. Since he spent his days tucked away in his lab across town and not on a protective detail, there was no need for Ben to actually own a tux. Luckily, he and Adam were both six-foot-one with a similar muscular frame. Except for their arms. Griffin and Ben teased Adam ruthlessly about his gorilla arms.

Adam slapped Ben on the back before turning to leave. “Enjoy the party, Inspector Gadget.”

Ben leveled a withering look at his friend.

Adam shrugged. “Hey, you gotta admit the name fits you.”

“Keep the Crown safe tonight, Agent Lockett,” the director ordered, referring to the White House by its Secret Service code name.

“Always job number one.” Adam saluted them before disappearing.

“The guests will be arriving shortly.” The director indicated Ben should precede him down the few steps leading to the briefing room.

Ben hesitated briefly. When he woke up that morning, the only stressful thing on his agenda was making sure his thirty-five-foot sailboat was secure ahead of the line of nasty summer storms predicted to pass through the nation’s capital this evening. But then his dark web alias had received a very troubling message. One that required a speedy intervention.

“Make way for the president,” Director Worcester murmured sharply, prodding Ben into action.

As the men and women assembled at the table rose to their feet, Ben hurried to one of the two empty chairs lining the walls directly behind his boss, the Secretary of Homeland Security. She nodded toward Ben confidently as the president seated himself at the head of the table. The others followed suit amid a chorus of, “Good evening, Mr. President.”

President Conrad Manning acknowledged them with a weary sigh. “Diplomacy is difficult enough without having to battle severe weather and a known terrorist hacker trying to crash dinner.” He unbuttoned his tuxedo jacket and leaned back in his chair. “We’re taking a huge political risk letting him through the front door. Tell me we have the intelligence to identify this guy before he gets into the State Dining Room.”

“We have no idea of this person’s actual identity, only his online alias,” the Secretary of Homeland responded. “He’s been visiting multiple terrorist outposts boasting of his apparent prowess in hacking into various entities’ computer systems and holding them for ransom. Our sources indicate he’s working with someone here in Washington to perpetrate a cyberattack against the US.”

“This is a big country,” the president said. “Can’t your sources get more specific than that?”

“Only that we believe he is the leader of a ring of cyber hackers who have been taking over banks worldwide. His success would be catastrophic to the US economy, sir.”

The Secretary of Homeland’s words settled over the room causing most of those assembled to shift uncomfortably in their seats.

President Manning pinched the bridge of his nose. “All of this based on some chatter on the dark web? What the hell is the dark web, anyway? A chat room for a bunch of terrorists and criminals? Can we believe anything that even goes on there?”

The NSA director cleared his throat. “With all due respect, sir, we’ve been monitoring this individual’s activities via multiple channels in addition to the dark web. Based on this, we concur that the intel the Secret Service provided is viable.”

Damn right it’s viable! Ben tried not to jump out of his chair at the NSA director’s snarky tone. The man hated that Ben was always able to put the pieces of the puzzle together quicker than his own staff.

“We’d be committing diplomatic suicide to exclude an entire delegation from the dinner based on our assumptions,” the Secretary of State interjected. “It’s better to let him through the door as long as we can catch him before he meets his contact.”

“And then what?” the president demanded.

“We continue our search for his contact,” the Secretary of Homeland replied matter-of-factly.

The CIA director spoke up from the end of the table. “Our sources indicate our unwanted dinner guest is a member of the prince’s entourage. All we have to go on, however, is a dimly lit photo our operative was able to shoot during one of this guy’s marketing visits.”

Everyone looked toward the screen at the end of the room where a photo popped up. It was dark, but Ben’s pulse sped up at the challenge the grainy image presented. He was confident VOYEUR, the facial recognition software he’d spent close to ten million dollars of taxpayers’ money refining, would be able to identify the suspect quickly. His fingers twitched around the handle to his laptop case housing the VOYEUR software.

“As you can see, his profile is heavily shadowed,” the CIA director continued.

“Our suspect will be enjoying dessert before any artificial intelligence can identify him from that photo,” the NSA director announced in disgust.

“Not necessarily.”

All eyes turned toward Ben. He’d been impertinent by speaking up, that much was evident by the look on the Secretary of Homeland Security’s face. But they didn’t have time to get into a turf battle with NSA. The artificial intelligence NSA used would take time to pinpoint the suspect. VOYEUR had passed all the field tests demonstrating it could work more rapidly than the technology other agencies were using. It was time to put the system to work.

