

WRONG SIDE



2090 TRASHY CINDERELLA BOOK 1
A LY ANN SEXY CYBERPUNK THRILLER

Ella, a disillusioned 24-year-old who routinely cheats death in Los Angeles in 2090, neglected to be born outside of K-Top, a mega-corporation city-state barricaded by walls, a place where people can experience the joy of drone flight and running water. As an Outsider, who can only dream about living in such paradise, her capacity to memorize entire books word for word in less than an hour serves as a fun party trick. Her dealings with the gang that rules her conservative community will ultimately lead to her getting arrested by K-Top. Olivier, the dangerously seductive chief information officer, gives her the opportunity of a lifetime: turn into a spy for K-Top in exchange for her freedom. Will her incredible learning capacity help her impersonate a Ph.D. student and seduce the frustratingly righteous and wholesomely handsome Dr. Hartley, or will her desire for both her handler and her mark be her undoing?

Chapter 1

Drugs Will Get You Suspended

Maybe selling drugs wasn't such a good idea after all. Funny how spending your evening hung by your feet in a lab filled with drug dealers ogling your half-naked body will make you question certain decisions. I can't thank my Vipers friends enough for my glorious rope burns and head blood-throbbing leading to this insightful revelation. And the sweet aroma of burned plastic the gurgling barrels of Jollies has unveiled, what a fabulous way to make a gal want to spew her guts out.

Girls' moans echoed over the warehouse metal walls, which foolishly led me to open my eyes, allowing salty sweat to scorch my cornea. The Vipers had so gallantly laid my phone on

their slimy concrete floor and marveled with wide eyes at the 3D hologram of the two youthful and scarcely dressed damsels eagerly feasting on each other. All in all, I couldn't have dreamed of a better preview of hell.

The tall and emaciated Zee, with the Vipers' signature green-scale tattooed face and snake-eye contact lenses, sauntered toward me. He pulled a survival knife from beneath his ankle-length black leather coat, and I stopped breathing. Lox, the embodiment of a brute with bulging muscles on the verge of breaking through his camo wife-beater tank, followed, holding an unfamiliar gun in his hands.

Zee's cold knife grazed across my neck as he flicked my left cheek with his forked tongue. "Mayron isn't a patient man, Ella."

"Thanks for the pep talk and all, but I can sell Jollies much faster when I'm not tied up."

Zee crept in front of me, dragging the chilled blade across my sweaty skin and almost slicing my jaw. "You think you're funny?"

"Some people might even say charming." I smirked.

"Such a stunning face. Chiseled cheekbones, narrow nose, plump lips," Zee said as his blade traced a sinuous line on each feature, which made my neck hair crawl. "And your body... Perfect in every way, as if God himself designed it. It would be a shame if something happened to mess that up."

"I always suspected you had a crush on me in high school, but again, who didn't?"

He pierced my jaw, and I bit my tongue to stop myself from screaming as a drop of blood prickled its way to my left eye and painted the world red. A memory of my mom yelling at me at age 10 to go to my room and lock the door flashed in my mind. I spied under the door as the green monsters burst into the living room, metal baseball bats in hands.

“You’re late,” one of the beefy Vipers had said.

“Just a few more days.” My mom stood in front of my dad, tears streaming down her face.

The Vipers pushed my mom to the side, and the sound of the bat crushing my dad’s knee still haunts my dreams 14 years later. I felt his pain like my own, still do.

“J- Just give me one more week,” I said to Zee, panic shining through my armor. I inhaled and exhaled as slowly as I could and forced myself to smile. “How long have you known me? You know I’m good for it.”

Zee leaned in. “You know what Vipers do to liars.” His voice breathy, misting my ear.

“I’m not lying!” I shouted.

Lox aimed the gun at my forehead. “A little bird told us you sold out at your party.”

Someone ratted me out! I was done! My blood thumped in my ears, and my vision blurred. I tried to slow my breathing and failed. “But then my account was hacked. Anyhow, I know who did it and can get you the money in a few days.”

