

Revolution

JENNA BLACK



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK
new york

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CHAPTER ONE

“We are so screwed,” Bishop said as he rummaged through the cupboards in his apartment, tossing everything he could find onto the kitchen counter. The other members of their fledgling new resistance had all joined him in the kitchen, although Nate’s eyes were glazed over in a manner that suggested he wasn’t listening, maybe wasn’t even seeing anything around him.

Nadia wished there was something she could do for him. But of course, there wasn’t, not when he’d seen his father shot in the head only a few hours ago.

“Not the most helpful commentary,” Dante said, but the bleak look on his face showed he wasn’t any more optimistic.

Earlier this morning, Nate and Nadia had stormed the Paxco Headquarters Building, demanding to speak to the Chairman. Their plan had been to blackmail the Chairman into stepping down in favor of Nate, but nothing had turned out how they’d planned. Now the Chairman was dead, shot in the head by Dorothy, who claimed to be his daughter and would succeed him to the Chairmanship because she’d framed Nate and Nadia for the crime. They’d survived the encounter and made it back to Bishop’s Basement apartment, but that was about the best that could be said for their grand plan.

“I’m just telling it like it is,” Bishop said. “I told you I couldn’t hide so many people in the Basement for long. And that was *before* I found out some psychotic sentient machine wants to kill you so she can take over the world.”

Nadia wasn’t entirely sure *what* Thea—and Dorothy, the empty-minded Replica she’d created so she could impersonate a human being—really wanted. To continue her gruesome research into the mind/body connection, sure. There was no question Thea was even now procuring prisoners and Basement-dwellers to vivisect for the “good of mankind.” But there was more to it than that, and Nadia doubted Thea’s ultimate goal had anything to do with the good of mankind.

Bishop closed the last cupboard and made a sweeping gesture at the pile of food lying on the counter. “Except for a year-old frozen dinner in the freezer, that’s all I’ve got.”

None of them had eaten since a meager “breakfast” of canned beef stew the day before, but hungry as she was, Nadia couldn’t say the offerings held much appeal. She picked up a dented, rusty can of some artificial ham product whose main ingredient was soy. It was well past its expiration date. Not that she was in any position to turn her nose up at whatever Bishop had to offer.

“That’s not very much for five people,” Agnes ventured tentatively. There were a couple of bags of noodles, crushed almost into powder, as well as the “ham” and a can of green beans, but that was it.

Bishop nodded in agreement. “Even if security doesn’t hunt us down, we’ll end up starving to death.”

Agnes frowned at him. “But the soup kitchens—”

“—require ID,” Bishop interrupted. “If you don’t have ID, then you have to buy food from your local ‘grocer.’”

Nadia could hear the quotation marks around the term. “What do you mean when you say ‘grocer?’” she asked.

“Assholes who sell crappy leftovers for profit. They force people in their territory to hand over some portion of their rations, then sell the rations to others who don’t have ID. My landlord is one of them.”

Technically, no one in the Basement was supposed to have a landlord—the housing was all state-funded—but Nadia had learned through Bishop that even in this relatively tame neighborhood, Basement predators abounded. No apartment came without a price tag, and if you couldn’t pay in money, goods, or services, you had no choice but to sleep in the street.

“I can pick up food at the kitchens,” Bishop continued. “I never gave up my ID when I went to work for Nate. But rations for one aren’t going to keep five of us fed.”

Nate roused himself from his stupor and blinked a few times, as if coming back from a long way away. “How many dollars do you have left?” he asked Bishop.

Bishop had stolen Nate’s stash of dollars—the currency of choice in the Basement—when he’d been forced to flee for his life, and based on the shabby, unfurnished state of his apartment, it didn’t look like he’d spent a whole lot of them. Then again, he’d had to go into deep hiding and had paid the Red Death, one of the gangs that ruled the heart of Debasement, to take him in. Nadia had no idea how much money that had cost, but she bet it was a lot.