“You seem confident you can pull this off, Agent . . .” The president looked at Ben as if he was trying to place him.

“Segar, sir. Special Agent Ben Segar. I’m a friend of Dr. Benoit’s.”

“Ah,” President Manning said, recognition dawning as he motioned for Ben to continue.

“I am confident, Mr. President. I’ve finessed the program so that it calculates in nanoseconds what other facial recognition programs take minutes, sometimes hours, to calculate. Unlike other artificial intelligence systems, VOYEUR can even recognize a face at any age in the spectrum. In other words, my system can identify a face from a picture taken years prior. And vice versa.”

The president arched an eyebrow at him. Ben took it as his cue to continue.

“You see, the patterns used in automated facial recognition algorithms don’t correlate to obvious anatomical features such as the eyes, nose or mouth in a one-to-one manner, although they are affected by these features. The algorithms see faces in a way that differs from how we visualize them. VOYEUR is able to use precise mathematical correlations—”

The president held up his hand. “I appreciate your enthusiasm for your work, Agent Segar, but I’m a statesman. I never made it past college calculus. I’m going to have to trust your very capable

mathematical mind on this one.” His expression grew steely as he met the eyes of each of his advisors surrounding the table. “I’m going to have to trust all of you.” The president’s gaze landed back on Ben. “See that the person of interest is identified and apprehended for questioning before he gets a finger on a single hors d’oeuvre.”



Ben set up his laptop just inside the usher’s office on the first floor. His fingers moved quickly over the keyboard as he logged into the White House’s closed-circuit television feed. He bypassed all the cameras except the two in the makeshift security shed at the bottom of the North Portico steps. With the exception of the heads of state, all the visitors to the dinner would pass through metal detectors at the security checkpoint. Thirty seconds was all he needed to hone in on each image and make a match.

“You realize if this works, you’re sitting on millions of dollars’ worth of proprietary technology?” a voice said at his shoulder.

He wasn’t surprised to see the NSA director breathing down his neck. The director had made his case about artificial intelligence getting into the wrong hands at numerous conferences the two men had attended. The race to perfect and speedup the technology not only existed among countries but between private and public-sector entities within the United States, as well.

“China would likely pay billions for it,” the director continued. “Lord knows they like to keep a close eye on their people.”

Ben could envision hundreds, if not thousands, of potential uses for VOYEUR, some commercial and others decidedly nefarious. And the director was right; someone would pay a lot for the system, if not just the mathematic equations behind it. But he hadn’t been motivated by money when he first starting dabbling with facial recognition software.

He’d been looking for someone.

He’d been looking for *her*.

Tonight, however, he was looking for a potential cyber-terrorist, he quickly reminded himself. And when he found him, they’d shut down a cell of radicals worldwide. Besides, he needed to admit she was the one puzzle he would never be able to solve anyway. She wasn’t coming back.

Ben ran his fingers over the mousepad, adjusting the recording angle of the two cameras to ensure the best view. The VOYEUR cover page popped up on the screen.

“Wow. She’s quite the looker,” the NSA director said from over Ben’s shoulder. “It always surprises me how you computer geeks end up with a stunner like her.”

The director was assuming Ben *had* ended up with her. He hadn’t. He clicked over to the closed-circuit feed again.

“She’s just the test face I used to calibrate the software,” he explained to the director. It wasn’t a lie.

“The first guests are rolling up,” Agent Groesch announced via the earpiece Ben wore.

He could hear the rain in the background as thunder rumbled loud enough to nearly drown out the marine band playing in the Cross Hall. The nasty weather wasn’t doing Ben any favors. The Uniformed Division officers likely wanted to hurry guests through in order to keep them out of the rain. Ben might not have even thirty seconds with which to work.

The initial contingent of partygoers began to pass through the security checkpoint. Women in evening gowns followed by men in black-tie filtered past the cameras. He measured the amount of time VOYEUR took to execute the facial recognition against the seven databases it searched.

Twenty-one seconds. His program was exceeding even his own wildest expectations. Too bad the knowledge did very little to calm his nerves. Unlike his other covert ops, his name was on this one. Front and center. If it failed, everyone would know who to blame.