“Liar!” Lox’s word was loud enough to pierce my eardrum.

Zee snatched the gun from Lox and dug it into the back of my neck. “Say goodbye, Ella.” Zee’s tone reminded me of a kindergarten teacher announcing recess.

A tiny part of me hoped he would pull the trigger, but my parents, sister, and best friend needed me. So, I had to do what I always do: manage to survive yet another day.

“No! Wait! I’ll bring back double what I owe you tomorrow, I promise.” Pain shot through my neck, and I screamed at the top of my lungs. Heart pounding and gasping for air, I slowly opened my eyes. “What the fuck! What did you do?”

“Insurance policy,” Zee said with a Joker-worthy smile. “You bring us 10,000 Ks by midnight tomorrow or Lox here pushes this button and bang, no more Ella. Got it?”

Lox dangled a small rectangular remote control.

My memory of Asher's living room splattered with blood and brain mush from when he tried to remove his chip made the prospect of dying a tad less appealing. “Got it. Now get me down.”

Zee cut the rope with his knife and my head crashed into the concrete floor. My skull thundered with pain. My body shook uncontrollably and I couldn't feel anything. The world went dark.

I awoke confused, feeling like my scalp was trying to split in half. *Did I have another freaking seizure?* I laid on my back on the pavement in my underwear, registering only darkness. My hand flew to my chest. My silver pendant shaped with a circle in the upper third was still there. I circled my finger around my face and kissed my cross. My grandmother had bought it for my mom when our family joined the Universalist faith. I tried to sit up, but the world wobbled too much. Waking up from a seizure feels like rousing from a drunken blackout without any of the preceding fun parts. Postictal confusion is no joke. Thankfully, my memories should come back in a few minutes.

I detached my phone coiled to my forearm. “C-3PO, tablet mode, please.” My eighth of an inch thick screen straightens so freaking slowly. If only I could afford the new paper-thin Pax600 that goes from curve to flat instantly. I glanced at the time. *Thursday, March 16, 2090, 8:37 p.m.* I used my phone's flashlight to get my bearings. Seeing the rusty warehouse smacked

this evening's events back to my consciousness along with an unsettling heatwave. 10,000 Ks in a bit more than 24 hours wasn't a tall ask; it was near impossible.

A shipment drone flew towards K-Top's wall, its flashing lights and buzzing propellers goading my headache. As a kid, drones were magical exotic birds journeying to K-Top's impenetrable wall, this fairy-tale kingdom where Insiders can stroll on a moving sidewalk, fly in a drone, or picnic in a park without risking getting shot.

There comes a day in every Outsider's life when you learn that no Super Klaus is flying around distributing toys to every kid and that you'll never see the inside of the wall. Then, the drones become a constant flaunting of everything you will never have. Despite the ten years without any *C* virus outbreak in the territory surroundings K-Top, no Outsider is allowed to apply to work there, let alone visit the place. You live and die an Outsider with no running water and no decent roads while constantly being reminded of this other place, this luscious and safe oasis where—I'm pretty sure—no Insider has ever woken up half-naked, covered in dirt with an exploding chip in their neck.

As an Outsider, I may aspire to be blessed by a gunshot or an overdose in my 30s to end my shitty existence for my formidable mistake of being born on the wrong side.

Out of options and out of time, I was cornered to my ultimate last resort: telling my parents... I swallowed painfully. "C-3PO, would you please call home?"

"I'm busy deleting my history right now. Those criminals made me play pornographic scenes of human females in my hologram projector. Can you believe that?" C-3PO said from the speaker of my phone with his posh British accent and canned voice, exactly like in the 2D classics.

"We don't have time for this!"

“Those images are disturbing-”

“You do understand you won't have an owner at midnight tomorrow if you don't do what I say.”

“But who would I belong to? I searched my database, and I do not see any will.”

“Make the fucking call!”

“I don't appreciate this kind of language.”

“Call Mom!”

