

## Chapter 1

*Anti-Hero – Taylor Swift*

### Harlow

I had always known I would do something that would bring me to this exact moment sooner or later. I just didn't expect it to be the thing I regretted the least. Not a great starting point for what I was about to face.

Sighing, I dropped my head onto my folded arms on the table and tried to stop thinking about my mother's disappointed face, or the grim-looking investigator who had brought me into this damned interrogation room. Instead, I reminded myself to think of Brax, my strong, eleven-year-old brother who, thanks to what I had done, had a chance at a long life. I would do anything for him.

I thought back to two weeks ago, to the moment Brax opened his eyes and beamed at me after such a tough operation. I thought of his relief when the doctors told him that, thanks to his new heart valves, he could run around and play with his friends again. To the tears of joy from my mums, Lillian and Katy, who could hardly believe that contrary to all expectations, Brax had actually had the operation. I thought of the rare, wonderful feeling of having done the right thing. I knew that, technically, I had committed several crimes but if I hadn't...Brax probably wouldn't have stood a chance.

Didn't that count for anything?

I balled my hands into fists and breathed in and out slowly.

No, for the police that didn't change a thing. They only saw the crimes, not the reasons. In their eyes I was a criminal. A hacker who defied the law. Nothing more.

But they *should* see more. They should see *everything*. The little boy who struggled every day because we couldn't afford the right health insurance. I guess there would have been a legal way to get the money together if we'd had more time. Overtime, more shifts, online tutoring, whatever. But, in reality, my brother didn't have that time. And whatever it said about me, I would do it all again in a heartbeat. For Brax.

I felt numbness spreading through my left leg and slowly sat upright again. How long had I been sitting here now? How long could it take to get me a public defender and get this over with?

With gritted teeth, I began to massage the thigh that had fallen asleep, looking across the room to the enormous mirror opposite. I knew it was one of those one-way mirrors, which guaranteed someone was watching me at that moment, to...

...Yes, to what? To read me? Figure out if I was secretly plotting to take over the world through the internet? If things were different, as a fan of true crime I might have thought it was cool to have ended up in my own crime novel. But not like this...

I grimaced at my reflection in the mirror and tried not to pay too much attention to my faded 'Seahawks' hoody and light blue ripped jeans. Or the messy bun of light brown curls sitting askew on my head. With my scruffy appearance I probably embodied the typical cliché of a young woman who'd gone off the rails, fallen into the traps of the dark web.

At this point, Miyu would say I was letting unfounded melodramatics get the better of me, because my brilliant brain couldn't cope with the reality of my situation. I wished she was

here. Miyu would absolutely rock this situation; she'd blow the detectives away with her hard-hitting answers – like in one of those movies where the bad guys are always one step ahead of the police.

Only this wasn't a film, and my hacker friend wasn't here, with me, but in Tokyo, almost five thousand miles away. And me...I felt anything but powerful. More like exhausted, resigned, guilty...even though I had no regrets, which didn't make any sense, even in my head.

God, I was so far from rocking this situation.

Sighing, I stopped pummeling my sleeping thigh and began nervously picking at the skin around my thumbnail instead.

*You did the right thing, Harlow, that's all that matters. Just hold on to that. Just that.*

The next moment, the door opened with a loud squeak, which made me jump so violently that I promptly smacked my knee on the edge of the table. Suppressing a curse, I rubbed the throbbing spot and looked up.

Contrary to my expectations, I found myself looking not into the grim face of the cybercrimes investigator from before, but at a handsome man in an immaculate three-piece suit. I estimated he was in his mid to late forties and that his net worth was at least eight figures. Given the sparkling Rolex and the expensive Italian briefcase, maybe even nine figures.

I raised one eyebrow and placed my hands flat on the shiny table.

"Hello Harlow."

"Hi," I replied, clearing my throat because my voice sounded like I'd swallowed a sack of flour. "Are you...my public defender?"

According to the ugly wall clock, a public defender had been promised to me a good three hours ago.

The man shook his head and sat down in the seat opposite me. For some reason, the plastic chair looked like his own personal throne. "No, Harlow. I'm not your lawyer, not in this matter. My name is Harvey Abbot, I'm the director of the Lakestone Campus of Seattle." He smiled slightly, his grey eyes lighting up.

When I thought about it, the Harvey Abbot sat in front of me looked a lot like his namesake, Harvey Specter, from the TV show 'Suits'.

Either way, what was the head of a fancy, elite institution doing in my interrogation room at the police station? Maybe if it had been his account that I had...well, hacked, I could understand if he wanted to find out for himself who the perpetrator was. I just couldn't make sense of it.

I pulled my bottom lip between my tip and chewed it uncertainly. "Sorry for asking, but do we know each other from somewhere?"

