

Chapter 2 — Bright's Envelope

Mai insisted on driving.

Ace didn't argue. Ace rarely argued with anything that had an engine.

Shammy, cramped in the back seat like an overqualified weather system shoved into economy class, stared out the window as they pulled away from the warehouse. Red-blue strobes faded behind them, replaced by the city's softer glow — billboards, storefronts, the bruised neon of late-night LA pretending it wasn't tired.

For a full minute, nobody spoke.

That was how you knew it mattered.

Mai's knuckles were pale on the wheel. The phone sat face-down in the center console like a guilty witness. The VHS tape rode in her bag, and Mai could feel it there as if plastic had learned how to radiate smugness.

Ace broke the silence first, because of course she did.

"Don't open the tape."

Mai's jaw flexed. "Not planning to."

Shammy leaned forward slightly. "What if it's like... a really heartfelt home movie?"

Ace didn't even look back. "Then it can be heartfelt in storage."

Mai snorted. Shammy smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes.

"Someone filmed us," Mai said. "That changes the risk profile."

Ace watched the rearview mirror like it owed her money. "It was planted."

Shammy's fingers tapped her knee — a quiet, restless rhythm. "Planted how? Like... he knew exactly where we'd stand?"

Ace's voice was calm, and that calm had teeth. "He lit the scene. He framed the body. He placed the tape. He wanted a response. He wanted our response."

Mai's mind raced, building a diagram out of dread.

"He didn't just stage a murder," she said. "He staged a discovery."

Shammy's tone went a shade lighter, the way she did when she was trying to keep the atmosphere from cracking. "So... he's basically a director with a murder hobby."

Mai glanced at her in the mirror. "Don't make it cute."

Shammy raised both hands as if surrendering. "Not cute. Deeply... artisanal."

Ace's mouth twitched. "Serial killer but make it vintage."

Mai stared forward. "Stop."

Shammy, very softly: "Okay, that was kind of good though."

Ace didn't respond, which in Ace-language meant she had accepted the compliment and would never speak of it again.

They drove in deliberate loops — not paranoia, not theatrics. Protocol. Mai didn't go straight back to where they were staying. She took them through a long sweep of streets, changed lanes without reason, took an exit, reentered, doubled back. If someone tailed them, they'd have to commit to it.

No headlights lingered too long behind them.

But Mai didn't relax. Not even a fraction.

They reached a parking structure attached to a building that didn't look like anything. It was the kind of place you could walk past a hundred times and never remember. Concrete, anonymous signage, the hum of HVAC that sounded like a throat clearing.

Mai parked on level three. No cameras on their row. Or if there were, they were Foundation cameras. Which was the same thing as "no cameras" for anyone else.

She killed the engine. The silence returned, heavier now because it wasn't moving.

Shammy stretched like a cat that had been forced into a box. "I'm going to file a complaint with the concept of back seats."

Mai opened her door. "File it with the concept of reality. It's always less accommodating than you'd like."

Ace hopped out. Looked around. Listened. Felt the space.

Then she said, quietly, "He knew you'd get the text."

Mai froze.

Shammy stopped mid-stretch. "Wait— what?"

Ace's violet eyes flicked to Mai's phone, face-down. "He didn't text 'play it' to everyone. He texted you."

Mai swallowed. "I didn't give anyone my number."

Ace's gaze didn't move. "Which means he got it."

Shammy's voice sharpened. "Or he already had it."

Mai's stomach tightened. "No."

Ace looked at her, and it was that rare kind of look where Ace wasn't just observing — she was offering a fact, and if you didn't accept it, you would be wrong and endangered.

"Not no," Ace said. "Not yet."

Mai pulled the phone out. Turned it over. The message still sat there like a smirk.

PLAY IT.

No sender. No number.

Shammy leaned in, eyes bright with something feral. "Oh, I hate that."

Mai's voice was flat. "I know."

Ace tilted her head. "He wants to be inside your choices."

Mai exhaled slowly. "He's not."

Shammy's grin returned, thin and dangerous. "Mai, say that again, but like... louder. For the universe."

Mai shot her a look. "You want me to argue with the air now?"

"I want you to intimidate it."

Ace's mouth moved — not quite a smile, not quite anything. "Air listens to Shammy."

Shammy looked pleased. "Damn right it does."

Mai pushed past them, heading toward the stairwell. "Come on."

They moved through the building with the practiced ease of people who didn't have to pretend they belonged. The hallway smelled like disinfectant and bureaucracy. The lights were too bright. Everything was designed to make you feel watched, which meant you stopped noticing when you were actually being watched.

Mai didn't stop noticing.