“Of course, Master Ella, I will make the call right away.”

That's what we need now, passive-aggressive AI.

“Sweet baby savior Ella! Where are you? We left you a dozen messages.”

I wanted to pick up so many times, but what was I supposed to say? I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I'm at the corner of Turnbull Canyon Road and Valley Boulevard. Can you come to pick me up?”

“Sure, sweetie. We have been worried sick. Why haven't you called?”

“I'll explain everything when you get here.” Or rather, I hoped I could concoct a believable story that would convince her to help me and not strangle me.

“Okay, I'll be there in 15 minutes.”

“Thanks Mom! You're the best.” Who was I kidding? My mom could always tell when I was lying.

“C-3PO, 3D-call Gia.” I rolled over, placed my phone on the ground in front of me, and managed to rise on my noodle legs.

Gia's life-size 3D hologram popped out of my phone. Her purple eye shadow and cat eyes would have looked so cute on her dark bronze face if it wasn't for the mascara streaking her

cheeks. Knowing she'd been crying because of me pinged my chest. "I kept calling you all afternoon. I thought you were dead or something." Gia's hologram arms reached past my shoulders and she pretended to shake me. Thankfully, technology wasn't there yet. "You look like you slept in a dumpster. What happened to you? Why are you in your underwear?"

I needed to play it cool not to cause Gia any more heartache. At five foot two and barely 100 pounds, distressed Gia looks and sounds like a squeaky, frazzled squirrel. Her crop top flashed a banned USA flag over a tongue sticking out. This was Gia's way of giving the middle finger to our corporate rulers in gratitude for having *liberated* us from the thrall of democracy. The 42 years of propaganda that followed may have convinced some megacorporations' employees to keep peacefully frolicking inside modern barricaded cities like nothing had changed. But we, Outsiders, were harder to convince of the benefit of abolishing every remaining public infrastructure. Say what you want about the corrupted government, but at least they were there to extinguish fires and provide drinkable water; you know, overreaching things like that.

"The Vipers grabbed me at Rafael's place."

"Did they, you know, abuse you?" Gia's eyes widened.

"No, nothing fancy like that. Just plain old dangling me by my ankles. When they found me, I was with Rafael, and we were, you know." My lips curved to the side. "Starting to have fun."

"Those bastards! I told you they're batshit crazy! Never deal drugs for the Vipers again! You know what. Never deal drugs again, period! It's way too--"

"You know I had no choice."

"You could have waited for another used exoskeleton."

“No way. I had been saving for it for years and never found any as low as 60,000 Ks.” I would have been able to afford without having to work with the Vipers if I wasn't a selfish, useless, junky.

“Why did the Vipers let you go?”

“I promised to bring back twice what I owe them.”

“But how? Do you have any leads on the guy who hacked your crypto?”

“No, but I have a plan.” A plan that involved doing the very last thing I wanted to do.

My mother's trembling chin, and color-drained, dismayed face when she spotted her filthy, disheveled daughter in lingerie will forever be imprinted in my mind. The weight of her disappointment made me wish I was still dangling from that rope. I was surprised she didn't drive away and disown me right then and there.

Against her better judgment, apparently, she stopped and got out of the car. She must have been working when I called because she was still wearing her rectangular grey frock with two large side pockets filled with small screwdrivers. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her curly blond hair was a greasy, tangled mess. “Sweetie! What happened to you? Are you okay? Don't stay outside like that. Get in the car.”

What happened to me? Nothing I didn't deserve. “I'm okay. It looks worse than it is,” I lied. The rope burns on my wrists and ankles stung like a son of a bitch.

“Thank God I didn't bring your father and sister. You can't keep leaving like this. You know Kira needs stability. Anyway, tell me what happened to you.”

How can I say this? Your daughter is not only a drug dealer, but she's an unsuccessful one who got robbed after her very first gig. “I'm in trouble, and I need 10,000 Ks.”