He shook his head again. "Not yet, but I would be glad for that to change in the future."

Well, he had me hooked.

"I'm told you've done something quite extraordinary. You'll have to forgive me, I don't know much about programming, or 'hacking' as you call it these days, but my trusted source had assured me that you've quite a talent for it."

If he had told me that he was the long-lost King of America and was now laying his claim to the country, I couldn't have looked more confused.

"Sorry?" I said witlessly, staring at him, perplexed.

“I realise that this situation is somewhat – how shall I put it? – *unusual*, but I assure you that you have absolutely nothing to fear from me.” Harvey Abbot raised his elbows and folded his long fingers under his chin. “So, Harlow, are you good at programming?”

According to Miyu and the others in my small but mighty network, I was a *goddamn genius* – their words, not mine. Anything that had to do with computers, coding, and numbers had always been incredibly easy for me. Logic and mathematics were likely breathing for me, and the world of hacking was a second, virtual home. But I was pretty sure Harvey Abbot hadn’t come to here to hear about that. So, I did the first thing I could think of and resorted to good old sarcasm.

“Why? Need help setting up a router?”

The corners of his mouth twitched. At least he had a sense of humour. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

I frowned uncertainly. “What’s this really about, Mr Abbot?”

“You hacked into the complex network of a bank that claims to be one of the most secure in the United States. Then you stole a significant amount of money from an account, leaving behind minimal digital footprints that almost no one noticed.”

I pressed my lips together into a thin line. The key word was *almost*. I had *almost* succeeded; I had *almost* been good enough. But I had made a really stupid mistake with one of the firewalls. One that I would never usually have made – but this time...my little brother’s future was at stake, and I had lost my nerve. One missed step that had been my undoing and had ultimately brought me here. I was just lucky that I hadn’t been exposed until after Brax’s operation and that they couldn’t just take his heart valves straight back. Otherwise, everything would have been in vain. The anger, the guilty conscience, my messed-up future, the debt that this had put me in.

Harvey Abbot leaned further across the table, his grey eyes fixed on me. “What you’ve done, Harlow, may be illegal and wrong, but it is impressive, nonetheless. You have a remarkable talent for programming algorithms. One that should be nurtured.”

“What do you know about my campus?”

Not much more than I had picked up, here and there. Located in downtown Seattle, not far from the Space Needle, the Lakestone Campus was highly exclusive and exorbitantly expensive – unless you were one of the lucky few who got a scholarship. In addition to the necessary cash, you also needed an above average intelligence quotient. In order to study there, you had to go through a complicated application process that consisted of multiple tests. I didn’t know exactly what these tests looked like, but I could imagine that they were a bit more complex than solving Sudoku puzzles in the ‘extra tricky’ category. That more was required than most people could give. Many of the most respected and brilliant personalities in politics and science, from all disciplines and all of the world, graduated there, The Lakestone Campus in Seattle was, so to speak, the *crème de la crème* of the Ivy League, the best, most elite universities in the USA. A little world of its own that mere mortals couldn’t dream of accessing.

“Not very much, I’m afraid,” I answered belatedly, looking past him at the one-way mirror, still suspecting that this was some twisted game.

Harvey Abbot nodded as though I had confirmed his suspicions. “The campus is a place for exceptional talent in all disciplines, Harlow. The students there are supported

comprehensively, but primarily with their specialist subjects. In contrast to many other well-known universities, students can choose an area of expertise right from the start – in exceptional cases, even two areas. Students also take a foundational course, but it takes up less space. In short, you could say that the Lakestone Campus is a forge for talent.”

I winced as I tore a piece of skin off my thumb and shook my head. “At the risk of repeating myself, what does this have to do with me?”

Because even if I did know how to work with computers and code, I was not a high-flyer, not a genius, and therefore not qualified for a renowned private university. Not to mention, I could never afford the tuition and I had barely graduated high school.

Instead of giving me a direct answer, Harvey Abbot lifted his outrageously expensive briefcase onto the table and opened it. “You’re an intelligent young woman. What do you think is the punishment for your crime?”

The colour drained from my face in an instant. That was exactly what I had refused to let myself think about since the moment the police showed up on our doorstep.

“A very large fine – on top of the amount you stole. Maybe multiple years in prison if you can’t find a way to pay back the money. As well as the fact that your life will be ruined forever.” The smile had disappeared from his features, his voice more serious, more direct.

Nausea spread through me as the fear that I had more or less suppressed so far crashed over me like an ice-cold wave. “I didn’t do it to harm anyone! I’m not a criminal. This... This was about my little brother – about his *life*. He needed me!”