They entered a small room behind two secure doors. It wasn't a lab. It wasn't an office. It was a holding room — a place for things that needed to exist briefly before being filed into whatever part of the world ate secrets.

A metal table sat in the center. A sealed cabinet in the corner. A Faraday bag rack on the wall.

And on the table:

A manila envelope.

Thick. Old-fashioned. Deliberately anachronistic — as if the Foundation had decided to cosplay as itself.

Mai didn't touch it immediately.

Ace did.

She slid it toward her with one finger, like it was just paper and not a chunk of fate.

Shammy leaned over Mai's shoulder. "Please tell me it says something stupid on it. Like 'TOP SECRET: DO NOT OPEN'."

Mai flipped it over.

In black marker, in handwriting that looked like it belonged on a cocktail napkin:

TRIAD — LA / BAT READ. DON'T FUCK AROUND. — BRIGHT

Mai stared.

Then she closed her eyes for a beat, because sometimes your brain needed a small break just to keep from snapping its own neck.

Shammy whispered, reverent. "He signed it like a threat."

Ace, almost fondly: "It is."

Mai opened the envelope.

Inside was a thin dossier, a USB drive sealed in tamper-evident plastic, and a single sheet printed with Foundation header.

At the top, stamped in a way that made her mouth go dry:

O5 DIRECTIVE: EXCEPTION

Mai read the first line.

Then the second.

Then the part she hated the most.

Shammy watched her face change and lowered her voice. "Bad news?"

Mai didn't look up. "It's an exception."

Ace's eyes narrowed. "Containment bypass."

Mai nodded once.

Shammy blinked. "We don't do that."

Mai's gaze lifted slowly. "We do now."

She laid the sheet flat on the table so they could all see it. The language was clinical, which somehow made it more violent. No flourish, no justification. Just a clean decision.

OBJECTIVE: TERMINATION RATIONALE: COPYCAT SUPPRESSION / NARRATIVE BREAK CONSTRAINTS:
NO PUBLIC EVENT / NO CAPTURE THEATER / NO MARTYRDOM

Shammy stared at it for a long moment. Then she made a sound that wasn't a laugh.

"Wow," she said softly. "That's... not subtle."

Ace's voice was a knife. "They're afraid."

Mai's lips pressed together. "They're practical."

Shammy's gaze flicked between them. "Those can be the same thing."

Mai didn't disagree. She hated that.

Ace tapped the paper once with a fingertip. "They're not hunting a person."

Mai nodded. "They're hunting a format."

Shammy leaned back, eyes narrowing like stormclouds learning to read. "So they want us to... what, kill the myth before it spreads."

Mai's voice turned colder. "Yes."

Shammy's mouth curled. "That's disgusting."

Mai met her eyes. "It's effective."

Ace said nothing.

Shammy looked at Ace. "You're okay with this?"

Ace's gaze didn't waver. "I'm okay with stopping it."

Shammy opened her mouth, closed it again. The air in the room shifted — not lightning, not power, just that subtle sense that the atmosphere had registered a spike in emotion and tensed.

Mai reached for the next page in the dossier.

Bright's notes.

They weren't written like normal Foundation reports. They were written like Bright had gotten bored halfway through and decided the report needed personality.

— TRIAD / READ THIS LIKE ADULTS —

LA has a new "hero." Not a hero. A story pretending to be a hero. He's staging kills like episodes. Lighting, framing, pacing. The city is the audience. We're the reaction.

The tape is bait. Do not play it anywhere dumb. (Read: anywhere that breathes Wi-Fi.)

Why termination? Because containment turns him into a legend. Legends multiply. And I don't feel like cleaning up a dozen discount Bats wearing Amazon tactical gear.

Mai's lips twitched, unwilling.

Shammy read over her shoulder and made a quiet snort. "Discount Bats is going to be my new insult."

Ace's expression remained neutral. "Amazon tactical gear exists."

Shammy's eyes widened. "Ace. Please don't tell me you know that."

Ace blinked. "Mai ordered my knife sheath off Amazon."

Mai didn't even look guilty. "Two-day shipping."

Shammy pressed a hand to her forehead like she was witnessing betrayal. "We're doomed."

Mai flipped the page.

Secondary: Theta-24 assigned. Yes, those idiots. No, you don't get to veto it. O5 wants deterrence. They want the myth to become unattractive. Theta-24 makes everything unattractive.

But— (Bright underlined this twice) Triad leads. Theta-24 is support. If they try to turn this into a show, you shut it down. If I try to turn this into a show, you shut it down harder.

Shammy stared at that line. "He wrote that like he expects you to hit him."