The crowd monitoring him grew as Director Worcester joined them at the usher's desk. Ben reached up and tugged the bow tie loose to keep the sweat from pooling on his neck. He was confident in VOYEUR. But many of the guests passing through the metal detectors were already known entities, their clearance checked and rechecked multiple times before they were even invited to the White House. How long would it take to match a rogue face to the partial photograph the CIA had given him? He sat staring at the screen, his pulse pounding in his ears as he settled in to wait.

"Here comes the prince's delegation now," the NSA director said ten minutes later.

The air in the room seemed to crackle around them as lightning flashed outside the windows. Ben tried to steady his breathing. This was no different than some of the secret projects he ran on the dark web. He would prevail here, too.

A few minutes later, Ben's computer chirped loudly when the final member of the prince's delegation went through the metal detector. The screen confirmed a full facial match to the picture the CIA director had provided.

"That's our guy," Ben announced. His mouth had become so dry that the words were hard to push out. But Director Worcester was already communicating with the Uniformed Division officers manning the checkpoint.

The next few minutes were a blur as the staff for the State Department worked with Secret Service agents outside to escort the suspect to another location. The Secretary of Homeland paraded through the usher's office, drink in hand, and patted Ben on the back.

"I knew you could do it, Agent Segar," she said.

The NSA director was more sanguine. "I'll see you in my office first thing, Segar. There's no reason we all shouldn't be using your technology. Remember, it's government property. And for the time being, *you* are government property, too."

"You really are the Boy Genius." Griffin Keller slipped into the chair next to Ben and handed him a small plate full of appetizers. "I guess all those nights you spent with your fingers caressing your keyboard instead of a woman finally paid off. I hope you'll remember us little people when you leave government service and become a bazillionaire."

Ben shot his friend a questioning look. "I'm sorry, what's your name again?" he teased. "Could it be Asshole, perhaps?"

"And so it begins."

"I'm surprised they still let you in this place." Ben speared a piece of shrimp off the plate. Prior to his marriage, Griffin had transferred to a job with the Department of Treasury, citing the more predictable hours as his reason for deserting the Secret Service. Getting leg-shackled did that to a man.

"I've got a person of interest on the guest list. He caught us off guard by showing up tonight. We suspect he's aware we're building a case against him, but he entered the US anyway. He's the arrogant playboy son of a Russian billionaire. Junior is buying up a lot of local real estate," Griff explained keeping his voice down so as not to be overheard. "Then taking out some serious loans using his newly acquired residences as collateral."

"That's a good way to make dirty money clean again."

"Exactly. And now he's branching out into cybercurrency."

"It's the wave of the future," Ben said.

“So you say. The good old paper stuff still works fine for me.” Griff picked up a pastry off his plate and grinned at it foolishly. “Plus, I never pass up an excuse to stop by the Crown and corner the curator on the back stairs.”

“Didn’t Marin tell you?” Ben teased, referring to Griffin’s wife, formerly the White House executive pastry chef and now it’s historian. “She’s dumping your ass for me. She even promised to save me some of her special cream puffs for later.”

Griffin actually growled. Ben would have laughed had his laptop not chimed at the same moment. In all the excitement of earlier, he’d forgotten to power off VOYEUR. His heart raced, thinking he’d somehow identified the wrong guy.

“Speak of the devil,” Griff said as he glanced at the laptop screen. “There’s my Russian friend Alexi Ronoff now. As usual, he has a gorgeous piece of arm candy accompanying him. Although I haven’t seen this redhead before. I have to admit Alexi has great taste.”

Ben’s computer chimed again as VOYEUR zeroed in on the woman with Ronoff. Reaching for his bow tie and pulling it completely off, he struggled to get air into his lungs. *He* had seen that redhead before.

Slamming his laptop shut he dumped it into Griffin’s lap. “Don’t let this out of your sight!”

“What the hell, Bennett?”

But Ben was already sliding across the slick floor of the North Lobby. He skidded to a halt just as the couple passed through the doors at the top of the steps. The screech of his shoes on the marble floor had everyone turning to stare at him, including the very stunned pair of sea-green eyes belonging to none other than Quinn Darby. The woman he had been waiting thirteen years to confront.

And then, as if to underscore the significance of the moment, lightning crackled viciously overhead. Seconds later, the White House went dark.