Harvey Abbot nodded slowly, then took a few pieces of paper out of his briefcase and pushed them across the table to me. “I believe you. That’s why I have this for you.”

I tensed and took a shaky breath. I tried to control my racing heart before lowering my gaze to the document in front of me. After reading the first few words, my head snapped back up. “I don’t understand.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Harlow, your actions will have consequences. You committed a crime and I think you know that. But I’d like to offer you an opportunity to take a different path from this point on and use your talent for something worthwhile.”

“Talent?”

“Yes, talent. We only accept those who have talent in addition to intelligence. If candidates lack the necessary financial resources, the campus awards scholarships. Now, you’re probably wondering what part you play in all of this, Harlow.”

He’d hit the nail on the head there. Despite, or perhaps because of, the information he’d thrown at me, and which was now spinning uncontrollably around in my head, I couldn’t figure out what was going on.

“Well, there is a third category of students who are accepted at the campus and who are, to a certain extent, my personal responsibility. During my time as head of the Campus, I have already met several young people who did not excel at school, did not get particularly good grades, perhaps did not even graduate. Young people who never would have thought about applying to a university like ours. Even though they’re talented, perhaps exceptionally talented, in their specialisms. And that makes them eligible for one of my, I must admit, slightly unconventional scholarship programmes. What I’m trying to say is that the selection committee and I see great potential in your understanding of logic. Potential that should not be wasted on criminal endeavours.”

I looked at him, his words slowly starting to make sense in my head, and couldn't stop a sharp curse slipping out of my mouth.

"Sorry," I muttered, noticing Harvey Abbot's disapproving look. I quickly reached for the thick, expensive-looking paper with the Lakestone Campus of Seattle logo embossed at the top. Almost in awe, I stroked the three letters, L, S, and C, set in a dark green, shiny font, and for the first time I truly understood what they meant.

This wasn't just a registration form, it was direct confirmation of acceptance for the fall semester, which only required my signature.

I almost swore again. Because I couldn't get my head around it. Because I couldn't believe it. Because I had the distinct feeling that I'd somehow ended up in the wrong film.

"I'm offering you a deal, even though I'm not acting as your lawyer." Abbot allowed himself a short, dry laugh before becoming serious again. "I have some good contacts – the Police Chief happens to be an old friend; I know a very capable defence attorney; and I know the prosecutor responsible for your case from my days as a student. If you agree, I will take the matter into my own hands and negotiate a community service sentence for you, which you will serve with me on campus, outside your lectures."

"Outside my lectures," I parroted unnecessarily, unable to tear my eyes away from my name, printed on the document.

"There will, of course, be a lot of those when you start as a student at Lakestone Campus next semester."

The papers slipped from my grasp back onto the table as I turned my attention back to Harvey Abbot. "Why on earth would you want me at your university? Why would you do this for me? I'm not gifted, I'm..."

*...a criminal, by the looks of things.*

He smiled and closed his briefcase. "Because I know young people like you, Harlow. And because I know talent when I see it. You are extraordinary and you have something that can open so many doors for you – legally." I lowered my eyes guiltily. "I want to give you the chance to further develop your skills, and yourself. All you need is a little help getting started and a push in the right direction."

I was silent for a few moments before finding my voice again. "To be honest, I don't know what to say. Can I...can I take some time to think about it?" My voice was quiet, barely audible as I said it. I couldn't believe I was saying it.

"Of course, but don't take too much time. My offer stands for forty-eight hours, after which the police will take over again." Harvey Abbot began getting to his feet, adjusting his three-piece suit. "I'm offering you a first-class education with accommodation on the LSC grounds and one of my private, full scholarships, on probation. The university covers all costs. In return, I expect you to distance yourself from any illegal activities, complete your community service hours and any other requirements, behave impeccably, and work in a disciplined manner. My offer, your choice, Harlow." He gave me a good-natured smile and placed a fancy business card with the Campus emblem next to the documents. "I expect your call twelve noon the day after tomorrow."

My fingers trembled as I reached for the card, staring at the information on it until my eyes blurred. This just couldn't be real. In my world, the impossible didn't just walk in the door with a big red bow around its neck. Or, in this case, wearing a flawless three-piece suit.

“Think carefully. This is a one-time only offer,” said Harvey Abbot, picking up his briefcase and heading for the door.

I raised my eyes and tightened my fingers around the business card. “Mr. Abbot?”

With his hand already on the door handle, he turned back to me.

“Thank you,” I said hoarsely, and I meant it. Even though I had to talk everything through with my mums before making any decisions...I was grateful to this strange man. Because he had given me a chance, even though he only knew the side of me that had ended up in that interrogation room at the Seattle Police Department.

Harvey Abbot smiled and bowed his head. “I look forward to hearing from you.”