Mai's voice was dry. "He expects me to hit him."

Ace, faintly: "He likes it."

Mai gave Ace a look so sharp it could have cut the table in half. "No."

Shammy's grin flickered, delighted. "Ace, I think Mai's lying."

Mai ignored both of them and pulled the sealed USB toward her. "We have offline analysis. We scrub any network contact. We don't even think about cloud storage."

Shammy pointed at the VHS tape bag. "What about the tape?"

Mai's eyes narrowed. "We keep it sealed until we can play it in a controlled environment."

Shammy brightened. "So we are playing it."

Mai held up a finger. "We are playing it on our terms."

Shammy's smile sharpened. "You said we don't play his game."

Mai's finger didn't drop. "We don't play his game. We dissect it."

Ace leaned in slightly. "He wants you to react."

Mai looked at her. "Then we react like surgeons."

Shammy crossed her arms. "And what does a surgeon do to a tumor?"

Ace answered without hesitation. "Removes it."

Mai's gaze returned to the O5 directive. Terminator. No theater. No martyrdom.

The Foundation didn't want a court case.

It wanted a dead end.

Mai hated how clean it sounded. She hated how easy it would be to justify, and how hard it would be to carry.

She closed the dossier and slid it toward the center of the table.

"Okay," she said. "We need three things."

Shammy leaned forward, business now. "Hit me."

Mai held up one finger. "We need to identify the distribution chain. Where the artifacts go, who boosts them, what nodes matter."

Shammy nodded. "Jello territory. Great."

Mai held up a second finger. "We need to predict the next victim. Not by who deserves it. By who fits his narrative."

Ace's eyes sharpened. "I can read the rhythm."

Mai held up the third finger. "We need to control the tape."

Shammy's eyes lit. "VCR time."

Mai gave her a dead stare. "Do not say that sentence again."

Shammy, immediately: "VCR time."

Mai's stare intensified into something that could have been classified as a low-level weapon.

Ace, unhelpful: "VCR time."

Mai inhaled, held it, then exhaled like she was expelling a demon. "I'm surrounded by children."

Shammy leaned in, triumphant. "Admit it. You love us."

Mai didn't answer. But her mouth did the thing again — the tiny twitch that meant yes, and she hated that it meant yes.

Ace's gaze moved back to the envelope.

"There's more," she said.

Mai opened it again. A final page slid out, folded once.

No Foundation header.

No stamps.

Just one line printed in plain text.

HE ALREADY HAS FOOTAGE OF YOU.

Under that, in Bright's handwriting:

WELCOME TO SEASON ONE.

Shammy stared at the line, and her voice went very quiet.

"He's going to release us."

Mai's fingers tightened around the paper. "Not if we cut him first."

Ace's gaze went distant for a moment — the way it did when she was tracking an enemy through geometry instead of sight.

“He wants to make us characters,” Ace said.

Shammy’s smile returned, not playful now — predatory. “Then we ruin his script.”

Mai placed the page down, flat, deliberate.

“Okay,” she said. “We’re doing this.”

She looked between them.

“No heroics. No ego. No show.”

Shammy raised a hand like a student. “Can I have a little ego?”

Mai didn’t blink. “No.”

Shammy’s hand lowered slowly, wounded. “Cruel.”

Ace’s voice was soft. “We’ll give him silence.”

Mai nodded. “And then we’ll give him a dead end.”

She reached for her phone, turned it face-up again, and stared at the message.

PLAY IT.

Mai deleted it.

Then she powered the phone off and dropped it into a Faraday bag like she was throwing away a curse.

Shammy watched, impressed. “That was... satisfying.”

Mai zipped the bag shut. “It’s not satisfying until he’s gone.”

Ace’s eyes lifted toward the ceiling, toward the building, toward the city beyond.

“He’ll move again,” she said.

Shammy’s gaze followed, as if she could see through concrete. “Soon.”

Mai opened the cabinet and set the VHS tape inside, locked it, and spun the code.

“Tomorrow,” she said. “We build the map.”

Shammy cracked her knuckles like she was about to start a game. “Tomorrow we hunt.”

Ace didn’t move, but her presence sharpened anyway.

“Yes,” Ace said. “Tomorrow.”

Outside, Los Angeles hummed on, blissfully unaware it was about to become a set.

And somewhere in the city — in a car, in a room, in a place that smelled like dust and old electronics — someone watched a clip of three figures leaving a warehouse under police lights.

Someone rewind it.

Paused it.

Zoomed in.

And typed, carefully, like a director noting blocking.

THEY CAME. THEY SAW. THEY DIDN'T PLAY.—

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