She laughed nervously, stopped, and stared at me, her smile slowly devolving into a scowl. "Seriously? What did you do?"

"I've been working for our shop after school since I was seven, pulling 70 hours a week since graduating, yet I've never asked to get paid."

"What did you do this time? Who did this to you? Was it Rafael?"

"No. Please, I don't want to talk about it."

"You disappear for a month, and I find you, your wrists torn, with blood on your face, almost naked, and asking for a ridiculous amount of money. I think you owe me an explanation."

So, I tell her. Every single foolish decision I made that led me here: the black market exoskeleton, me selling Jollies on my birthday, my crypto account getting hacked, and the Vipers kidnapping me and implanting a literal ticking time bomb in my neck that will explode if I don't come up with the money tomorrow. My mom remained speechless, gripping the steering wheel, knuckles white.

I couldn't take her silence anymore. "Say something... Tell me I'm stupid. Yell at me, please!"

She exhaled loudly, and a single tear broke free. "We're not telling your dad. He can't know you're in trouble because you tried to help him. You stay in the car while I bring you some clothes. Seeing you like this would kill him."

"So, can you loan me the money? I know the business isn't doing great, but I'll pay you back in a week, I promise." How? That remained to be determined.

"Our savings are gone." The words burst out of her; her face flushed. "We didn't want to worry you, but the Vipers increased their protection fee again, and most of our clients are asking for an extension on their debt. There's nothing left."

My lips locked for the rest of the drive home. I had wrecked my relationship with my mom for nothing, and I still had no idea how to find the money before midnight tomorrow. I was screwed.

My Mom parked at the warehouse, and I waited there while she brought me clothes. She dropped the hideous bubble gum maxi dress she bought me (which I would never be caught wearing) to punish me, and left, letting me do the walk of shame home alone. I cast my flashlight into the pitch black street and began my quest to our house among the scattered chunk of concrete filled with years of putrid garbage. My goal, as always, was to avoid stepping on the maggots who greedily decompose the never-ending onslaught of leftover food and humans' feces.

Crush.

“Oh, God. What the fuck is that?”

I shone light on what I had just stepped on: a tiny broken face with long dark brown hair and dark blue eyes like mine. A forsaken doll. Will my parents get to bury me if my head explodes tomorrow? Or will I have the same fate as this doll, my body ditched to rot in the filth?

My parents' shop, which doubled as our living room, was littered with random knickknacks. Half-eaten rehydrated food packets festered on the coffee table. My mom's washed-out fuchsia bathrobe sagged over the tan-colored three-seat couch. Dust sullied the tools and small appliances displayed in the wall-to-wall shelving unit. So many clients had failed to pay for their possessions, and we had no buyers for them. Our furniture may be worn down, but we at least kept that room clean and tidy for the customers. My parents evidently had given up after I left.

Dad limped toward me, putting more weight on his cane than usual. It had been humid lately, which worsened his pain. He placed his hands on my shoulders to steady himself and captured my gaze with his brown bloodshot eyes, looking exhausted. I didn't remember his golden-brown hair having so much grey in it; it was like he had aged two years in a couple of weeks. "Why didn't you call to let us know where you were?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I tried to call, but every time, I just... I just couldn't, you know."

My mom tried to wipe her tears before my dad noticed but failed.

He kept one hand on my shoulder, brought my mother's hand to his lips, and kissed it. "Sweetie," he said, looking intently into my eyes. "You have this gift from God. One day you will achieve so much with it. Whatever you did, we'll find a way to resolve it together."

To make real money around here, you either sell drugs or yourself, and my photographic memory on steroids can't do squat for either. "Don't worry, Dad, everything's fine. I'll go check on Kira."

I went to my sister's room in the attic. Kira sat cross-legged on the carpet, her curly red hair framing her freckled pout. She was playing with an old rag doll Mom made for me when I was eight years old, the same age as Kira now. "Hey, pumpkin!"

She smiled, showing her chipped tooth, but without lines around her eyes that come with true joy. "Are you staying home now?" She pushed a lock of hair behind her right ear revealing the burn mark on her cheek.