“If we eat like we’re all on a crash diet, I might have

enough dollars to keep us fed for a week. After that, we'd have to decide whether to spend the rest on food or shelter, 'cause we won't have enough for both."

Nadia chewed her lip anxiously. The odds of them all surviving that week didn't seem too good. Thea, in the person of her puppet Replica, Dorothy, had let Nate and Nadia go, but that had been a strategic decision and was meant to be temporary. Thea wanted them dead. She just didn't want it to happen on the record.

Of course, finding them in the Basement might be a little harder than Thea expected. It was a community of cutthroats, thieves, and drug lords, but it *was* a community, of sorts. The kind of community that didn't take well to Paxco security officers and could be stunningly uncooperative even in the face of bribes. And the lawlessness of the area would work to their advantage as well—there were no security cameras anywhere, and they could buy whatever they needed through back channels without ever having to go near places where they might be recognized by security officers or Employees. If they had money, that is.

"So we have one week to come up with a plan to kill Thea and set the record straight so I can be Chairman," Nate said. He was looking more alert by the minute as his fury kindled. He'd had mixed feelings about his father, at best. The man *had* killed the original Nate Hayes, after all, and had not only approved Thea's experiments but had enabled them. He'd been a cruel and ruthless leader, abusing his power whenever he felt like it. But he was still Nate's father, and his death had been a hard blow.

"That about sums it up," Bishop agreed as he pulled a dented, misshapen pot out from a cupboard under the sink,

filled it with water, and put it on the stove's smallest burner, one that was about one-fourth the size of the bottom of the pot.

Dante frowned at him. "Why don't you put it on a bigger burner?"

"This is the only one that works."

Nadia grimaced. She'd known the accommodations in the Basement weren't great, but she'd never realized just what kind of conditions Basement-dwellers lived in. The apartment was a hovel, the appliances ancient and barely functional, and the food had no doubt been on its way to the dump before it was commandeered for the soup kitchens.

Agnes cleared her throat, then spoke up in her tentative, little-girl voice. She was older than Nadia—she'd be turning eighteen in just a few days—but that voice of hers made her sound even younger and more vulnerable than she was.

"Realistically, we know we're not going to beat Thea in a week."

Nate glared at her so fiercely she recoiled. "The hell we won't!" he snapped.

Nadia was prepared to cut Nate a lot of slack after what had happened, but she wouldn't stand for him acting like a bully. "Cut it out, Nate! Having a temper tantrum isn't going to help anything."

Nate turned toward her, and for a moment she thought he was going to bite her head off. He'd always had a temper and had rarely tried to control it. But he'd matured a lot since the day he'd awakened in the Replication tank, and he reined himself back in.

"Sorry," he said, though his eyes still flashed. "But I don't

think moaning about how doomed we are is going to help anything.”

“I wasn’t moaning,” Agnes said, giving Nate a glare of her own. “I was being realistic.”

“Which is spectacularly unhelpful right now,” Nate retorted.

“How would you know how helpful it is when you won’t let me finish?”

Nate looked taken aback by the sensible question, and Nadia had to fight off a smile. She wanted to flash Agnes a thumbs-up, but she didn’t want to risk setting Nate off again. His self-control was shaky at best.

Bishop didn’t bother to fight his smile. The pot of water had reached an anemic boil, and he started dumping the noodles into it. The water immediately turned a frothy, starchy white, the noodles so crushed Nadia suspected the end result would be more like a paste than a soup. When he reached for the can of “ham,” Nadia looked away, thinking it might be easier to choke down the food if she didn’t examine it too closely.

“As I was saying,” Agnes said, when Nate kept his mouth shut, “it’s not likely we can solve all our problems in a week, and as Bishop was saying, we can’t stay hidden here indefinitely. Which means we have to go somewhere else.”

“There is nowhere else,” Nate said.

“There’s Synchrony,” Agnes countered.

Synchrony was loosely allied with Paxco, although Nadia had no idea what the current state of that alliance was. Up until last night, it had looked like they were on course for a very strong bond indeed, with Agnes due to sign a marriage agreement with Nate as soon as she turned eigh-

teen. But now that Nate had supposedly assassinated his father and kidnapped Agnes, who knew what the relationship between the two states was? Chairman Belinski had to be frantic to find his daughter, but Thea was no doubt determined to make sure that didn't happen. Thea had to know that Nate and Nadia would have told their companions the whole truth, and that meant she would want them all dead as soon as possible.

"Synchrony?" Nate asked, as though he'd never heard of the place before.

"We'll be out of Thea's reach there," Agnes said. "My father can provide twenty-four-hour protection, and we wouldn't have to worry about starving to death or getting murdered by a mob of Basement-dwellers."

"And how exactly do you propose we get there?" Nate asked. "We can't just hop on a plane, even if we could afford it. We could steal a car to get us to the border, but how would we get across? I don't think the nice men with the machine guns will let us through. For all we know, they have orders to shoot us on sight."

Agnes stared at him with wide eyes and swallowed hard. "My father can have people waiting for us."

"On the Synchrony side of the border, sure," Nate agreed. "And that'll do us a lot of good when the Paxco border patrol arrests or shoots us on *this* side of the border."

Agnes raised her chin. "You think my father would be okay with Paxco forces arresting or shooting me? Synchrony may be small, but I don't think even Paxco wants to go to war against our military."

"That would be true if someone other than Thea were calling the shots for Paxco," Nadia said. "But it's hard to know

just what Thea will do. Loss of human life doesn't bother her, and she might think disposing of all of us is worth the minor inconvenience of a war."

"But even if she's using Dorothy to usurp the Chairmanship," Nate argued, "the Chairman isn't all-powerful. She would need the board of directors' approval before she declared war, and I can't see—"

"But *she* wouldn't be the one doing it," Nadia said. "She doesn't need the board's permission to order the border patrol to shoot us on sight, and it's Chairman Belinski who would actually declare war."

"So we have my father send a delegation over the border into Paxco," Agnes said. "They meet us and escort us over the border. The border patrol wouldn't be able to shoot us without shooting the delegation, and that's something they won't be willing to do."

Nadia wasn't so sure about that. Thea might guess they'd head for Synchrony, and she'd no doubt have contingencies in place. All it would take was one person firing a gun, and all hell would break loose. It seemed likely the five of them would somehow get killed in the cross fire if something like that were to happen.

"What's more dangerous?" she mused out loud. "Trying to survive in the Basement with limited money, or trying to cross the border when Thea is almost certainly expecting us to try it?"

"Both choices suck ass," Bishop said.

"Will you quit with the language?" Nate asked peevishly, giving him a light punch on the arm.

Nadia rolled her eyes. She had long ago become immune to Bishop's language, and even Agnes seemed to be

getting used to it, no longer flinching when he said one of those words that was not used in polite Executive society.

“It doesn’t matter what language he uses,” Nadia said. “He’s right.”

“Of course he’s right,” Agnes agreed. “The important question isn’t what’s more dangerous, it’s what will serve us better if it works. And I don’t think that choice is all that hard to make.”

When she put it that way . . .

What good could possibly come from hiding in the Basement? Nadia and her friends would be powerless here, with no money or supporters. But if they could make it to Synchrony and cut some kind of deal with Chairman Belinski, they might be able to stop Thea from achieving whatever her end goal was. The idea of conspiring with a foreign Chairman, of potentially betraying her state to one, did not sit well in Nadia’s stomach, but it seemed like the lesser of two evils.

“So,” Nate said, “I guess we’re going to Synchrony.”

Agnes let out a breath of relief, her shoulders sagging. She had to know they had a lot of potentially lethal hurdles still to leap, but Nadia understood the appeal of the idea of going home.