Every time I see Kira's scars, it feels like I had been punched in the gut. "I need to do something very important tonight, but when I get back, I'll bring you to Sailor Moon Cafe, and you can have all the Tiger's Blood shaved ice you want."

"You promise?" Her large green eyes were filled with hope.

"I'll do my best, I promise. Go back to bed; you should already be asleep."

"Can you read me a story?"

I love how she hissed every *S*. "Not tonight. I have this really tight deadline..." Quite literally.

Kira's face dropped.

My heart shattered. What if I didn't come back from this? What if this was my last night with her? "Just one story."

"Great! Read me, *Cinderella*."

"Are you sure? You must know it by heart at this point."

"It's okay. I like it."

I sprawled next to her, and we took turns reading one page of the story on her tablet. She stumbled on a few words; otherwise, her reading was fluid. "You're doing so great."

"The other kids don't think so. They giggle each time I make a mistake."

I extended my arm and squeezed her shoulder. "It must hurt when people laugh at you."

"I don't care." The moisture in Kira's eyes betrayed how she truly felt.

"Really? Because it hurt me when I got made fun of in school."

Her brows crumpled. "But you read impossibly fast!"

"Don't worry, they found other things to tease me with." Things you're way too young for me to tell you about.

She slid under the covers. "What happened to your hair?"

I kissed her forehead. "Nothing that a shower can't fix."

I left Kira, opened the bathroom door, and caught a glimpse of my dark-chocolate bird nest hairdo. Surprisingly, getting kidnapped and tortured wasn't the best grooming routine for

my long hair. The dirt stain on my skin from being dragged out of the warehouse perfectly complements every girl's "I've been through hell" look. At least Zee's blade didn't leave too large a mark on my jawbone...

Wait? Why didn't Zee slash my face? That wasn't out of compassion, that's for sure; my dad's broken knee a daily reminder of the Vipers' mercilessness. The Vipers probably had something else in mind to recoup the money I owe them if I failed to pay up, and I bet it calls for a pretty face. What if, when the time comes, I don't have the strength to refuse? I couldn't risk being faced with that choice. I need a way to find the money fast.

Think Ella think. I texted Gia.

Do you have a gig lined up??

We're still working on the Silverback gig

I'll be right over

I turned on the faucet connected to a large black bucket. The lukewarm rainwater washed away the dirt, but left the shame unscathed, completely immune to the feeble drizzle. After showering, I dragged myself to my bedroom, hounded by the creaking floorboards and the wind hissing through a crack in the window.

I found my favorite pants—my Logos black leggings with a slit cut out on both knees. I bought them for next to nothing at the flea market. Thank God for those dumb Insider brats who are foolish enough to discard pants made with Superflex fabric. I picked Gia's emerald Kodia

crop top with a sweetheart neckline attached by spaghetti straps that I'd been 'borrowing' for the past year. She said it was a 'real' Kodia, but I was sure it was a fake. There's no way she could have found one Outside, let alone afforded it. My mother's old black leather jacket, which she officially gifted me for my sweet sixteen, completed my outfit. I dried my hair with a greyish frayed towel and some auto-drying hair gel. The cheap stuff I have doesn't dry my hair in seconds like it claims to in the ad, but it does a pretty good job of giving my hair a beachy look.

I slipped into my favorite black combat boots and trudged outside onto the front porch. The orange light from The Locke's Repair Shop sign dripped over the thick steel bars, pretending to guard our windows, giving Outsiders the illusion of safety.

The front door flew open. "Where do you think you're going at this hour?" Mom yelled. "Come back inside!"

"I can't. I have to see Gia." I stomped away.

"Ella, please!" My dad threw the words like a lifeline.

I turned. The lines on my father's forehead told me my mother had failed in concealing her idiotic daughter's newest epic fail.

"It's not safe for you out there at night." My dad's voice wavered.

"It's not safe if my head explodes either."

Mom approached me, not making eye contact, pulling the lapels of her bathrobe close around her neck. "Ella, there's something I've been meaning to tell you for a while."

Dad walked down the porch to eavesdrop, holding the railing and his cane.

Mom leaned in. "Twenty years ago, your father and I—"

"Susan, don't!" Dad shouted.

Mom turned to Dad. "If anything happens, I want her to know the truth," Mom whispered.

“That’s enough,” he shouted as he tried to reach my mom but lost balance on the uneven ground and fell to his knees.

My heart sank.

Mom rushed to help him get up.

“I don’t need your help.” He pushed himself up with his cane. My dad was too proud to let anyone help him, even if it meant he could never get out of the house again.

My mother’s words echoed in my mind: *If anything happens, I want her to know the truth.* Was she going to tell me what truly happened to me when I was 7?

I had never bought the story about my accident on the staircase at my aunt’s place. No one hits their head and forgets the first seven years of their life, but I never asked questions because I wanted to believe that it was true. All families have secrets too painful to admit to each other. So, they pretend there’s no shadow looming above their heads to keep the family intact.

I moved away from the orange glow of our house and slipped into complete and pungent darkness with my flashlight chasing after safe spots to place my feet. The wind crawled on my damp hair and shivering body.

“It’s over! I’m done screwing every man in town to pay for your smack, you lazy fuck!” Marina, my neighbor, yelled at her drug addict husband from her house. Ceramic crashed as I imagined she threw plates or vases at him. Tomorrow, she’ll have new bruises because it’s the only way to ‘calm her down’, her sicko husband once explained to me when I confronted him about it. Everyone on our street knows, yet no one does anything. Love is the most destructive addiction, and I refused to let that venom fester inside me.

Only 100 feet before I reached the motorcycle tucked away in our workshop.

The screams faded in the background, and footsteps behind me made my heart skip a beat. I reached for my gun on my thigh and found nothing. *Damn!* I must've left it at Rafael's. Why not have a sign saying come mug the poor little girl walking alone at night without her gun? My head flipped in the direction of the footsteps.

"Hands up!" The voice was low-pitched and muffled through a transmitter with tons of reverb.

I raised my hands, my body stiff as concrete.

"Transfer your coins!" A guy pointing a gun at me said. With my crypto balance at a whopping 0 K-coins, this wasn't going to end well. Yet, I felt bad for the guy with his filthy baggy pants, knee-length gray jacket with holes on the elbows, and dirty long strands of hair clinging to his face.

Wait! I recognized that silver gas mask with its familiar intricate skull design. I relaxed a bit, tilting my head. "Herl?"

He blinded me with his outdated, chunky rectangular phone. "Ella! I didn't recognize you." He lowered his gun.

I rushed and hugged him. "So, how have you been lately?" I stepped back, my hands still on his shoulders. "When did you start using a gun?"

"It's been hard, and you haven't been here in a while."

Shit! Herl probably came to rely on my help, and I left without giving him a heads up. "Sorry, Herl. I've been hiding from the Vipers while trying to find the dude who hacked my account for the past month. I would help you today if I could, but I'm sure you are richer than I am."

"All I have is 22 Ks."

“Mine is a big fat 0. My crypto account was wiped the night of my birthday party. Years to rack up 52,528 Ks one gig at a time wasted away in one night.” I reached in my pocket. “I have one of the temple’s protein bars if you want.” Every Sunday, my parents bring some home, telling the preacher we’ll distribute them to the homeless in our neighborhood, yet often enough as a kid, when money got tight, as mortifying as it was, we had no other means of sustenance. So, I found a way to provide for my family, knowing full well it meant damning my soul.

He rolled his eyes. “Sure,” he said without conviction.

I tossed the bar to him. “I’ve tried to find the bastard who wiped my account, but I’m at a dead end.”

“How about I tell you if someone is bragging about a huge payoff?”