“I’ll have to call my father and see what I can arrange,” she said, looking at Nate and raising an eyebrow. “You have a secure phone, right?”

Nate nodded and pulled a phone out of his pocket. Nadia’s adrenaline suddenly spiked as she remembered something Dorothy had said during their confrontation earlier.

“How sure are we that the phone’s secure?” she asked. “And that Chairman Belinski’s phone is, too? Dorothy said

she found one of the videos we made, which means she has feelers all over the net. What do you want to bet she can listen in on phone lines, too?”

Agnes gave the phone in her hand a doubtful look. Then she seemed to come to a decision and stood up a little straighter, her chin sticking out with a hint of stubbornness. “We can’t get to Synchrony without taking risks. Even if Thea can listen in to the phone call and track its origins, at least we can tell my father what’s *really* going on.”

“Will he believe us?” Nadia asked. “I mean, I think it’ll sound pretty damn crazy to someone who hasn’t been wrapped up in it from the beginning.”

“He’ll believe *me*,” Agnes said.

Nadia hoped it wasn’t wishful thinking.

Agnes turned on the phone, quickly tapping in a number. She held the phone to her ear, then frowned and lowered it. “Nothing’s happening.”

Bishop made a little sound of disgust. “Because phone service is out. Happens all the time around here. It’s not like anyone in power gives a shit whether we can use the phone or not. Could be days before they get around to fixing it.”

Nadia met Nate’s eyes, and she could see he was having the same thought as she. Thea knew their first move after this morning’s fiasco would be to run to the Basement, the one place where they could escape the city’s ubiquitous security cameras. Disabling the Basement’s phone service was an obvious way to stop them from reaching out for help—or from telling anyone the truth about Dorothy.

“I guess if we want to call my father,” Agnes said, “we’ll have to go where there’s service even if it means risking being

spotted. I don't think we can afford to wait until service is restored. Assuming it ever is."

Apparently, Agnes's thoughts had traveled the same road.

"I don't know," Bishop said, frowning fiercely. "Could be exactly what Thea wants us to do. Maybe she's trying to flush us out, one way or another."

"It doesn't matter," Nadia said firmly. "I want us all to get out of this alive, but the most important thing of all is to get word out about Thea. She's gained a frightening amount of power, and she now has all of Paxco under her control. She *has* to be stopped, and contacting Chairman Belinski seems like the best way to stop her."

Synchrony was considered one of the less powerful states because it wasn't particularly wealthy. However, the reason it wasn't wealthy was that it spent so much of its money on its military, a military that was well trained and very well equipped. Powerful enough to defeat Thea's commandeered forces, if it came to that.

"So we're going on a road trip," Nate said, trying to sound casual and unconcerned.

"Let's wait until nightfall, at least," Bishop suggested. "We'll be harder to recognize in the dark, and there'll be more people out and about to give us cover."

He turned off the stove and pulled the pot off the burner. Nadia's stomach gave a lurch when she took a quick glance at the contents. Some artificial chicken flavoring packets had turned the water a shade of yellow not seen in nature, and there were chunks of pink-tinted soy meat product and gray green beans floating in it.

"Dinner is served," Bishop said with an ironic flourish.

Nadia was sure she wasn't the only one whose appetite had retreated into a corner to hide, but they were all damn well going to eat what they were given.

until the moment that he, Kurt, and Agnes headed out into the night, Nate racked his brain in hopes that he could come up with a better plan. Splitting up seemed like a bad idea, and yet there was no good reason to risk letting Nadia, with her famous face and her so-so disguise, be seen out in public. Hell, there wasn't a whole lot of reason to risk *Nate* showing his face, except that he had put his foot down and insisted on coming along, disguised as his Basement alter ego, the Ghost. No one was going to recognize the Chairman Heir beneath the white wig, the bluish-white face powder, and the pale blue contact lenses. He needed to be *doing* something instead of sitting around thinking. His mind was too full of horrors, his heart too full of jumbled emotions. Besides, he was the rightful Chairman of Paxco. He needed Agnes to reassure her father she hadn't been kidnapped and to verify their crazy-sounding story, but if anyone was going to encourage a foreign power to invade his state, it was going to be him.