“You’re sure? I don’t want you-”

“Anything for my favorite neighbor.” Herl’s eyes creased, hinting at an endearing smile under his gas mask.

“How about I give you 5,000 Ks if you find any leads?”

“That’s too much. I’m happy to help for free.”

“I insist.” He needed it more than I did.

“Thanks, Ella.”

“Log out, Herl.”

“Log out.”

I opened the rolling garage door of the workshop and jumped on my parents’ rusty electric motorcycle. I’d spent more time fixing it than actually riding it, but it got me from point A to point B, at least most of the time. I drove into the narrow alley swamped by red and black Viper tags and graffiti of different creative versions of ‘FU K-Top’.

The wind bit my exposed skin as I forged ahead, my headlight unclocking the barren dirt path. The pressure in my chest eased slightly, and, for a moment, time stopped. No past, no future, only the golden full moon hanging low on the horizon, lulling me to a state of quietude. Light flashed, and the throbbing propellers broke the silence as a no longer magical drone shattered my perfect canvass.

Gia slammed her cheek on my chest and squeezed me so tight I stopped breathing. Purple neon lights flooded the concrete floors and walls and exposed metal ducts of the two-story repurposed underground warehouse. The buzzing of the 6-foot-wide AC unit fixed to the cracked wall drowned my thoughts until Gia released my airway at last.

Mac's black sleeveless Insiders Slayer tunic with a flaming skull—love that band—showed off his tribal tattoos on his neck and shredded biceps. Gia had recently shaved his copper-colored hair on each side, but had left the top part full and wild. He stepped towards me, stroking his stubble beard; he had been on edge ever since security guards shot his brother during our last heist. Needless to say, our crew had been reluctant to go back on the saddle ever since. “So, the Vipers got to you, huh? Is everything okay?”

“I'll survive.” All evidence pointed to the contrary, but I didn't want to freak them out. I flopped on the white leather couch that was basically my second bedroom. Because of my birthday party last month, one seat cushion now had a large tear. I had promised to buy them a new one.

Gia baked when she was nervous, and I could smell the homemade cookies in her toaster oven. She perched on her knees next to me and intertwined her fingers in mine. “From now on, you stay right here. How did they find you anyway? I thought you spoofed your location tracker

on your phone.” Gia had fixed her makeup and had added more eye shadow on her top and bottom eyelids, with purple at the center gradually fading to pink. Her eyeshadow matched the purple end of her long and voluminous black ringlets.

“I’ve no clue how they got to me. So, yeah, I have to pay them 10,000 Ks, so I need to score a gig ASAP.”

“Shit! That’s a lot!” Mac displayed a hologram of the Silverback Electronic warehouse with rectangular letters and a digital keypad with a fingerprint sensor next to the garage door. “I’ve installed a microchip on that keypad.”

“And I’ve 3D printed one of the guard thumbprints and replicated his phone signal, but we are still missing his password.” Gia shifted to a cross-legged position, scratched her calf, and gnawed at her bottom lips in a constant fidgety stream.

Mac ran his fingers through his hair. “Yeah, I’ve been trying to hack the door’s lock using quantum force for weeks now, and still no luck.”

I jumped in front of the hologram. “You’ve been going at it all wrong. Most chain stores like Silverback use an alphanumeric password with a minimum of 12 characters. If they use numbers, uppercase and lowercase letters, and special characters, we are talking 94 to the 12th power of possibilities. A computer like yours can decrypt 10 billion keys per second. We’re talking 1,500,000 years to go through all possible combinations.”

Mac had grabbed his titanium yo-yo from the desk and boasted his elevator trick, making the disk slowly go up the string during my nerdy rant. “You have a better idea Miss math whiz?”

“You have to work the human angle. They’re always the weakest link.”

Mac pulled back the yo-yo in his hand. “What then? Kidnap the guy working there and force him to give us his password?”

I shook my head. "How? By torturing him? I have to skip scenes in movies that show people in pain. I could never hurt someone, not even when my life depends on it."

Mac was doing the Rock the Baby trick with his yo-yo, building a tent with the string and swinging the yo-yo inside.

—

Gia's eyebrows rose. "What do you mean when your life depends on it?"

Shit! Why did I say that? Gia is worried enough already. "Just saying, I mean..."

"The fucking Vipers put one of their exploding chips in your neck, didn't they?" Gia squealed like a whistle.

Mac's yo-yo crashed on the floor.

Gia's eyes widen. "How much time did they give you?"

There was no point in denying it anymore. I checked the time on my phone. "Twenty-five hours."

Gia's chest heaved the same way it does when she's about to have a panic attack.

Mac pressed her against his chest. She appeared so tiny against his muscular body.

"Don't worry, babe. We'll sell some of our things—"

"There's no way. Even if we sold everything we own, we wouldn't reach 10,000." Gia turned to me. "What about your parents, can't they loan you the money?"

"Already tried, they've blown through their savings. Gia, can you still reach out to the guy that works at Silverback?"

"Sure, my cover is still intact." Gia scurried to the kitchen island.

The side of my mouth tugged. "Perfect! I know what to do."

Gia grabbed a Jolly from her ceramic heart shape jewelry box.

I wondered how many she had taken already. "Can you bring me your makeup kit?"

Gia raised one eyebrow. "Okay..." Her platform shoes thudded against the industrial iron staircase as she ran up to their bedroom.

Mac tossed his yo-yo on the desk, removed the string from his finger, and folded his arms. "What are you planning to do? Charm him into giving you the password? Forget about it. Some warehouses have killed employees caught selling passwords. You're hot, but no one is— THAT—hot. Besides, employees are trained to give false passwords to anyone who asks for them."

I smirked. "I'm not planning on asking him."

Gia walked down the stairs, and her face appeared less tense. Jollies usually did the trick, although she kept needing more and more. She gave me her make-up kit in a large black and white checkered pouch. I marched to the bathroom with Gia in tow. So, I unzipped the pouch, plucked Gia's black eyeliner, and brought it to my eyelid. Drawing a perfect cat eye is normally a piece of cake, but with my jittery nerves, it felt like painting during an earthquake.

Gia glanced at my shaking hands in the mirror. "Do you want one?"

"I need my mind sharp for my plan to work."

"Let me do it then."

I turned and gave her the pen. "I'll be fine once the adrenaline wears off."

Gia drew on my eyelid. "You don't have to play the tough girl with me, Ella."

Tears filled my eyes.

Gia grabbed a tissue and dabbed my face. "It's okay. You're not dying tomorrow."

"Death isn't the worst thing that can happen to me."

"What do you mean?"

“Do you really believe that the Vipers are planning on blowing my head up if I don't bring them back the money? What would they gain from that?”

Gia brushed mascara on my eyelashes. “Send a message?”

“Look at me. They barely touched me. No bruises. Only a dot on my jaw and the scrapes on my wrists and ankles. If they wanted to make an example of me, they would have beaten the shit out of me. No. They'll want me to work for them in one of their strip clubs or, worse, their escort services.”

Gia applied a warm plum lipstick. “Now you're getting paranoid. Zee wouldn't do that to you. We've known him since his face was covered with pimples and not green scales.”

You have to give it to Gia, always willing to forgo logic to reassure a friend. “I would rather die than have to sell myself.”

“Don't say shit like that. I know you; you always figure out how to come out on top of every situation. You're one lucky son of a bitch. It's like you have a guardian angel watching over you.”

I gave her a contrived smile.

Gia is the only one that gets me. The real me, not the con artist who cheats to get what she needs, but a fragile girl who has been lied to about her past before the age of 7.

I felt lost, unable to live or die, going through the motions as if my life was happening to someone else, someone whose soul had been wrung out of her body.

The only thing I knew without a doubt was that I was not a good person.

I hope you enjoyed the first chapter of Wrong Side!

Please check <https://2090series.com/> for updates on its upcoming release.