"Stay close," Kurt said unnecessarily as he and Nate and Agnes merged with the crowd that had started forming in the street the moment the sun went down.

Nate wished there were some way they could get in touch with Chairman Belinski without having to drag Agnes through the streets of the Basement. She was in disguise, of course, and the people of the Basement made a practice of minding their own business, but there was an aura of vulnerability about her that he feared might attract the wrong

sort. But she had been adamant that she had to be the one to make the call, and it was hard to argue. He was certain that Belinski thought Nate had kidnapped his daughter, so there was no way he would listen to anything Nate had to say without Agnes there.

He and Kurt sandwiched Agnes, doing the best they could to shield her and make it obvious to any Basement predators that she was not unprotected, as they made their way toward the Basement's border. It was possible Dorothy had cut off phone service in the low-class Employee neighborhoods just beyond the Basement, but it seemed unlikely. Low-class those Employees might be, but they were still *Employees*. Dorothy could get away with shenanigans that only hurt Basement-dwellers, but she'd have a lot harder time justifying anything that might cause problems for Employees.

Hopefully, within a block or two after passing the Basement's border, they would be able to pick up a phone signal. Then they'd find somewhere as secluded as possible so that Agnes could make her phone call without being observed. And hope that they weren't caught on surveillance video and recognized before they could plan a strategy with Chairman Belinski.

"Something seems off," Kurt commented.

Nate shook himself out of his worries and looked around, trying to see what Kurt was talking about.

"What do you mean?" Agnes asked.

Kurt shook his head. "Not sure, really. Just feels . . . different out here."

As soon as Kurt pointed it out, Nate noticed it, too. Here in the "tourist" areas of the Basement, where Employees

and Executives came to play, there was usually a palpable buzz of energy in the air. Lots of adrenaline-fueled excitement from the tourists, lots of predatory anticipation in the Basement-dwellers who planned to take advantage of them.

Tonight, the mood felt strangely subdued, even though there were just as many people on the streets as usual, and business was being transacted.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Nate muttered. But there was nothing to do but keep moving and hope it was all in their imagination.

Unfortunately, it wasn't.

When the street they were following neared the Basement's edge, the tension in the air reached such a level that even Agnes felt it, and they soon found out why.

A row of sawhorses had been set up at the border, crossing from sidewalk to sidewalk with only two small openings at the center. Each opening was manned by two uniformed security officers, and it appeared that anyone who wanted to cross the border in either direction was being required to show ID.

Worse, there was a giant video screen set up behind the barricade facing the Basement, its message blinking ostentatiously. Impossible to miss.

First, a picture of Nadia; then a picture of Nate; then WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE. And finally, most chilling of all: REWARD \$100,000 AND EMPLOYEE STATUS.

Nate stopped in his tracks and swallowed hard. That would be a hell of a lot of money for a Basement-dweller even if it was being offered in *credits*, but in *dollars* . . .

Kurt uttered a string of curses, then took hold of both Nate's and Agnes's arms and steered them away in a hurry.

“No talking!” he snapped at them even though no one had tried to say anything. He glanced around him significantly. Nate got the message, and he presumed Agnes did, too. There were ears all around them, and if they said anything that suggested the roadblock was meant for them, someone would be sure to hear. They’d probably drawn enough attention to themselves by their abrupt about-face, although glancing over his shoulder Nate could see they weren’t the only ones doing it. There were plenty of people in the Basement who did not want to parade themselves in front of security officers.

Trying not to look overly furtive, they headed back toward Kurt’s apartment. It was time to come up with a plan B.